

His Unlikely Lover Novel Chapter 7 To 10

CHAPTER SEVEN

They were silent for a very long time afterward. The sweat dried and cooled on their bodies, and Bobbi began to shiver despite the warmth of the evening. Gabe tightened his arms around her and turned her so that she was sandwiched between the back of the huge, lavishly upholstered sofa and his hard body. She immediately felt safe and warm and buried her face against his chest with a contented sigh.

She dozed off but woke with a start when Gabe adjusted his position carefully.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “My arm fell asleep.”

“Oh.” She felt inexplicably shy now as she tried to sit up. He reluctantly released her and allowed her to disentangle herself from his arms and legs. She kept her eyes averted as she got up and began hunting for her clothes.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice rough. He also got up and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it thoroughly in the process. He looked way too appealing and Bobbi found that she couldn’t look at him for too long without wanting to run back into his arms again.

“Fine . . .” She found her shorts but couldn’t find her panties or her top. Wanting only to get herself covered as quickly as possible, she tugged on the shorts and grimaced at the uncomfortable sensation of rough denim against her overly sensitive flesh. She found his shirt instead of her top and, deciding that it would do, dragged it on and buttoned it up only high enough to cover her breasts, leaving a deep V of exposed flesh from neck to cleavage. She didn’t know how sexy she looked with her messy hair and the masculine shirt that was so long on her it completely hid the shorts from view.

“Are you hungry?” he asked stiltedly, and she shook her head. God this felt so uncomfortable suddenly. How did one behave after something like that? What did one

say to your secret lover slash best friend after you'd had amazing sex for the first time? Bobbi was at a complete loss.

"No. I have an early start tomorrow morning," she said, searching for her shoes and finding them beneath his discarded trousers. She slipped on the trainers without socks and blasted him with a bright, insincere smile. "I have to go."

"You don't have to leave yet," he protested. "Have a snack . . . or something."

"I'm not hungry and I'm rather tired."

"Do you regret what happened?" he asked, a surprising amount of uncertainty in his voice. She sighed and made direct eye contact for the first time since getting dressed.

"No. I don't," she said truthfully. "I just don't know what happens next. Do you?"

"Not really," he confessed. "But we could find out together." She smiled at him before closing the distance between them until she stood directly in front of him. She cupped his jaw with her hands and tugged his head down, going up on her toes to meet him halfway. The kiss she gave him was sweet and filled with aching promise, but she moved away before he could deepen it. His eyes remained shut for a heartbeat longer before he sighed and looked at her regretfully.

"That felt like a good-bye kiss."

"Hmm, a good-night kiss," she confirmed. "I have to go."

"You don't," he denied. "You could stay the night."

"Gabe, that's not how we keep this thing between us secret," she said with an incredulous laugh. "The first person who spots me making my way home in the morning would know exactly what we'd been doing all night."

His eyes were filled with mute frustration, and she watched the muscles in his tight jaw bunch as he bit back whatever he'd been about to say in response to her words.

“I’ll see you soon,” she assured before turning away and heading for the door. She just needed to keep it together long enough to get out of this house. She refused to allow him to see how much he had hurt her, and if she stayed much longer he would surely notice her eyes shining with the tears that she absolutely refused to shed. She wasn’t a crier. Crying never solved anything. He let her leave without any further resistance, and Bobbi fled. Only when she was halfway across her own yard did she succumb to an extreme bout of trembling as the shock finally crept in.

Gabe felt like punching something. This felt so . . . wrong. It shouldn’t have been so difficult to let her leave. But he’d had the best sex of his life tonight and he wasn’t done with her yet. Not by a long shot.

And yet . . . afterward, the distance between them had left him feeling sick to his stomach. He wanted to have sex with her again, but he could do without the extra dose of scorching guilt that came after he came, so to speak. He felt like he was cheating on someone and he didn’t understand why.

He hadn’t been thinking clearly when he had suggested that she stay the night, but from the moment the words had emerged he’d wanted it desperately. He had wanted to make love with her again, fall asleep next to her, and wake up with her in his arms. It had been all he could think of and when she had—quite justifiably—shot him down, the blow had been pretty damned devastating.

Sleeping with her would complicate things. It was better to keep the sex impersonal but even as he nodded in response to the thought, he felt that hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach again.

But this was still new to them—they’d get used to the arrangement, more comfortable with it. They just needed time to adjust that was all. The words provided scant comfort but they were all he had.

Work the next day wasn't quite the distraction Gabe had hoped it would be. He glared at his computer screen without really seeing the information on display.

"Mr. Braddock." His executive assistant's face popped up on the screen, providing a welcome diversion. "I have Mr. Richmond on the line for you."

Gabe scowled; just what he needed. How the hell was he supposed to look the man in the eye after all the raunchy things he had done with his daughter the previous night?

"Put him through. Voice only." He lifted the telephone's handset to his ear.

"Mike, good morning." He tried to keep his tone light but sounded stilted to his own ears.

"Morning, Gabe. Glad you decided to go the old-fashioned route with this call. I hate those face-to-face calls, you know? Having my every expression analyzed can be a bit disconcerting," the older man greeted jovially.

"You just don't want people to see the gleam in your eyes when you go in for the kill," Gabe scoffed, and the other man laughed appreciatively.

"I wanted to know if everything was still on course for next month."

Gabe rolled his eyes.

"Why don't you ask Violet or Stephanie?" he asked, referring to their assistants.

"Well, you're in charge of the event, and I want to be sure that you're keeping an eye on those two—no need for the whole thing to get too frou-frou."

"They know what they're doing; it's not their first major event," Gabe pointed out.

"It's the first time I'll be handing my company over to someone else." Mike Richmond would officially hand over the reigns to Gabe at the company's annual Valentine's Day Ball. Gabe knew that the older man felt ambivalent about retiring, even though his eldest son, Edward—who also happened to be his physician—insisted on it.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure Stephanie reminds Violet to keep it elegant."

"No hearts and flowers everywhere," Mike stipulated.

"Not a single one," Gabe assured.

“Okay, I suppose we can’t have a party without some flowers,” Mike conceded. “But they don’t have to overdo it. It’s not a funeral. I’m not dying, just retiring.” Gabe grinned, happy that the cantankerous old man couldn’t see him.

“Understood.”

“Right then. Anything else I need to know?” Gabe had a moment of blind panic and cold sweat as he imagined Mike Richmond looking out of his bedroom window last night and seeing Bobbi leading Gabe across the lawn toward the fence. Or worse, had he come back down to the den last night? Gabe and Bobbi had been so wrapped up in each other they wouldn’t have noticed a herd of stampeding elephants passing through the room. Logic reasserted itself as he figured that this conversation wouldn’t be quite so amicable if Mike Richmond had seen them last night.

“Gabriel?” the older man prompted, and Gabe cleared his throat.

“Nothing. Everything’s fine,” he said.

“Okay, well, I have yet another meeting with Clyde and his crew of bloodsuckers in a couple of minutes.” Clyde was Mike’s second son, a corporate attorney whose firm handled all their contracts. “I’ll get back to you later.” He disconnected the call abruptly.

“Right,” Gabe muttered, and replaced the handset carefully. He glanced at his desktop monitor—the spreadsheet was still there, looking even more boring than before. A quick look at the clock told him that it was barely after ten. He wondered what Bobbi was doing. How did she feel after last night? [enovels.com](http://www.enovels.com)

He might not have wanted things to change, but there had been a fundamental shift in their relationship last night and he should have known it would happen. He had been an idiot to expect things to remain the same. There was an emotional element that he hadn’t considered and he was concerned about her. It wasn’t something that he had ever felt for any of his former lovers—he had never wondered if they were okay physically, mentally, and emotionally. They had known the stakes and had remained detached, but this was Bobbi, and despite everything he had said last night, separating emotion from sex when it came to someone he knew so well wasn’t easy.

He glanced at the clock again: barely two minutes had passed since he’d last checked the time. Was it too early to call her? Or perhaps he should have called earlier? Maybe he looked like an insensitive jerk for not contacting her first thing this morning? He didn’t know what to do and that was a weird sensation for him. He was always so sure of what to do. Maybe he should go to the shop and take her out to brunch?

He cracked his knuckles as he considered his options. He had to call her, not knowing what was going on in her head was driving him crazy. He reached for his cell and

speed-dialed her number. It rang for ages before going to voice mail. He peered at the phone's screen contemplatively before trying again.

This time it went straight to voice mail.

Was she avoiding his calls? Why would she do that? Was she angry? Sad? Hurt? The possibilities were endless, and he decided to find out for himself. He grabbed his jacket and headed out of the office.

"Postpone my afternoon appointments, Stephanie," he told his assistant on his way out.

"Oh, but . . ."

"And don't call my cell, I'll be busy." He interrupted what he knew would be a protest. "And remind Violet to keep things classy at that damned Valentine's Day Ball. She knows what the Old Man likes." The last was yelled over his shoulder as he exited her office and all but ran to the elevator before she could stop him.

He felt strangely exhilarated as he climbed into his car and headed for Bobbi's shop. He told himself that it was because he was skiving off work, but a larger part of him admitted that he was excited about seeing Bobbi again.

Bobbi felt a tad out of sorts. Her morning had gone from bad to worse. She had slept through her alarm and then rushed into the shop forty minutes late. Pieter was off with measles of all things, leaving her shorthanded. The parts that she had ordered for the Corvette had arrived but they were all wrong and she had been on the phone for half an hour trying to reach the supplier to sort the mess out. Added to all that her entire body was buzzing with sensation after her encounter with Gabe last night. Her nipples were so sensitive that even the brush of cotton against them was uncomfortable, her muscles ached, and her hips and inner thighs were bruised from the friction of his hips and the clutch of his fingers. But none of those things compared to the extreme discomfort she felt . . . down there. She had had one really terrible sexual encounter before Gabe—during her first year of university—and the miserable experience hadn't really prepared her for the full effect of a man as large as Gabe.

All those jokes women made about not being able to "walk right" after great sex? Bobbi totally got it now.

But that was really no big deal in light of how emotionally devastated she felt after Gabe's demeaning stipulations on how they conduct this new aspect of their relationship. Her decision to have sex with him despite that had seemed like a brave step forward last night but now seemed absurdly naïve.

If she felt this awful about herself after just one night, how much worse would it get if they continued to have sex on a regular basis? She didn't know if she had the stomach

for this. Gabe had made her feel small and cheap. No that wasn't fair . . . she had allowed Gabe to make her feel small and cheap. She bore half of the blame for this dreadful situation and she knew that.

She exhaled impatiently as she listened to the ridiculous "hold" music while she waited for the supplier to come onto the line.

"Are you ignoring my calls, sweetheart?" The dark voice coming from the doorway of her tiny office nearly shocked her into dropping the receiver, and she fumbled frantically to keep it from falling.

"God," she gasped. "You nearly scared me half to death."

"Sorry," he said, sounding not at all remorseful. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

She watched him warily as he stepped into the tiny glass booth and shut the door behind him. He dominated the tiny space and she immediately felt boxed in and claustrophobic.

"Do you mind?" she snarled. "I'm working."

"Why haven't you answered my calls?" he asked, using his pristine white handkerchief to wipe down the chair opposite hers before seating himself and raising his eyes to hers expectantly. She merely stared back at him with a raised eyebrow and he smiled at her. The sincerity on his face nearly undid her, and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling back at him.

He glanced down at his handkerchief and his nose wrinkled fastidiously when he saw that it was covered in a layer of gray dust and grime from the chair. Nonetheless he folded it meticulously before dropping it into one of his jacket pockets. He was a classic fish out of water in this environment, and it saddened her to realize exactly how far removed his world was from hers.

"Well?" he prompted, and she looked at him blankly, forcing him to elaborate. "My phone calls? You've been ignoring them."

"I haven't, the line's just been busy all morning." She held up the receiver pointedly and he shook his head.

"I've been calling your cell," he told her, and her brow furrowed as she patted herself down with one hand, before glancing around her cluttered desk.

"I must have forgotten it at home," she said. "I've been having a bit of a Monday."

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

“Not hungry.” She shrugged. The music in her ear paused and she perked up, only to slump back down when it resumed again. “Oh my God, maybe they figure if they keep me on hold long enough I’ll simply give up?”

“Want to have brunch with me?” he asked, and she glared at him irritably.

“What part of ‘I’m working’ did you not understand?” she asked sarcastically. “And why aren’t you at work for that matter? Does my dad know that you’re slacking off like this?”

“I am one of the bosses you know?” he pointed out levelly. “I can take some personal time.”

“Oooh, color me impressed,” she rejoined caustically, and he grinned at her sarcasm. One thing about Gabe, he always seemed to enjoy her sense of humor.

“I wanted to see if you were okay,” he said, the grin fading. “You know? After last night.”

“Really? You want to have this conversation now? Here?” she asked in disbelief, gesturing expansively toward the glass walls and the phone in her hand.

“No time like the present,” he stated, and she sighed long-sufferingly.

Gabe watched her struggle with whatever she wanted to say to him and waited with baited breath for her response. She looked gorgeous this morning, her skin glowed with good health and vitality and her lips were still swollen from his kisses. God, she was so damned exquisite he could spend hours just watching her. He was resentful of every second he had wasted in the past—all those moments when he had simply not seen her. Had he been completely blind?

“Look Gabe, I . . . ,” she began seriously, only to tilt her head toward the telephone receiver that she held pressed against her ear. “Hello? This is Roberta Richmond from Richmond’s Auto Repair Shop. You sent me the wrong shipment and I . . . no, wait! Don’t put me on hold again. Don’t put . . . damn it.” The last two words emerged in a frustrated whisper and her shoulders slumped in despair. Her eyes darted back up to meet his.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “No need to worry about me. We had some fun and today it’s business as usual right?”

“Right,” he concurred, feeling nauseated at the thought of returning to “business as usual.” It felt dishonest.

“Then why are you here?” she asked angrily, keeping her voice low. “This behavior is not the way we usually operate. You’ve never come to my shop on a Monday morning before to ask me if I’m okay. We don’t do brunch. Ever. I don’t go to your office and

you don't come to mine. At least you didn't before last week. That's not the way our friendship operates. So what the hell is going on? What do you want from me?" She had a point. Gabe was the one who had insisted that they behave normally, yet here he was, acting completely out of character.

"You're right," he acknowledged. "But if you had answered my calls, there wouldn't have been any need for me to come over here to check if you were okay."

"Come on, Gabe," she derided. "Last week you would have tried to reach me, failed, and thought nothing of it."

"Yeah, well, last week was before I'd had you pinned down and writhing beneath me in desire. Last week was before I'd had my tongue in your mouth, your breasts in my hands, and your breathless voice in my ear begging me for more." His voice rose with every word until he was practically shouting and she frantically shushed him.

"Fine, okay." She held up a placating hand. "But after today I'd appreciate it if you stopped contradicting yourself. It's confusing the hell out of me."

"Noted," he murmured, feeling confused himself. He leaned forward, trying to catch her eye again. She was downright cagey this morning and still hadn't told him if she was okay or not. Despite that magnificent glow she had about her, she still looked somewhat strained around the eyes and he wondered if she had managed to get any sleep the night before. He certainly hadn't—he had been turned on and miserable because she had left him before he had had his fill of her.

"Will you come over tonight?" he asked softly, but she didn't seem to hear him, keeping her eyes glued to the order form on her desk and her attention focused on the telephone receiver clamped to her ear. Gabe wasn't used to being ignored by women, and he now discovered that he didn't like it at all. But he swallowed down his anger as he reminded himself that Bobbi wasn't just any woman and that she habitually ignored him when it suited her. She was just being . . . Bobbi. He had wanted things to remain the same between them but hadn't counted on the status quo being frustrating as hell.

"Bobbi?" he prompted, and she lifted her eyes to his. They were so damned pretty they literally took his breath away and he struggled to form the words for a brief moment. "Will you come over tonight?"

She chewed on her lower lip, plumping it up invitingly, and he coughed to cover up a groan. God, this was torturous—he wanted to kiss her so badly he had to curl his hands into fists to prevent himself from dragging her across the damned desk and into his lap.

"I don't know," she responded at last and he nearly swore in frustration. She was clearly trying to drive him insane. "Maybe."

He had to content himself with that vague response and pushed out of the chair.

“Call me if you change your mind about getting something to eat.”

“I won’t,” she said, with a brief shake of her head. He was about to respond to that when her body language changed and she looked away from him again. Effectively dismissing him. “Yes? I’m Roberta Richmond from Richmond’s Auto Repair Shop and I received the wrong goods . . .”

He gave her one last glance but it was as if she had forgotten he was there. Feeling rather despondent, Gabe left.

Bobbi watched as he gracefully made his way back out of the shop, exchanging a few laughing comments with Craig as he left. She listened to the dial tone in her ear—her call had been dropped about three minutes ago but she had clung to the handset like it was a shield, knowing that if she put it down she would have to give him her undivided attention and she hadn’t been quite ready for that. She replaced the handset carefully. She would have to call them back but she didn’t have the energy just yet.

Suddenly the weight of problems the day had dumped onto her shoulders felt unbearably heavy and she slumped in her chair, wanting to do nothing more than bury her face in her hands and weep.

The day had seemed interminable; after several more frustrating phone calls, Bobbi had finally managed to sort out the shipment error but the setback had cost her valuable time. Pieter’s measles would put him out of commission for at least a week and the loss of manpower would result in a forfeiture of revenue that she really couldn’t afford.

The only good thing about the seemingly insurmountable heap of complications was that it had pushed the situation with Gabe firmly to the back of her mind. But by the time she closed shop after seven that night, thoughts of him came creeping insidiously back into her head.

By the time she made her way home, all she could think of was heading over to his place. God, she was so tempted. So what if she felt awful afterward? She could work around that . . . what he made her feel during was pretty damned spectacular. If she rationed her time with him wisely—maybe she could keep her already broken heart shielded from further harm?

She bargained with herself all through the late dinner that Faye had left in the microwave for her. She had had a stressful day and needed something to help her relax . . . just a couple of hours to help her take the edge off. They had already had sex after all; so one more time wouldn’t make that much difference, would it?

God, she sounded like an addict! She laughed bitterly when she recognized that that was exactly what she was and that Gabe was her drug of choice.

She barely tasted her dinner and trudged upstairs afterward to grab a shower. She took extra care with shampooing her hair and shaving her legs and armpits, telling herself that she was just doing it because she needed to pamper herself a bit. She brushed her teeth and used the expensive body lotion that Theresa had given her for Christmas. She hadn't even opened the bottle before now but she applied it generously, relishing how smooth her skin felt afterward. Why hadn't she ever used the stuff before? It felt and smelled amazing.

She dragged on her usual sleepwear of boy shorts and a tank top and went back downstairs to the library for a book. She was surprised to find her father asleep on one of the comfortable leather sofas, an open book lying facedown on his chest. The sound of the door opening startled him out of his light snooze and he smiled at her sleepily.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in days," he said warmly, and she returned his smile, curling up on the sofa next to him.

"You haven't," she replied, dropping a kiss on his cheek. "I've been busy."

"Yes, you've had quite the active social life lately," he said, and she flushed guiltily.

"What do you mean?" He looked surprised by her reaction and question and his gaze sharpened.

"What do you think I mean?" he asked pointedly.

"Nothing." She tried not to look too uncomfortable with his line of questioning.

"Roberta, do you have a male friend you're not telling me about? Gabe mentioned something about a guy yesterday? Someone you met at the pub?" The sound of Gabe's name startled her, but her father misinterpreted her reaction and grinned gleefully. "You do have a male friend! I'd like to meet him."

"It's uh . . . it's not that serious yet," she whispered, aghast by the awful turn the conversation had taken.

"What's his name?"

"K-Kyle Foster, he's a landscape architect." Oh God, what the hell was she doing?

"And you like him? He's a good man?"

"He's very nice." Stop talking, Bobbi! her conscience was shrieking at her. Just shut the hell up!

"You should consider bringing him to the Valentine's Day Ball," her father said, and her mind went completely blank as she thought about that horrible annual event. She

usually managed to avoid it but her father, who so rarely made any demands on his children, had insisted that Bobbi and her brothers attend this year. Since he planned to announce his retirement, Bobbi knew that she had no option other than to show her support. But she had forgotten that she would probably have to bring a date to the event. That thought was followed by an even worse one . . .

Would Gabe be bringing a date? God, she wouldn't be able to stand it. Not with everything that had happened—was still happening—between them.

"I'll consider it," she said absently—her mind on Gabe and the gorgeous woman he would probably bring to the formal event.

"Good," her father said. "And bring him to dinner sometime, I'd like to meet him."

"Sure," she said, still on autopilot. Her father dropped an arm around her shoulder and planted a swift kiss on the top of her head. The show of affection was so rare that it startled Bobbi out of her reverie.

"I'm off to bed," he told her. "Good night, baby."

"Good night, Daddy," she replied, warmed by the endearment. He left the room in his usual brisk manner. Bobbi sat immersed in her chaotic thoughts for a long time. She had lied to her father, dragged poor Kyle into this mess, and now had to find a date to the damned Valentine's Day Ball.

Maybe Gabe would ask her. Once the wistful thought had entered her mind it continued to float around in there like a hopeful sprite. She tried to bat it away, knowing that it was ridiculous to even consider the possibility, but the part of her that liked to wish for impossible things couldn't help but hope.

"Gabe won't ask you," she said out loud, and flinched at the inescapable truth in the words.

Gabe stared blankly at the television screen, not really absorbing what he was seeing as he tried to swallow past the lump of bitter disappointment that had lodged in his throat. She wasn't coming.

It was nearly one in the morning and he had held out hope until about an hour ago when the huge grandfather clock in the foyer had struck twelve. After that he had simply gone numb and continued to sit here unable to summon up the energy to head up to bed. So maybe the night before hadn't had quite the same impact on her as it had on him? The thought was humbling and hard to accept, but there wasn't much else he could take away from this resounding rejection.

He buried his face in his hands. This was probably for the best; he already felt like he was in too deep. They would simply forget that it had ever happened and go back to normal.

He winced at that thought. As if it would be that easy. He could never unsee the perfection of her naked body, or untaste the honey of her mouth, or unfeel her clenching heat around him. He was so screwed . . .

He reached for the remote and switched off the television and the sudden echoing silence unsettled him. He sat there for a moment longer, willing himself to get up and go to bed. He had just pushed himself out of the chair when he heard the quiet knock on the front door. His breath caught in his throat and his heart stuttered to a stop before resuming its rhythm erratically.

The knock came again, louder this time, and he leapt into action running to the front door, skidding on the foyer's polished floor and nearly falling on his butt, in a bid to get there before she changed her mind and left. He was breathless by the time he wrest open the heavy door and barely took in the fact that she was in her nightclothes before dragging her into his arms and planting a hungry kiss on her lips.

She kissed him back, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He staggered back and kicked the front door shut before pinning her to the heavy wooden door and taking his fill of her mouth.

He lifted his head and cupped her face with his hands.

"I thought you weren't coming," he gasped, fighting for breath. She grinned at him, her legs tightening around his waist.

"Really? I was kind of hoping that I'd be coming." It was a silly play on words that barely made sense but it delighted him.

"I'll work on that for you," he promised, thrusting his hardness against her core and she moaned, burying her face in the hollow of his neck as she pushed herself against him, establishing a quick rhythm that nearly had them both spending in seconds. Luckily reason reasserted itself and Gabe groaned before dropping his hands to her hips to stop her sensual grinding.

"Stop that, damn it! I want to get you to a bed this time," he growled.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked impatiently, and he wrapped one hand around her back and cupped the other beneath her butt to support her as he clumsily made his way upstairs with her still clinging to him tightly.

When he reached his room, he stumbled his way to the bed, dropped her down on the soft mattress and climbed up with her in the same motion. He studied her appreciatively as she lay spread out beneath him and growled ferally before hunching down and unceremoniously dragging down her top and sucking one tight nipple into his mouth with a rough finesse that had her arching her back off the bed.

“Oh God,” she cried out, clamping her thighs against his hips and curling her fingers into his hair.

“This isn’t going to last long,” he muttered against her breast.

“I don’t care,” she sobbed, reaching down between them to fumble with his belt and fly. He hissed when she managed to get everything undone and finally wrapped her hands around his length. She stroked him with both hands and he shuddered in response.

He didn’t bother removing her shorts; he merely pushed them aside and positioned himself at her entrance before shoving his way in. The contrasting sensations of the cotton of her underwear and the wet silk of her intimate flesh against his responsive shaft nearly made him come before he’d gotten more than the head in and he swore gutturally when he realized that the reason he was feeling so damned much was because he wasn’t wearing a condom. He never forgot to put on a condom and he was momentarily disconcerted by the lapse.

“Shit, shit, shit. No condom. I’m sorry.” It nearly killed him to withdraw and Bobbi wailed when he left her but he took care of the protection as quickly as he could under the circumstances and was back with her seconds later.

“Don’t do that to me again,” she rebuked, and he apologized with a kiss before thrusting his way back in. They didn’t last long. It was rough and fast and over in less than four minutes.

Gabe watched her come in that erotic way of hers, so quiet with just a gasp and a moan and then a long release of breath. He couldn’t imagine ever tiring of that or of feeling her orgasm around his shaft. The way she pulsed around him pulled his own climax from him.

“Bobbi,” he groaned as he poured himself into her. Just that. Just her name. It was all that needed saying.

She had stayed longer this time, Gabe reflected hours later as he watched her slight figure walk across the lawn toward the high fence between their properties. Long enough for them to have a round two—which had been slow, sensual, and utterly devastating—and round three in the shower. She had left immediately after the shower, ignoring Gabe’s entreaties for her to stay longer. She hadn’t even wanted him to walk her to the gate, insisting that she would be fine.

As he reflected upon the past few hours, he realized that she hadn’t spoken much at all. She had told him what she liked and where she liked it. Had expressed her appreciation when he had done something that she enjoyed. Had said his name in so many different ways that he’d lost count of them but she hadn’t spoken of anything

else. Hadn't told him how work on the Corvette was progressing, hadn't said if she'd solved the delivery mix up of that afternoon.

The animated chatter that he was used to from her had been completely missing and the absence disturbed him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gabe groaned and blindly reached for the cell phone on the nightstand. Who in the hell would be calling before six in the morning? He glared at the display but it read "unknown" and he dragged his thumb across the screen to answer.

"Gabriel Braddock," he snapped.

"It's me." Chase. Gabe pushed himself up and winced when he felt a burning sensation on the skin of his shoulders. He reached up gingerly with his free hand and investigated. There were three deep scratches scored into the flesh of both shoulders. He remembered Bobbi dragging her fingers down his back during their second bout of lovemaking and grinned at the memory—half aroused as he recalled exactly why she had made them. He had taken her to the brink and then eased off, she had been pissed off but he had made it up to her, prolonging the encounter until she had been out of her mind with lust.

"Gabe?" Chase's voice brought him back down to earth with a jolt.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm here . . . When are you arriving?" Despite everything that had happened over the last few days, thoughts of his brother had remained very firmly in his mind. He was happy that Chase was returning home and would be out of immediate danger for the moment at least.

"I'll be landing in Cape Town at eight thirty this morning. Can you pick me up? Or send a car?"

"I'll pick you up," Gabe said.

"Thanks. See you later." His brother still sounded off. Gabe couldn't put his finger on it but something was very wrong. Chase disconnected the call before he could respond and Gabe put his phone aside and lay there for a while. He wondered if Bobbi was awake yet. She usually got an early start to the day. He decided to check and sent her an SMS.

Up yet? When she didn't immediately respond, he threw the bed covers off and padded—naked—to the closet to drag out his jogging shorts and T-shirt. When his phone buzzed, he all but dove for it but it was buried somewhere beneath the covers and he swore irritably while he hunted for it. When he found it he was rewarded with a single word.

Yeah.

Well . . . hell.

I'm going for a run. Wanna join me? This time he didn't have to wait too long for the response.

Sure. Meet me at the gate in ten mins.

He grinned, feeling ridiculously happy that she'd agreed and dragged on his running shoes before doing a few perfunctory stretches, keeping an eye on the clock. He didn't want to be late.

He left the house within seven minutes and was at the gate a minute after that. Bobbi wasn't there yet. He did a few more stretches, enjoying the fresh air and early morning birdsong. It was a perfect summer morning and still cool enough for a leisurely jog around the neighborhood. Bobbi didn't enjoy jogging as much as he did and joined him on his morning runs only occasionally. He heard a voice and looked up through the bars of the two-meter high gate. She was waving and shouting out a greeting to one of the security guards on the Richmond property. She made her way toward Gabe with that usual insouciant amble of hers and he looked his fill, appreciating the sensuous roll of her hips. He drank in the skintight running shorts and racerback sports bra that she usually wore for jogging and couldn't quite fathom how he had managed to run with her before without wanting to lick every expanse of silky flesh on display. She was toned and tanned all over and while she didn't have the most generous curves, the shape she did have was tight, sexy, and undeniably feminine.

"Morning." She grinned when she reached him.

"Hey."

"It's been a while since we've gone jogging together," she noted, executing a graceful overhead stretch that emphasised the flatness of her belly and pert roundness of her breasts. She then turned and placed her hands on the gate to do a calf stretch and Gabe bit back a groan at the sight of her firm butt in those indecent shorts. God they clung to her like a second skin and just barely covered the lower curve of her behind.

"I haven't been jogging in a while." He was so completely distracted by her sexy, sinuous stretches that he could barely concentrate on what he was saying. "Busy."

"Well, I'm going to kick some serious butt today, Braddock." They were back in friend mode, he realized. It was as if last night hadn't happened at all. She was her usual teasing and playful self and it created a disconnect in Gabe who couldn't transition from lover to friend as easily as she apparently could. This was the same woman he had held and kissed and touched and pleased just hours before and it was

crazy not to be able to acknowledge that fact with a caress or a kiss or even an endearment.

But these were his rules and if she could play by them, then so should he.

“Don’t count on it, Richmond,” he countered, trying to inject some humor into his voice. “I have a couple of secret weapons.”

“Oh? And what would they be?” She slanted her head curiously and looked damned adorable in the process.

“Longer legs and . . . stamina,” he responded before taking off at a sprint and laughing when she shouted a protest.

He got a good head start before slowing down and allowing her to catch up with him. He shortened his stride so that she could keep pace with him and they settled into an easy jog. After less than a kilometer she glared up at him.

“I hate running,” she grouched. “Why do you make me do this?”

“Stop complaining, I didn’t make you do anything. I just invited you along. You didn’t have to come.”

“Then why do you keep letting me do this to myself?” She puffed and he grinned again.

“You’re being pathetic, Richmond, stop whining so much and focus on your breathing.” She was a good runner but hated the exertion. She needed coaxing and teasing to keep going. He’d been half coaching, half haranguing her during their jogs for years. It usually worked and she always finished the entire seventeen-kilometer course around the neighborhood in under an hour.

They ended up back at his place about fifty minutes later and did a few cool-down exercises in silence.

“I’m picking Chase up in an hour or so,” he told her, after taking a sip of water. The day was going to be a scorcher with the morning temperature already in the mid to upper twenties. He handed her his water bottle and she drank thirstily.

“Did he say anything about his reasons for coming home?” she asked, running a hand through her damp hair. A few tendrils stuck to her forehead and he had to stop himself from reaching out and brushing them back.

“Nothing yet . . . but something’s definitely wrong.” He frowned as he recalled his brother’s uncharacteristically subdued voice on the phone that morning.

“At least he’ll be at home, so you’ll have plenty of time to figure out what the problem is,” she said, and he nodded.

“Right. I’ve got to get showered, call Stephanie to tell her not to expect me this morning, and hit the road,” he said, wiping the dripping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

“Me too, we’re short-staffed. Pieter has measles and there’s a lot to do.” She turned away but his voice halted her progress.

“Bobbi?” He waited until she had turned back to face him before hooking a hand around the nape of her neck and dragging her over until she was plastered against his sweaty body. He dropped a hard kiss on her delicate mouth before she could utter a word of protest and before she could even think to push him away, he had already released her. She swayed and he put a hand on one of her shoulders to steady her.

“Easy there,” he crooned, amused when she fixed a bemused look on his face. She looked completely dazed and incapable of speech.

“Uh . . . right,” she finally said. “Thanks. I mean . . .”

“You’re welcome.” He grinned.

“Right. I’ve got to go . . .” She still looked completely discombobulated when she turned away from him again.

“Have a good day,” he called to her back and she acknowledged the sentiment with a wave. “See you tonight.” So maybe he had presumed too much with that last statement, but aside from straightening her shoulders, she said nothing in response to it.

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She had already disappeared through the gate by the time Gabe realized that he was still standing on his front steps with a ridiculously goofy grin on his face and made his way back into the house. The grin didn’t fade until after his shower.

He wasn’t grinning an hour later when he watched Chase make his way through the domestic arrivals gate at Cape Town International Airport. Chase looked haggard. That was the only word he could think of to describe his twin. He looked like he had lost at least ten kilograms, his hair was a shaggy mess, he obviously hadn’t shaved in days, and his cheeks were sunken hollows.

“Jesus,” Gabe whispered in shock when he first caught sight of the man. He plastered a smile onto his lips when Chase saw him and heartily embraced the man who was a mere ten minutes older than Gabe. When they had been younger even their own mother had had difficulty telling them apart. Their mother would burst into tears if she were to see Chase right now. Gabe, himself, felt like weeping.

He held onto his brother longer than he usually would and Chase seemed content to let him. They eventually moved apart and Gabe cleared his throat awkwardly, kind of embarrassed to note the sheen of tears in his brother’s eyes but then even more self-

conscious when he realized that he was doing a lot of blinking to clear his misty vision as well.

“Missed you, bro,” he muttered. He grabbed Chase’s tog bag, knowing that Chase would prefer to carry his precious camera equipment.

“Yeah, it’s been too long between assignments,” Chase agreed. He hadn’t set foot in the country in more than six months. He had inherited their father’s wanderlust and sense of adventure but had channelled it more productively. They chatted about the flight and airline food on the long walk back to the car—keeping things simple and impersonal.

Chase whistled appreciatively when he saw the Lamborghini.

“This is a gorgeous piece of machinery.” He grinned boyishly, giving Gabe a glimpse of his old self. He did a slow circle around the car before coming to a halt at the driver’s side.

“Keys?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah right,” Gabe scoffed. “If you think I’m letting your travel-weary butt drive this baby, you can think again.”

“You suck,” his brother groused.

“You sound like Bobbi,” Gabe chuckled, his heart doing a bizarre loop-the-loop in his chest at the mere mention of her name. What the hell? He busied himself with loading his brother’s gear into the car, hastily stifling that weird reaction. Luckily Chase traveled light—an occupational hazard—or they would have run into trouble. The car wasn’t exactly designed to carry a lot of luggage.

“You haven’t let her drive it yet?” Chase asked, after they had left the airport.

“Yet?” Gabe snorted. “Try ever. She’s too reckless, she could get herself killed.” He went ice cold at the very thought.

“Come on, she’s not that bad,” Chase dismissed. “She’s actually damned good at racing—competent and in control—you’re too much of a nervous ninny to see that.”

“Do not encourage her,” Gabe warned, and Chase shrugged.

“Whatever, man.”

“So will you be staying at your flat?” he asked Chase, referring to the luxury apartment in Camps Bay. When Chase didn’t immediately respond, Gabe glanced over at him in concern and saw that his brother was absently staring out at the passing scenery. He looked lost and haunted.

“Chase?”

“I’d prefer to stay at home this time round, bro. If that’s okay with you?”

“Of course it’s okay with me,” Gabe reassured. “It’s your house too.”

“I mean I don’t wanna cramp your style or anything. I know you always have some brainy blonde on call.” Gabe froze as he thought of Bobbi. How the hell were they going to work this with Chase staying under the same roof? The house was huge but . . .

“That’s a weighty silence.” Chase’s voice intruded in his thoughts and Gabe glanced over at him. “I take it things are more serious with this latest one then? What is she? An astronaut? A professor? No, you’ve already dated a professor . . . an astrophysicist? Neurosurgeon?”

“I’m not seeing anyone right now.” Gabe ended the speculation and the look of blatant disbelief on Chase’s face was almost comical. Gabe grinned reluctantly.

“I’m not exactly Don Juan, you know. I do occasionally find myself between relationships.”

“You lie,” Chase mocked. “No, say it ain’t so! My baby brother always has a bevy of beautiful blondes at his beck and call. Don’t tell me my hero has feet of clay. Don’t tell me!”

“Shut up,” Gabe laughed, enjoying his brother’s banter. He had been watching Chase grow more relaxed with every passing kilometer as if whatever emotional burden he was carrying grew lighter and lighter the closer they got to home.

Bobbi got through the morning somehow, but it was hard when she couldn’t think of anything other than Gabe and the things they had done to each other the night before. Then there was that morning’s kiss, which had been hard and fast and filled with so much promise that all she could think about was going back for more. It was seriously distracting.

Her cell phone rang just before lunch and her heart leapt in excitement as she reached for it, wondering if it was Gabe. She doubted it since he probably wanted to spend time with Chase but she was hopeful. She rolled her eyes when she read the name on screen.

“Billy, hi,” she greeted. He was five years her senior, the closest brother to her in age and the one who had given her the most grief growing up. They were pretty close though and often hung out together. Edward and Clyde were closer to each other in age—they had been fifteen and seventeen when their mother had died and had handled the sudden loss a lot better than their younger siblings had.

The younger Richmond siblings, feeling abandoned by the adults and near-adults in their family at such a confusing time in their lives, had instead adopted the Braddock

family as their own and had spent many long hours playing with the twins. Lucy Templeton-Braddock had taken them under her wing and had provided the stable maternal influence that they had lost. She had often referred to them as her “lost little lambs” and had treated them like they were her own.

“Hey, Bobbi, I have a huge favor to ask you.” Her brother started his conversation without preamble and her eyes widened in surprise. He hardly ever asked her for favors.

“Jase told me that you met Kyle Foster the other day?” That wasn’t at all what she had been expecting and she couldn’t do more than make a soft sound of confirmation. “I was hoping you could introduce me?”

“What? No. Ask Jason, Kyle is his buddy.” Why were people constantly asking her about Kyle Foster? It was bizarre. “I don’t even know him.”

“According to Jason, the guy has the hots for you,” Billy pointed out and Bobbi went bright red, grateful that her brother couldn’t see her face.

“Why do you want to meet him anyway?”

“He’s one of the best landscape architects around and in high demand. I’ve wanted to work with him for years.” Billy was an architect. A really great architect.

“You’re a professional, Billy, your reputation speaks for itself. You don’t need me to make your contacts for you, just call him up and tell him you want to work with him. I’m sure he’ll jump at the opportunity.”

“I’ve already tried that. I need him for a project in April, but he’s booked through to November. I figured if I could chat with him in a less formal setting, dinner maybe, and tell him about the project he’ll be interested enough to work on it with me.”

“Dinner?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, like a double date kind of thing; you bring Foster, I bring one of my female friends and . . .”

“Should I sleep with him to sweeten the deal?” she asked sarcastically.

“Bobbi!” Her brother sounded so scandalized that for a moment she gave in to the impulse to grin. “Of course not, that’s not what . . .”

“Billy, my answer is no. Do the professional thing and have your secretary call his secretary or whatever. Just leave me out of it.”

“Dad tells me you’re bringing him to the Valentine’s Day thing.” Her jaw dropped.

“Oh my God! What?” Her voice was so shrill Sean and Craig looked up from the shop floor to peer at her through the glass of her office door. “I met the guy once, why the hell is everybody asking me about him?”

“Well, you hardly ever go out with guys, I’m pretty sure Dad was starting to think you batted for the other team,” he said, and Bobbi sighed and dropped her head back on the headrest of her chair, staring at the ceiling in frustration. She absently noted a daddy longlegs sitting idly in its web in one of the corners and her eyes automatically tracked across to the other corners to ensure that they were spider-free. “Dad seems to think you’re totally in love with the guy.”

Her father had completely gotten the wrong end of the stick on that one, Bobbi thought with a sigh. Right emotion, wrong guy.

“Well, I’m not,” she denied. “Now leave me alone, I’m busy.”

“Aww come on, Bobbi,” he reproved. “Throw me a bone, won’t you? You used to be a better sister than this.”

“And you and Dad need to stop talking about me behind my back,” she added. She disconnected the call while he was in mid-plea and glared at the screen irritably.

“Be seen with one guy in public,” she grumbled. “And they’re planning your wedding and naming your first-born child.” Their peaceful berg was too small and the Richmond and Braddock families were too well known for any juicy bit of news to slip by unnoticed. She knew that it was one of the main reasons Gabe wanted to keep their affair, if that’s what it could be called, secret. They would never be able to get away with just sleeping together, the pressure on him to do the “respectable” thing with the daughter of such a prominent family would be immense. And Gabe being Gabe wouldn’t allow himself to be forced into anything and that could have some pretty major repercussions for him—personally and professionally—if her father decided to take offense.

But even while she understood his reasoning, it just really hurt to be nothing more to him than an itch that needed scratching. She ran her hands over her face and groaned.

“Stop thinking about it,” she told herself, her voice muffled behind her hands. Just enjoy it while it lasts.

She picked up her phone again, wanting to touch base with Gabe and genuinely concerned about Chase.

Hey. Chase ok? She tapped out the message swiftly and then put the phone aside to pick up a couple of requisition forms. She hated the paperwork aspect of her job; it kept her away from what she really loved which was being elbow deep in the innards of an automobile. Unfortunately owning a business meant that she had to deal with the

boring stuff too and sadly the boring stuff seemed to completely outweigh the fun stuff. Her phone buzzed.

I don't know. I'm worried. Something wrong. I didn't talk to him about it yet—had to come to work.

Give him time, she responded.

Yeah.

She watched her phone for a while longer but no other message was forthcoming so she put her head down and went back to her paperwork. The phone buzzed a minute later and she grabbed it eagerly.

So . . . are you wearing a bra today? She was equal parts embarrassed and amused by the question and not sure how to respond to it. She was saved from making that decision when the buzzer went again.

Sorry. Out of line but . . . are you?

She laughed out loud at that bit of nerve, bit her lip and tapped out a quick message, and pushed "Send" before she could change her mind.

YEAH you're out of line . . . and no. I'm not. His next reply made her breath catch.

SO hard I hurt right now. Thanks!!!

Wish I was there to kiss it better. Her response was more risqué than she'd intended. It was like her fingers had taken on a life of their own.

OMG!! You're killing me. Can't concentrate on work now cos that's all I'll be thinking about. She grinned. She was still thinking about how to respond when a new message buzzed its way to her screen.

Crap. Gtg—your dad's on his way to my office!

Bobbi choked back a laugh as she pictured him jumping like a guilty schoolboy just because her father had nearly caught him indulging in a bit of PG-13 sexting. Okay, so maybe Mike Richmond wouldn't take it too well if he knew that Bobbi was the recipient of the racy messages—but it was still a funny thought. Gabe respected her father so much, Bobbi knew that he would hate to do anything to upset or disappoint the man. She shook her head and put her phone down.

She didn't know what she was doing here. The lines between the role of friend and lover were becoming less distinct. That morning, the jog, it had started off friendly and then he had ended it with that kiss. The SMSs they'd just exchanged—her initial inquiry had been that of a concerned friend and it had turned into a mild sexting session. How was she supposed to keep these two roles straight when Gabe was the

one who kept mixing things up? She was going have to talk to him about it and try to reestablish some of the ground rules.

Gabe had wanted to eat in and have a talk with his brother, but Chase had insisted they head down to the pub for dinner. Gabe knew his brother well enough to recognize the delaying tactic. Chase was aware that Gabe had questions and he didn't want to answer them. He had even asked Gabe to delay telling their mother that he was back in Cape Town. She knew that he was in the country but thought he was staying in Johannesburg for a couple of days.

When they walked into the pub, the friends they had known all their lives flocked around them to welcome Chase home with back thumps and pints of beer; it took a while before they could make their way to a table and order some food, and even then somebody was always stopping by for a chat.

"God, it's good to be home," Chase said during one of the rare moments they were alone at their table.

"You should come home more often," Gabe told him, trying to keep his tone light.

"I've been thinking about it." Chase's tired response had Gabe leaning forward intently.

"Thinking about what exactly?" he prompted.

"Staying home and working on that book." Chase had been thinking of compiling a book of photographs for years. He always tried to capture the beauty hidden beneath the ugliness of the war torn places he found himself in and that was what his book would focus on. A single rose blooming on a battlefield, a glorious sunrise over a minefield. He had once told Gabe that he took those photos to maintain his sanity.

"Won't you get bored at home?" Gabe asked, taking a sip of beer.

"I can't see the beauty anymore, Gabe." His brother's voice sounded completely desolate and Gabe's throat tightened. "I look around me and all I see is ugliness, despair, fear, poverty . . . violence. There's no beauty. Not even here."

"Ah, man," Gabe shook his head, blinking away that sting in the back of his eyes again. "I'm glad you're home, brother."

"Yeah, me too . . ."

"Movie?" Chase asked when they got home an hour and a half later and Gabe nodded.

"Yeah, lemme get some chips and beer. You pick the movie." Gabe moved toward the kitchen and then turned back. "Hey!"

Chase paused on his way to the den and looked back at him.

“No chick flicks!” Gabe instructed, and Chase blinked, studied him for a second, and then, for the first time since returning, truly laughed. The sound was deep and spontaneous and just a tad rusty and made Gabe feel rather sentimental.

“Damn,” Chase bantered. “I was so looking forward to watching Pretty Woman again. Or Titanic maybe.”

Chase chose a comedy, one they had seen several times before, but Gabe recognized that his brother was seeking the familiar and that a violent action movie wasn't what Chase needed.

The movie had been on for less than half an hour when the doorbell rang. Gabe tensed, knowing instantly who it was. He had forgotten to tell her that Chase would be staying with him.

“It's nearly twelve.” Chase sat up with a frown and paused the movie. “Who would be visiting at this time of night?”

“I have an inkling,” Gabe replied. “I'll get it.”

He left the room before Chase could question him any further and hurried to the front door. The sight of Bobbi standing there in nothing but a pair of skimpy Snoopy pyjama shorts and a matching pink tank top made him groan. She looked good enough to eat and that had been his plan for the night before Chase had come to stay. She smiled at him and took his breath away.

“Hi,” she whispered, and stepped into his arms. She reached up and entangled her hands in his hair before tugging his head down for a kiss. He wrapped his arms around her slender body and captured her lips in a tender embrace that was filled with longing and desire. Her soft moan as she wound her arms around his neck undid him and he deepened the kiss, stroking his tongue into her mouth for a brief instant before reason reasserted itself and he dragged his head back. She made a disappointed sound and tried to capture his lips again but he brought his hands up to her arms and moved her firmly away, turning his head to avoid her kiss. He winced at the hurt confusion that clouded her eyes.

“Chase is here,” he muttered, and the pain deepened for an instant before she stepped back.

“Bobbi,” he whispered, uncomfortable with the brief flash of rejection that he had seen in her eyes and despising himself for putting it there. “I’m . . .”

“Oh please don’t . . .” She held up a hand in entreaty. “Just don’t say you’re sorry. It’s okay. It’s just part of the agreement.”

“But . . .”

“Gabe,” she warned, and he sighed deeply.

“This isn’t easy for me either, Bobbi.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s not.” But she sounded bitter and unconvinced and it was killing Gabe not to reach for her and drag her back into his arms. “Can I say hello to Chase? It would look weird if I didn’t. I won’t stay too long.”

“You can stay as long as you want,” he said, ill at ease. He hated how badly he was mishandling the situation and hated the awful certainty that in his quest to keep her from getting hurt, he was not only wounding her but irreparably damaging their friendship in the process.

She brushed past him and padded into the den, the soles of her trainers squeaking on the tiled floor. He absently rubbed at the gnawing ache in his chest as he followed her in. Chase looked up when they entered the room and his face lit up when he saw her.

“Well, look who it is.” He sounded delighted and leapt to his feet to envelop Bobbi in a tight hug. She laughed and returned the embrace, squealing when Chase lifted her off her feet and swung her around.

“Put me down, you giant oaf.” She giggled and he complied, smacking a big kiss on her mouth.

“I’ve missed you, sweetie,” he told her and she stood on her toes to ruffle his hair.

“I’ve missed you too, you sexy beast,” she said affectionately, cuddling up to his chest again. Gabe could feel his brow settling into a scowl as he watched the excessive kissing and cuddling between the two. Had they always been this physical? He found himself wanting to wade between them and push them apart. This was ridiculous. When Chase planted yet another kiss on Bobbi’s cheek, Gabe felt a growl building in his chest. Enough, for God’s sake!

“Bobbi’s not staying long,” he said loudly enough to interrupt the snuggle fest. Chase looked into Bobbi’s upturned face with a mock frown.

“Ridiculous, you’re watching the movie with us, aren’t you?” he asked Bobbi, who darted a tentative glance at Gabe.

“I’m not sure.”

Gabe winced at the small waver in her voice, knowing that he had put it there. God, he was being a total dick. He just didn’t like seeing Chase’s hands all over her. And that thought was shocking in its own right. It was as if he was jealous . . . of Chase.

“It’s Talladega Nights,” Gabe informed her, gentling his tone. “Stay, I’ll get you a beer.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind,” she said hesitantly.

“Of course we don’t mind,” Chase scoffed, dragging her to the sofa and planting her next to him. “Why would we mind? You sit with me, I’ve missed the hell out of you and I’m keeping you close.”

Gabe tried to keep another frown from settling on his face and turned away from the cozy pair, heading for the kitchen. When he returned, Bobbi had her shoes off and her feet curled under her butt on the sofa. Chase had an arm around her shoulders while she had her head on his chest and was absently playing with his free hand as she told

him about the Corvette she was renovating for Jason. Chase was giving her his full attention and neither of them noticed Gabe's return until he slammed the beer bottle onto the coffee table in front of them. Chase looked up in surprise, and Bobbi eyed him with that awful look of uncertainty on her face again.

"Sorry," Gabe muttered. "It slipped."

Chase seemed to accept that and rested his cheek on Bobbi's head, but she still kept a wary eye on Gabe as he slumped down on the recliner next to the sofa.

Bobbi felt incredibly awkward, it was clear that Gabe didn't want her here. Maybe he didn't trust her to keep her mouth shut about their sexual arrangement, maybe he wanted to spend time with his brother and resented Bobbi's presence, or maybe he just plain didn't want to be in her company right now. Whatever it was, it made her feel uncomfortable and for the first time ever, she felt unsure of her welcome in this house. She could sense the waves of disapproval wafting off him even after he'd put the movie back on and she couldn't relax, despite Chase's solid and reassuring presence beside her.

She couldn't concentrate on the movie and was lost in her thoughts when a soft snore in her ear startled her out of her reverie. She twisted her neck to look up at Chase and came to the gradual realization that his arm was heavy across her shoulders and his body was becoming uncomfortably heavy. She tossed a glance over at Gabe, who was staring at the television screen grimly—he seemed as lost in his thoughts as she had been.

"Gabe," she whispered. He didn't seem to hear her and she escalated her voice to an urgent hiss. "Gabe!"

He was startled into jerking his head around to where she and Chase were sitting on the sofa. The questioning look on his face was immediately replaced by amusement when he saw her predicament.

"He's getting heavy," she grunted, and Gabe chuckled before coming over to prod his brother.

"Chase, you're crushing Bobbi." There was no response, and he shook Chase more firmly. Chase sat bolt upright and one hand wrapped around Gabe's throat while the

other arm drew back to deliver a punch. Bobbi screamed and the sound seemed to snap Chase out of whatever daze he was in, because his grip immediately loosened. His arms fell to his sides and his hands clenched into tight fists.

“Shit,” he swore shakily, his entire body trembling. “I’m sorry. I was . . . I was having a dream.”

“Some dream.” Gabe kept his voice light, even though Bobbi could see the concern in his eyes. “No harm done. You’re knackered though. You should get some sleep.”

Chase ran a trembling hand through his hair and nodded. He cast an apologetic glance at Bobbi.

“Sorry about that, sweetie,” he said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s all good,” she said with a wobbly smile. “You just get a decent night’s sleep. We can catch up tomorrow.” She got up and hugged him again, her concern for him making her grip tighter than usual. He returned the desperate hug with equal fervor before reluctantly releasing her. He spared a brief shamefaced glance for Gabe before saying a hurried good night and leaving the room. There was an odd and uncomfortable silence after Chase’s departure and Bobbi darted a quick look at Gabe. There was a troubled expression on his face as he looked at the door through which Chase had exited the room.

“He’s too thin,” Bobbi said, and Gabe turned his moody regard on her.

“I know,” he agreed.

“I can see why you’re worried about him. He looks terrible,” she observed, and Gabe sighed deeply, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets and hunching his shoulders. He didn’t bother replying.

“I should go,” she said after another prolonged silence and watched Gabe’s jaw tighten in response. She looked around for her trainers but could find only one. Frustrated, she went down on her knees to have a look beneath the sofa. Of course it wasn’t within easy reach and she fumbled around for it—swearing softly beneath her breath when it kept evading her grasp. When—after a long while—she managed to snag a shoelace and drag it out, her cheeks were flushed with both embarrassment and exertion and she tugged her shoes on self-consciously, acutely aware of the fact that Gabe had been staring at her the entire time.

“Anyway . . .” She tucked back a strand of her hair and focused her eyes on the wall above his left shoulder. “I’ll see you. Good night.”

“Don’t go.” The words sounded torn from him and his voice was filled with enough urgency to bring her eyes up to meet his. The entreaty she saw there stole her breath.

“I thought you didn’t want me here,” she said, and hated how needy she sounded. He held out an unsteady hand to her. She hesitated before stepping toward him. He entwined his fingers with hers and gently tugged her closer until he had her loosely clasped in his arms.

“I want you here.” His voice was soft and his eyes gleamed with sincerity as they burned into hers. He cupped her face in his hands and just looked at her for the longest time, his gaze running from her hair, down to eyebrows, nose, mouth—it lingered there—and then back up to her eyes. “You’re so damned beautiful, Bobbi mine. I’m happy you’re here and I’m sorry if I made you feel unwelcome.”

Stunned by the intimate endearment—had he really just called her his?—it took Bobbi a moment to gather her thoughts enough to answer. “You didn’t want Chase to know about us, I get it.”

“That’s not it.”

“You wanted to spend time with him. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Nope.” His thumbs were starting a slow, seductive sweep from her jaw, up to the corners of her mouth and back again.

“Then, I don’t understand . . .”

“I wanted to spend time with you.” He totally dumfounded her with those words and she reached up to his wrists, meaning to stop the distracting stroke of his thumbs so that she could concentrate on his words, but not really succeeding. Instead her hands explored the bones in his wrists and then swept up his strong, veiny forearms and further up to his hard biceps.

“You had a funny way of showing it,” she murmured, and his face was so close to hers that her lips brushed against his as she said the words.

“I hated seeing Chase’s hands all over you,” he confessed. “Absolutely hated it.” She drew her head back so that she could look into his eyes.

“What are you talking about? Chase and I hugged.”

“You didn’t hug, you cuddled and caressed and damned near crept into each other’s skins.” He looked and sounded completely pissed off and Bobbi felt her eyebrows lift into her hairline.

“Gabe, it’s Chase, he’s like a brother to me,” she said.

“I was like a brother to you,” he pointed out grimly. “And there’s not a hell of a lot of difference physically between Chase and me.”

“You’re jealous,” she breathed, unable to believe it.

“I’m not,” he denied. “I just don’t like sharing. Especially not with my brother.”

“Hmm, but I don’t want Chase, I want you,” she whispered, stroking her hands over his triceps and down to his waist, where they found the bottom edge of his shirt and crept under it to the warm, muscular flesh beneath. She felt the taut muscles in his abdomen jump against her questing fingers.

“Why?” His question astonished her and her hands stopped their exploration.

“Why what?” she asked warily.

“Why do you want me? Why not Chase, who happens to look exactly like me?” Bobbi hesitated, terrified of revealing too much. Gabe knowing that she wanted him physically was one thing but him discovering that she was in love with him was something entirely different. It would complicate an already stressful situation and add even more strain on their already overburdened friendship.

“Because Chase isn’t you,” she said after a thoughtful pause. She could see that her answer didn’t satisfy him and went up on to her toes to kiss him, hoping that it would provide a distraction from his searching questions. It worked, Gabe moaned into her mouth and returned the kiss with a sweet intensity that blew her mind. He had never kissed her like this before. It was almost . . . worshipful and quite loving.

CHAPTER NINE

Bobbi’s entire body was humming when she floated her way home across the lawn in the early hours of the morning. Gabe had spent hours making gentle, almost reverential, love to her and that—combined with his display of jealousy earlier—had left her feeling cherished. And hopeful.

She quashed that feeling; it would lead to expectations, which would lead to disappointment and eventually heartbreak. She kept leaving her heart wide open and it

would be her downfall. When this thing ended, she would be left alone with her broken heart and unable to talk to anybody because nobody would know about it. It was a difficult position to be in. But nevertheless—while her body still buzzed with the aftereffects of Gabe’s expert ministrations—it was easy to fool herself into believing that what they had was real.

She snuck into the house, knowing that the entire security staff knew about her nightly visitations to the Braddock house, but she trusted them to be discreet. Unless her actions put her or her family into direct physical danger, they wouldn’t utter a word. In fact she didn’t see a single one of them on her return walk home but counted on the fact that they knew exactly where she was. They were being tactful, and she thought it was kind of sweet.

She fell into bed with Gabe’s scent still all over her, his taste in her mouth. She could still feel the hot, hard thrust of him inside her body and the scrape of his stubble in her neck and on her breasts. She fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

Gabe was whistling cheerfully when he drifted down to breakfast that morning. He felt amazing, well rested and in a brilliant mood. He had been utterly sated by the time he had reluctantly let Bobbi leave his bed last night. He wished she had stayed longer though, he may have been unable to perform after their four bouts last night, but he’d still wanted to have her curl up next to him and fall asleep. He’d wanted to open his eyes and see her face in the morning light, but she had gently extricated herself and planted one last kiss on his mouth before creeping out of the room with her shoes clutched to her chest.

Gabe grinned when he saw the housekeeper, Letty, who smiled in return.

“Mr. Chase requested a buffet breakfast on the patio,” she informed him.

“Thanks, Letty.” She nodded and went back to doing whatever it was she did to keep his home running smoothly. He appreciated the work she did and paid her handsomely

but wasn't one of those people who got too chatty with the household staff. Chase probably knew her entire life story, including how many children and grandchildren she had and their names. That's just the way he was—warm and approachable for the most part, which was why Chase's sudden unapproachability and unwillingness to talk was so disturbing. He was the complete opposite of Gabe—who tended to keep people at a distance until he got to know them. Only his inner circle ever saw Gabe joke and laugh and play.

When Gabe got to the sunny patio, Chase was staring pensively at the gleaming swimming pool.

“Morning.” Chase's head jerked in surprise. He looked up, his expression so tormented for a moment that Gabe's breath caught. The look lasted for only an instant before he shook himself and smiled.

“Morning.”

“You get a decent night's sleep?” Gabe asked, as he sat down opposite his brother after helping himself to scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast.

“Hmm . . . you know how it is after you've been on a long-haul flight. I was up at some ungodly hour again, feeling refreshed but frustrated.” Gabe suspected that it was more than that disturbing Chase's sleep but before he could ask about it, Chase blindsided him with a question of his own.

“Speaking of which, Bobbi left pretty late, didn't she? Did you guys watch another movie after I went up to bed?” Chase was buttering a slice of toast and didn't see Gabe's expression freeze for a panicked instant. He glanced up before Gabe could reply and whatever he saw on Gabe's face made his eyes widen in shock.

“Oh God,” he breathed. “Oh my God, Gabe, are you out of your ever-loving mind?” Gabe swallowed and felt his face flush with heat.

“It's not what you think,” he said lamely.

“You’re not having sex with Bobbi?” his brother asked, his voice absolutely crawling with disbelief. “With Bobbi, for Christ’s sake! What the hell are you thinking? Who else knows about this?”

“Nobody,” Gabe admitted. “It’s nobody’s damned business.”

“And how long has this been going on?”

“Not long.” He couldn’t believe it had been only three nights and the more he had of her the more he craved. This need he had for her seemed to grow with every touch.

“And what are your . . .” Chase shook his head and then snorted. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but what are your intentions?”

“My intentions?” Gabe asked, meeting his brother’s disapproving stare head on. “My intentions are to have breakfast and go to work.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Chase growled.

“That’s the only answer you’re getting though,” Gabe retorted, shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth and glaring at his brother defiantly.

“This won’t end well,” Chase predicted. “How the hell could you allow this to happen?”

“It’s none of your business.” Gabe hated how his brother automatically assumed that whatever was going on between Bobbi and Gabe would end, even though he knew it would as well.

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“I’m making it my business,” Chase responded. “You’re going to hurt her.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gabe said heatedly. “You’re making assumptions based on what? You don’t know what the paradigms of my relationship with Bobbi are.”

“Yeah? So what are they? You guys are involved in some secret romance that will eventually lead to marriage and kids? Is that it? Because if that’s not it, then I’m going to have to kick your dumb arse!”

“Look, we’re attracted to each other. That’s it. We’re working it out of our systems. It’s between us and nobody else needs to know about it.”

“Bobbi isn’t the type of woman you work out of your system, Gabe.”

“Why not? Because I happen to have known her longer than the women I’ve dated and slept with before? They were all daughters, sisters, and friends too, you know? It’s hypocritical of you to insist I treat Bobbi differently. We have a mutual respect for each other and we’re indulging in an adult relationship with clear-cut boundaries that we’ve both agreed to.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Chase lambasted him. “You never hid your relationships with those other women like they were dirty little secrets. If Bobbi is no different than any of them, why are you hiding this from everybody? Have you been out with her in public?”

“We’re always out in public,” Gabe replied, knowing that it wasn’t what Chase had meant.

“Oh cut the crap, Gabriel,” Chase derided. “You know that’s not what I meant. Bobbi doesn’t deserve to be treated like some second-class citizen, good enough for warming your bed but nothing else. You’re embarrassed to be seen with her, that’s what this is about.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Gabe said, feeling guilty as hell. Bobbi wasn’t the type of woman he was usually seen with. She didn’t have the dress sense, the gloss, or the elegance he enjoyed in a woman. Where would he take her for Christ’s sake? When she didn’t seem to own more than that one ugly dress?

“You’re going to hurt her,” Chase repeated.

“I’m not a cruel man, Chase,” Gabe said, annoyed by his brother’s self-righteous attitude.

“No, you’re not,” Chase agreed, leaving Gabe waiting for the “but” to come. “You’re not cruel, you’re merely indifferent. Your previous lovers knew the score, when you got bored or they got bored, you both walked away. No ill feelings on either side. You were okay and they were okay. Everything was just okay. So what happens when you grow bored with this relationship? When the novelty wears off and you feel the need to move on to the next woman? How do you cut Bobbi out of your life? Because that’s what you do, Gabe. It’s almost surgical—once you call it quits, you never mention them again. No pictures, no fond recollections—it’s as if they were never a part of your life. You’re a good guy, Gabe. The bloody best man I know and you treat women with the utmost respect when you’re with them, but you’ve never been in a relationship that lasted longer than a month or two. And this thing with Bobbi can’t really even qualify as a relationship, can it? Not when you’re skulking around pretending that it doesn’t even exist.”

“That’s rich, coming from you, Chase! You’re not exactly Mr. Reliable when it comes to women,” Gabe retorted, feeling his temper bubbling to the surface.

“I’m not the one who’s shagging my best friend, you idiot!” Chase’s own temper was always quicker to rise than Gabe’s, and Gabe could see it sparking in his eyes. “You’re going to hurt her but you’re too blinded by your own lust to see it.”

“Bobbi knows the score.” He felt driven to make his brother understand that this wasn’t as bad as he seemed to think it was. “And one of the main reasons we decided

to keep this quiet was because we feared reactions like yours. The less people who know, the less external pressure from family and friends, and when it ends, there'll be no awkwardness from people who would feel compelled to take sides."

"Oh, so you're doing it for all of us?" Chase asked sarcastically. "How big of you! What a relief to hear that you're not just covering your own butt so that you don't look like a complete dick when you dump Bobbi and move on to your next conquest."

"You have no idea what you're talking about." Gabe pushed his plate aside and shook his head in disgust. He was pissed off and hurt by his brother's low opinion of him. "None. This thing between Bobbi and me sprang up out of nowhere; it's not something I went looking for. It just happened and I'm trying to deal with it as best I can. So, I'd appreciate it if you'd butt out. This is between Bobbi and me."

Chase looked like he was about to respond but he clamped his lips together and said nothing. His eyes were stormy and he still looked royally pissed off, but he thankfully said nothing further. Gabe knew better than to think that his brother would let it go though and he already dreaded the next confrontation.

Gabe's day didn't improve. Mike was being difficult and insisted on knowing every single detail about the Valentine's Day Ball. Since Gabe didn't know a single damned thing about the ball, trusting their assistants to get it done, his replies to the older man's questions hadn't satisfied Mike and had led to a heated debate about what each man believed leadership roles entailed. Accusing Mike of micromanaging hadn't helped the escalating argument and the man had hung up in a huff, leaving Gabe frustrated and bad-tempered. He and Mike often disagreed, but this was a petty argument, which had escalated because of Mike's misgivings about retiring and Gabe's already foul temper after that morning's argument with Chase.

An hour later, while he was instructing Stephanie to set up a meeting with one of the GNT accounting executives about restructuring the company's pricing packages, his cell phone rang. He glanced down and grimaced when he saw his mother's photo on the screen.

"I have to take this," he told his assistant and the woman politely excused herself. Gabe watched her leave before picking up the call.

"Hi, Mum," he greeted.

"Hello, darling," his mother greeted warmly. "How are you?"

"All good here, Mum."

"Wonderful." His mother wasn't one to waste time before getting to the point and that was the case now. "I've been concerned about your brother. When will he be back in town?"

Great. Gabe winced. He didn't want to lie to his mother, but Chase had put him in an impossible situation. If he came clean now, they'd both be in the crapper.

"You might want to talk to Chase about that, Mum," he said carefully and there was a long pause before his mother replied.

"I asked you a straightforward question, Gabriel. Why can't you give me a straightforward answer?" Full name. Fabulous. This wasn't going to end well. Their mother knew that something was up.

"I thought I did give you a straightforward answer," he said.

"No, you tried to divert me back to your brother."

"Mum . . ."

"Where's your brother, Gabriel?" she asked bluntly.

"Mum . . ."

"Don't you 'mum' me, young man. Just answer the question." Lucy Templeton-Braddock Colbert could be downright terrifying when she wanted to be.

"At home," he confessed miserably.

"And why did neither of you see fit to inform me before now?" She sounded unsurprised, which meant that she had known beforehand but had decided to put him in the hot seat for the sheer hell of it.

"You knew," he accused.

"Roberta told me." Their mother had never called her Bobbi. "I called her earlier to ask her about her new boyfriend and she tried to distract me too, by saying that I must be happy to have Chase back in town. This time the distraction worked because I wasn't aware that my own son was home."

"Mum, you should talk to Chase about . . ." He paused as his mother's words sank in. "What new boyfriend?"

"Don't change the subject, Gabriel," she said, but he barely heard her.

"Mum, what boyfriend are you talking about?" he asked urgently, wondering if there were any rumors floating around about Bobbi and him.

"The landscape architect she's seeing, Kyle something. I heard about him from Suzie Claiborne," his mother said dismissively before continuing on her original course of chastisement, but Gabe wasn't listening anymore. He was wondering why the hell Jason's mother seemed to think that Bobbi was seeing that Kyle guy.

“Gabe, are you listening to me?” His mother’s voice had elevated shrilly and he shook himself and refocused on her tirade.

“Sorry mum, I was distracted by . . . stuff.” He grimaced at the lame excuse but his mother wasn’t paying attention.

“I said we’re coming around for dinner,” she said.

“Mum, look . . .” He sighed. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you that Chase is home but you have to prepare yourself. He looks . . . he doesn’t look great. He’s lost a lot of weight and he just seems exhausted. I think he knew that it would worry you, so try to lay off the guilt tripping, okay? I can take it but I don’t think he’s in a great place at the moment.” He and Chase may be at odds, but that didn’t mean that Gabe was going to hang his brother out to dry.

His mother was quiet for a long while after he had spoken and a shuddering sigh on the other end of the line told him that she was crying.

“I’m just happy he’s home,” she said, punctuating the sentiment with a wet sniff. “I won’t say anything about his appearance. Thank you for the warning.”

“No problem,” he said. “Love you, Mum.”

“I know, darling,” his mother said softly. “I love you too.”

Gabe disconnected the call and then glared off into the middle distance, thinking about Bobbi’s boyfriend. What was that all about?

“I hear you’re seeing that Kyle guy.” Gabe’s deep voice sent a shudder of longing down Bobbi’s spine before she registered his words.

“Oh my God . . .,” she groaned. “Not you too.”

“No truth to the rumor then?” He asked in a strained voice.

“That’s a stupid question,” she shot back. “When exactly was I supposed to squeeze in a budding romance with Kyle Foster when I’ve been spending my free time in dead-end shagfest with you?”

There was a long silence at the other end of the line.

“My mother, Frank, and Kim are coming round for dinner tonight,” he said after a while. “I think it’ll be a late night, so it’ll probably be best if you didn’t come around.”

Wow. That hurt more than it should have. Under normal circumstances, he would have included Bobbi in what was essentially a family gathering. So this was what it would be like after they ended their thing. They would remain friends, of a sort, but he would start excluding Bobbi from more and more of the family meals and outings

until they would simply have “drifted apart.” It wouldn’t be intentional but it would be the inexorable result of an impossible situation.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll chat with you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah . . . ,” he said, sounding reluctant, and she winced. “Okay, I’ve got to go. Take care.”

“You too,” she said, forcing the words out, hating how thick with tears they sounded.

“Bobbi,” he said, just before she disconnected, and her heart leapt hopefully. “Chase saw you leave this morning. He knows about us . . . our having sex. I thought you should be aware of that.”

“Oh.” Chase knew? How did he feel about it? What did he think of her? Of Gabe? She wanted to ask Gabe but he didn’t seem open to discussion at the moment.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“Right.” God, he sounded so cold that it sent an icy tremor through her body. “See you.”

He disconnected before she could reply, and she carefully put her phone down and unseeingly stared at the shop floor through the windows of her office. Sean and Craig were working on the Corvette and she was taking care of the paperwork as always. She bowed her head over another of the endless order forms that was piled in front of her and desperately tried to keep her tears at bay. She never cried. Never. And she refused to cry now. She had gone into this knowing full well how it would end; so crying over it would be stupid.

She picked up her pen and started to write again. She was stronger than this. She knew she was. She wouldn’t cry. Not now. Not for this.

Gabe was miserable throughout dinner. He shouldn’t have told her not to come around. As the time came for his mother, Frank, and Kim to head home, all he could think about was that he wouldn’t be seeing Bobbi later. He thought about calling her and telling her to come by after his mother left, but he wasn’t sure if she was even speaking to him at the moment. He knew that he’d been a bit abrupt with her that afternoon. But once he explained the strain he had been under she would surely understand? Hearing that everyone thought that she was dating Kyle Foster hadn’t really helped the situation, not when Gabe suddenly and inexplicably found himself wanting to go out and tell everybody who she was really involved with.

He ignored the small voice in the back of his mind that told him he was a selfish asshole and instead tried to figure out how to get her to come around. He was still trying to figure it out when he kissed his mother and hugged his stepfather and sister

good-bye. Chase had been quiet throughout the evening and their mother had been extremely tactful around him. All in all it had been a relatively successful evening.

He dragged his phone out of his pocket, hoping to see a message from Bobbi, but there was nothing. His heart sank in disappointment and he knew he'd probably have to apologize for his earlier dickishness.

"Are you going to tell Bobbi to come sneaking over?" The unexpected sound of Chase's voice startled him into nearly dropping the phone.

"That's none of your damned business," he growled over his shoulder and Chase glowered at him.

"Stop telling me it's none of my business!" he retorted, coming around to face Gabe. "I love that girl like a sister and you're my brother. Not only is this extremely weird for me, it is totally my business. I don't want to see either of you get hurt."

"Nice of you to show some concern for me too," Gabe said sarcastically.

"You've been around the block a few times more than she has, but that doesn't mean that you don't stand to lose as much as she does," Chase pointed out.

"What do you mean?" Gabe asked, confused.

"If . . . when this thing goes south, you're going to lose Bobbi," Chase said.

"No, we have . . ."

"An arrangement," Chase completed. "Yeah, I know. You're still going to lose her and I can't believe you're unable to see that."

"We know what we're doing," Gabe maintained stubbornly, and Chase sighed.

"God," he said tiredly. "I can't decide if you're being willfully blind or deliberately stupid. You know, Gabe, if it was just your happiness at stake, I'd leave you to make your own dumb mistakes, but I don't know if I can stand idly by while you hurt Bobbi."

"You seem to have an extremely low opinion of me, Chase. Why can't you trust me to know what's best for both Bobbi and me?"

"Because I don't think you know what's best, right now, Gabe," Chase said, laying a gentle hand on Gabe's shoulder. "I don't have a low opinion of you. I just think you've lost sight of the bigger picture."

"I'm going to bed," Gabe said, shrugging off his brother's hand. "Don't worry, Bobbi is safe from my nefarious attentions tonight. I'll see you in the morning."

Bobbi didn't hear from Gabe the next day, and she tried to keep her mind occupied with work. She was running on empty from lack of sleep and food. She felt like a

zombie and was functioning on autopilot. She felt alone and desperately needed to talk to someone. So when Chase walked into her shop at five that afternoon, she felt a warm tide of relief and gratitude flood through her entire being.

“Chase,” she murmured, and dropped what she was doing to walk straight into his arms.

“Hey, sweetie.” He kissed her head and it was all she could do not to melt into a messy puddle of tears. “Want to get a drink somewhere?”

She nodded and his arms tightened for a brief moment before he looked down into her miserable face and dropped a swift kiss on her forehead.

“I’ll just tell the guys to close shop early and grab my things,” she said, feeling somewhat embarrassed. It was a relief that Chase knew about her and Gabe because it gave her someone to talk to, but it also made her feel incredibly shy and self-conscious. His eyes were filled with gentle understanding though and not in the slightest bit judgmental, which was something she had feared after Gabe had told her that Chase knew.

Sean and Craig had watched the scene unfold and both looked concerned when she told them that she would be leaving early. Craig followed her to her office and watched as she shut down her computer and straightened up her desk.

“You okay, boss?” he asked gruffly. “We noticed that you seemed off today. We were worried about you.”

“Thank you for asking, Craig,” she said, touched by their concern. “I’m fine, just feeling out of sorts. You know how paperwork depresses me.”

He looked unconvinced and shoved his hands into his overall pockets and swayed back and forth on his heels.

“You sure?” he asked, and she felt a surge of affection for the tough, no-nonsense man. He had a rough exterior but he was a huge softie, a family man devoted to his wife and daughters. That paternal instinct sometimes carried over in his dealings with Bobbi.

“I’m sure . . .” She went onto her toes and pressed a quick kiss on his cheek. “Thank you.”

He looked embarrassed and cleared his throat before backing away.

“No problem. Anytime you need to talk . . .” He left the statement open-ended and hastened out of the room. Bobbi grinned at his retreating back before unzipping her overalls and hanging them up on the hook beside the door. She rinsed her face and hands before heading back out to meet Chase.

“Ready?” Chase asked, when she joined him again and she nodded.

“You drive,” she suggested. “We can come back here later to pick up my car.” He nodded and led her toward the Jeep that he always drove when he was home. The Jeep belonged to Gabe, but he was always happy to let Chase use it.

Chase automatically ran ahead to get the passenger door for her and she smiled at him in appreciation as she clambered into the seat. The Jeep was like a comfortable old friend. She always felt a fuzzy sense of homecoming when she slid into its passenger seat.

When Chase climbed into the driver’s side, Bobbi turned to speak to him.

“Do you mind if we avoid Manny’s tonight?” she asked softly. “I’m not really in the mood to hang out with everybody.”

“Yeah, me either.” He grimaced at the thought. He drove them to the nearby Hout Bay instead, which had more choices when it came to restaurants and pubs. They agreed on a place that neither had been to before, less chance of running into chatty old friends that way.

Once they were seated and ordered their drinks, they stared at each other for a long while.

“I guess you think I’m an idiot.” Bobbi broke the silence between them, toying with the basket of cutlery on the table.

“Not even close.” He shook his head. “I think Gabe is the idiot.”

“For getting involved with me?” she asked miserably.

“For not telling the world that he snagged you,” Chase corrected, and she raised hopeful eyes to his, not sure if he was joking. His eyes were serious and met hers without flinching, and he only broke eye contact when the server brought his beer and her gin and tonic.

“You mean that?” she asked, after the smiling server had left, hating the wavering note in her voice.

“Damned right I mean that,” he growled. “He’s made a complete mess of things.”

“Try not to judge him too harshly, he’s doing what he thinks is right,” she said softly, fishing the lime out of her drink and dropping it onto a paper napkin. “He didn’t know how to handle the attraction between us. It shocked the hell out of him, and he’s still not sure how to cope with it.”

“You seem to be handling it just fine,” Chase pointed out, and Bobbi flushed miserably. She focused on swirling the plastic swizzle stick around her glass, making sure her drink was thoroughly mixed, before raising her eyes back to his.

“I’ve had more time to get used to it. I’ve been attracted to Gabe for years and I’ve learned how to deal with my feelings. Gabe . . . hasn’t yet.”

“Years?” Chase asked in disbelief, and Bobbi nodded.

“Years.”

“You never let on, not once,” he said, sounding staggered.

“I still haven’t. He thinks this is as new to me as it is to him and I feel dishonest because of that. And he would still quite happily be treating me like his little sister if I hadn’t gotten drunk at a party last Friday and kissed him, so don’t go thinking he seduced me or anything,” she warned.

“Still, he finds that he has a previously undiscovered passion for you and his first instinct is to cover it up?”

“Chase, one day I was his best buddy, and the next day he was fighting to keep his hands off me.” She was trying to be logical and hated herself for defending Gabe despite knowing that it would be unfair to blame him for every wrong choice. “I should never have kissed him. I didn’t know how he would respond and I’m pretty sure I wrecked our friendship because of one reckless and stupid decision.”

Chase took a long, thirsty swig of his beer before he replied.

“I don’t like the secrecy, Bobbi,” he said, and she sighed.

“I knew what I was doing when I agreed to his terms, Chase. I just didn’t expect it to be so difficult. One minute I’m floating on cloud nine and the next I feel . . . small and unworthy and just so stupid.” Chase swore roughly and she flinched.

“I want to kill him for making you feel like that,” he growled, and she reached over to stroke his hand, where it rested beside his drink.

“Thank you but . . . he’s not the one who made me feel that way. I am. I agreed to his terms, I thought I could handle it. A quick affair, that is all he has to offer. At first I thought—” She broke off what she’d been about to say, knowing that it would only infuriate Chase further. Admitting that she’d expected Gabe to want a proper relationship with her after discovering his attraction to her still made her feel ridiculously naïve.

“At first you thought . . . ?” Chase prompted, and she shook her head, sipping her drink to avoid replying.

“It’s nothing,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, and Chase’s face was a study in sheer frustration.

“Bobbi, you do know that you deserve more than this shoddy treatment, right?” Chase asked, and she sighed.

“I know. I just spent years mooning over the guy and this seemed like the only way I could get him. I knew that it would be temporary; I knew that it would place an enormous strain on our friendship and I kind of knew that it would probably hurt like hell when it ended. Knowing all of that doesn’t make the process any easier though,” she admitted.

“This is such a mess,” Chase said.

“Hmm, but it’s not your mess, Chase. Gabe and I will deal with it. I need you to be my friend though, and Gabe needs his brother. We don’t need you to take sides . . . please don’t take sides,” she said, her voice soft with entreaty.

“Both you and Gabe keep saying that you know what you’re doing,” Chase observed in a low voice. “But from where I’m sitting you both look totally clueless. It’s frustrating the hell out of me because it’s like I can see the road ahead of you and it’s leading straight off a cliff.”

“I see the cliff,” she said. “I’m pretty sure Gabe sees it too . . . but sometimes falling is just inevitable.”

CHAPTER TEN

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Gabe kept checking his phone for messages from Bobbi but of course there were none. He knew that she wouldn’t call or SMS—not after the way he had blown her off the night before—but he didn’t know what her reaction would be to a call from him.

He missed her.

Not just the sexy woman who had become his lover but the endearing friend who brightened up his days with her endless chatter about cars, her silly pranks in the past, and her quirky—often insightful—observations about life in general. It was after ten and he was sitting in the den, morosely staring at his phone, unsure of his next move.

Chase ambled into the room and Gabe’s first instinct was to tuck the phone beneath the sofa cushions. Chase raised an eyebrow at him and Gabe flushed, feeling like a defensive teenager.

“Really?” His brother shook his head and sat down on one of the recliners. “You’re hiding your phone from me? Just call her. It’s better than having you mope around the house.”

“I’m not moping,” Gabe responded automatically, and then felt even more adolescent. Sometimes his brother brought out the worst in him.

“Could have fooled me.” Chase rolled his eyes, reached for the TV remote, and started to rapidly flick through the channels and every microsecond of noisy color that flashed onto the screen irritated the hell out of Gabe.

“Pick a damned channel,” he snapped, but Chase ignored him, continuing to cycle through the channels at the speed of light. Swearing irritably, Gabe vacated the room, seeking solitude.

He settled for the patio and dropped into a lounge beside the lighted pool. For a few minutes he just sat there, listening to the sounds of the night insects and frogs chirping, croaking, and whirring as they went about their business.

Just call her. He repeated Chase’s words to himself. What was the worst she could do? Hang up on him? He winced at the thought. God, he hoped she didn’t hang up on him. He had no Plan B.

He pushed the “Call” button and listened to the phone ring for a few endless moments. It rang for so long he was almost certain it would switch to voice mail, but when her breathless voice answered, he found himself both relieved and panicked.

“Hello?” His mouth had gone dry and he couldn’t quite bring himself to respond to her greeting. He considered hanging up but . . . “Gabe?”

Yeah, Caller ID screwed him over. Of course she knew who it was.

“Hi, Bobbi,” he croaked, ridiculously nervous. “How are you?”

“Fine,” she said after a long silence. “And you?”

“I’m . . .” The fine hovered on his tongue and he opened his mouth to say it. “I’m a jerk. An idiot. A complete dick. And so, so sorry, Bobbi mine. I shouldn’t have been so abrupt with you last night. But . . . I was. And that’s no excuse. I have no excuse. I just hope you’ll forgive me?”

No response.

“Bobbi? Are you there?” he asked nervously.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I’ve missed you,” he told her softly, wishing he could see her. It frustrated him, not being able to see her face and read her mood.

“I missed you too, Gabe.” There was another long silence.

“Are you still angry with me?”

“I wasn’t angry with you,” she corrected.

“Will you come around tonight?” he asked.

“I-I don’t think so, Gabe,” she said after another endless pause and Gabe’s entire world started crumbling around him at the rejection. “I’ll be there for the football tomorrow night.”

“Right,” he responded numbly. He’d forgotten about the Friday night game. The guys and their significant others would be descending on his house the following evening.

“Football. Of course.”

“I’ll see you then, okay?”

“Okay,” he repeated. He held the phone to his ear for a long time after she’d disconnected the call before dropping his arm. He sat on the lounge, hands clasped between his knees, elbows resting on thighs, and head down as he tried to figure out what to do next.

“Gabe.” Chase’s voice startled him and he looked up to see his brother standing in front of him. Chase sat down on the lounge opposite his. “You okay?”

“Not really,” he responded honestly, and Chase sighed. “You’ll be happy to know she’s not coming around tonight.”

“Seeing you like this doesn’t make me happy, Gabe.” Chase’s voice was almost gentle.

“You were right, you know? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, Chase.” Gabe hated how his voice cracked. “I should never have touched her . . . but she’s just so damned alluring, so completely irresistible with that quirky smile, those lively eyes, and that wicked sense of humor.”

“You do realize that you don’t sound like a man who’s just physically attracted to a woman, right?” Chase pointed out, and Gabe frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Smile? Eyes? Sense of humor?” Chase repeated. “I was expecting tits, arse, and killer legs.”

“Watch it,” Gabe warned. “And she does have all of those as well, of course.”

“Gabe, you need to figure out what you want from her and fast, before you muck things up even more than you already have.”

Gabe snorted. Like he didn’t know that already.

Twenty-four hours later, Bobbi nervously made her way across the lawn toward the gate. She hadn’t heard from Gabe since his phone call the night before and she wasn’t quite sure what to expect from him tonight. She had felt awful after that awkward telephone conversation. It had been so tempting to just say yes and rush to his side again—but he couldn’t keep blowing hot and cold like that. It was too emotionally draining.

She crossed the threshold of the gate onto Braddock property and followed the echoing sound of masculine laughter coming from the back of the house. Gabe had a standard-sized football field, complete with lines and goalposts in his huge backyard. He’d even had small bleachers built on either side of the pitch. Their friends and

family only ever used the stands closest to the house and there were never enough people to actually fill them but Gabe liked symmetry—so of course he had to have two sets of bleachers.

The group of men were standing around, chatting and stretching, a couple of them had pregame beers clutched in their hands. Their original group had grown to include Rick and Bryce Palmer, Pierre De Coursey, and Rick's business partner, Vuyo Mashego. Bryce was more of a rugby player and didn't take the Friday night games as seriously as some of the other men. He was one of the guys with a beer in hand, and so was his brother and Max Kinsley, a joker who didn't seem to take anything seriously.

They usually played five a side: goalkeeper, two defenders, a midfielder, and a striker. Chase saw her first and ran over to meet her halfway.

“Hey.” He grinned when he saw her all kitted out in her usual football gear.

“Hi. Are you playing tonight?” she asked. With Chase there they had eleven players.

“I'm thinking of substituting.” He shrugged, not seeming particularly concerned about it. “Or refereeing, maybe.”

“Is everybody here?” Bobbi casually glanced around the field.

“He's inside,” Chase told her, and she rolled her eyes, hating how obvious she was.

“He's waiting for Sandro. Everybody else is here. Except Billy, who called to say he'd be a bit late.”

“Did he say wh—” She stopped mid-word when she caught sight of Gabe exiting the house with Sandro and Theresa in tow. He had his arm wrapped around Rosalie De Lucci's slender shoulders, and Bobbi felt like she took a blow to her solar plexus. She fought to catch her breath and couldn't take her eyes off the gorgeous couple.

Bobbi hadn't given the other woman any further thought after last Saturday. When the stunning woman hadn't been at the girls' night out, Bobbi had assumed that Rosalie

De Lucci had returned to Italy. But no, here she was, showing up again like the proverbial bad penny. Gabe had his head bent toward hers, giving her his full attention as she said something to him.

“What’s wrong?” Chase asked, following the direction of her gaze. She was vaguely aware of him tensing beside her. “Who the hell is that?”

“Sandro’s sister, Rosalie,” she supplied, her voice sounding hollow even to her own ears. Theresa and Sandro finally reached the gathering beside the stands and everybody shouted out friendly greetings. Sandro was toting their sleeping toddler on his hip, he had his free arm around his wife’s waist, and he drew her in for a hug and a kiss before transferring the baby to her.

“Go on,” Theresa prompted her husband with a laugh. “Run. Be free.” Sandro grinned and jogged onto the field lazily, doing a series of stretches along the way. Like Gabe, he tended to take football more seriously than Bryce and Max did.

Bobbi couldn’t drag her eyes away from Gabe and Rosalie though. They had paused halfway to the field, and he was brushing her hair off her brow with a grin. The wind kept catching the silky strands and blowing it back into her face, so Gabe was fighting a losing battle. They looked like the cover of a romance novel standing there, leaning into each other with the wind in her hair and the backlights from the house delineating their shapes in silver. Bobbi would never look that perfect standing next to him. People would constantly wonder what he was doing with her. With Rosalie De Lucci they’d only nod and think, Of course those two are together.

She felt Chase’s arm creep around her waist and she leaned against his solid frame, needing the support.

“I don’t know what the hell that’s about,” Chase murmured in her ear. “But it’s probably not what it looks like. Turn away, before he sees that look on your face. You look like a woman who’s just had her heart ripped out of her chest.”

How apt. Since that was how she felt. She allowed him to turn her toward the field and watched the men warm up. Some of them, like Sandro, Vuyo, Pierre, and Rafael Dante looked almost professional, while the rest goofed around, kicking the ball to and fro and bantering while they did it.

“Let’s go get warmed up,” Chase suggested, and she nodded, needing to find some way to distract herself from the fact that Gabe still hadn’t joined them on the field. She maintained such total focus on her running and stretching that she barely noticed when someone came up to jog beside her until he spoke.

“I’m glad you’re here.” His voice made her break stride and stumble. She would have fallen if he hadn’t reached out to steady her.

“Gabe, I’m surprised you were able to drag yourself from Rosalie De Lucci’s side,” she said, and then winced at how bitter she sounded. She had promised herself she wouldn’t say anything but there she was putting her foot in her mouth again. She self-consciously wiped her sweaty face on the shoulder of her T-shirt before realizing how completely unsexy that must have looked. Especially in comparison with the ever-fresh, ever-polished Rosalie De Lucci.

“Don’t be childish, Bobbi. Rosalie is a friend and a very nice woman on top of that.” And he obviously found her attractive.

“You think she’s beautiful though.”

“Because she is,” he said impatiently, clearly done with the conversation. “You’ve been warming up for a while, the guys are ready to play.” He nodded toward the group of tall men standing in the middle of the field, and she felt her face flush in embarrassment. “Billy isn’t here yet, so Chase is subbing for whichever team picks him.”

She nodded brusquely and jogged toward the waiting group, leaving him standing there. When he joined them seconds later, the team captains, Sandro and Gabe, flipped a coin to see who would have first pick of the players. Gabe won and immediately picked Bobbi. She didn't know how she felt about that; he'd never picked her first before. Neither of the men ever had. She wasn't the strongest player, but she made up for it with speed and agility. Still the guys usually chose the bigger men first and the last choice always came down to Max and Bobbi, and she generally always got picked before poor Max.

They were well into the first half of the game when Billy came jogging out of the house and toward the field. He was followed by Jason, who joined their football game only occasionally and . . . Bobbi stopped so abruptly that she got a ball kicked straight in the face. The impact made her reel for a second, before she actually lost her footing and sank down on her butt. The game came to a halt as everybody gathered around her to check if she was okay. Gabe muscled his way through the huddled men and went down on his haunches in front of her, looking pale and shaken.

“Are you okay?” he asked in an unsteady voice, wincing as he reached out to touch the enflamed skin of her cheek. Bobbi grimaced and shied away from his hand before he could make contact. She didn't want him touching her in front of an audience because—despite the stinging pain—she knew that she would totally embarrass herself by leaning into his touch.

“I'm fine.” She dismissed all the concerned queries and instead focused on her brother and Jason and the creative ways she planned to murder them both. They had brought Kyle Foster. Of course they had brought Kyle Foster! God, could her life be any more complicated? Last Friday she'd been just another woman mooning over her handsome best friend. A week later and she was involved in a supersecret affair with said best friend and had an admirer who all of her friends and family thought was her new boyfriend.

Gabe looked like he was about to help her up, but Chase leapt in and took Bobbi's hand to tug her up. She smiled at him gratefully.

"Are you sure you're okay to play?" Gabe asked. She waved off his concern and trotted off to the sidelines for a quick drink of water. Billy, Kyle, and Jason joined her.

"That was quite a hit," Billy said with brotherly glee. "You're gonna look like hell tomorrow." She glared at him, or she would have if the left side of her face didn't felt so numb and swollen.

"Hi, Bobbi," Kyle greeted, while Jason not so subtly elbowed Billy in the ribs and the two backed off like pubescent teens.

"Hey, Kyle, nice seeing you again." He winced as he looked at her face and reached out to run a gentle finger over the stinging area.

"Looks painful," he observed.

"It hurts like hell," she managed cheerfully. "But you know, it's all part of the game. I lost focus for a second and took my eye off the ball. It's my own fault, really."

He smiled and she returned the smile, but when she happened to look over his shoulder it was to see her brother making kissy faces at her. She diverted her attention to the bleachers, where Bronwyn and Lisa were winking at her suggestively. Bobbi sighed and directed her eyes down at her feet, knowing that she probably appeared coy but was too afraid to meet anybody else's eye. Seriously, what was wrong with everybody?

Gabe was furious. When he saw Bobbi go down, his entire body had constricted with fear, and he just couldn't seem to reach her fast enough. He had felt like he was running through a lake of molasses to get to her. When he had eventually fought his way through the seemingly impenetrable wall of men surrounding her, he had nearly howled at the sight of her red and swollen face. He had wanted nothing more than to

sweep her up into his arms and transport her to some place where he could protect her, spoil her, and take care of her, but she had flinched away from his touch, and that more than anything else had cut him to the core. He had no claim on her. He would never have any claim on her. Some other man would one day have the right to do everything Gabe had wanted to do. But that didn't mean that Gabe had to like the thought of that future man.

He watched her walk off the field and frowned when he saw Billy, Jason, and a third man make their way over to her. Billy and Jason backed off and the third man . . .

A growl worked its way up to his throat as he watched the guy touch her. Exactly the way Gabe had wanted to touch her earlier. This guy had even less claim on her than Gabe and yet he had the utter gall to touch her? And worse she was allowing it? That well and truly pissed him off, and he stalked over to the sidelines toward them. The closer her got, the more about the stranger he recognized—it looked like that Kyle Foster guy from the pub, but why the hell was he here? Who had invited him?

A fulminating glare at Billy and Jason, who were quite merrily watching Bobbi and Kyle exchange awkward pleasantries, confirmed that one—or likely both—of them was the culprit.

“Bobbi,” he snapped when he reached them. “Are you ready to join the game again?”

She looked surprised to see Gabe standing right beside her but she nodded, and Kyle took her water bottle from her, with a promise to “guard it” with his “life.” Did the idiot think someone would steal her damned water bottle? Gabe glowered at the jerk, who merely looked back at him impassively.

“Braddock.” He nodded, a small smile on his lips. Gabe refused to acknowledge the greeting, no matter how damned petty he seemed and trotted onto the field after Bobbi. The game resumed moments later.

Bobbi didn't see the hit coming. One second she was skillfully maneuvering the football through a duo of hapless defenders, and the next she was flat on her back, blinking up at the star-filled night sky and battling to suck in her next breath.

Panic set in when she realized that she was unable to draw in that breath and a distant, detached part of her brain recognized that she'd had the wind knocked out of her. It was a highly unpleasant sensation that she hadn't had the dubious privilege of experiencing since childhood. Man, she was having a really terrible night.

"Bobbi?" A group of concerned faces popped into her field of vision, and she tried to assure them that she was fine, but only a wheeze emerged from her chest.

"What the hell, Kinsley?" Gabe's face was hovering on her left and he fixed a glare on Max, who seemed to be hovering on her right. "What's up with the frikkin body check?"

"I slipped," Max explained defensively. "It was totally unintentional."

"She could have been seriously injured, she's just a tiny thing," Gabe pointed out insultingly. If Bobbi had her breath back she would have taken exception to that, but she was barely getting in a decent gasp of air every few seconds and it took all of her concentration to breathe normally again.

"Oh come, Gabe. She can handle herself." Bobbi lifted a limp hand and gave Max a thumbs-up in agreement.

"See?" Max pointed toward her. Bobbi mentally rolled her eyes and cursed them for worrying about her in theory but not in practice. Neither of them had even bothered to ask her if she was okay. Feeling neglected, she pushed herself up into a sitting position and gingerly prodded her ribs to ensure that they were still intact. She grimaced. They were a bit sore but it was nothing major.

Gabe and Max were so focused on each other they barely noticed when she shakily made her way to her feet. The other players were all too caught up in the unfolding

drama of Gabe and Max squaring off to pay much attention to her. She always felt like a little person in the land of giants when she stood amongst all of them like this. It didn't help that she found herself practically sandwiched between Gabe and Max. They were the tallest guys there.

The men were both bristling with outrage and an overabundance of testosterone, and Bobbi hissed impatiently before placing a small, restraining hand on each of their chests. She wrinkled her nose in disgust as her hands settled onto equally sweat-soaked T-shirts and tried not to appreciate the well-defined musculature of the chests beneath the revoltingly wet shirts. Especially not Gabe's; she was trying very hard not to appreciate Gabe's chest too much. It felt like every time she took one step forward she took about eighty-seven steps back.

"I'm fine," she asserted firmly, trying very hard not to sound wheezy, knowing that it would set Gabe off again. He looked down at her and his eyes went flat with fury.

"Damn it," he gritted. "She's bleeding."

"I am?" she asked blankly, hesitantly reaching up to touch her face. She blanched when her fingers came away covered in blood. "Oh my God, I am!" Bobbi was tough and could withstand quite a lot of things, but she couldn't stomach the sight of her own blood. Anybody else's? Sure! Her own? Not at all.

She swayed woozily and Gabe reached out a hand to steady her. He ducked his head to peer into her eyes intently.

"Take a deep breath," he advised, and she complied with a shallow gasp.

"Deep breath, Bobbi," he repeated authoritatively. Nope. She couldn't get her lungs to work and she swayed again, as black dots swirled in front of her eyes. God, how embarrassing! She felt like she was about to faint. She vaguely wondered how she knew that, when she had never fainted in her life before. Gabe swore beneath his breath and shifted one of his arms to her back and the other to the back of her thighs before hefting her up to his chest like a sack of potatoes. He carried her to the sidelines, where the other women had all anxiously gathered around and lowered her gently to the grass.

"Oh my God, Gabriel, is she okay?" Bobbi blinked up into the worried faces around her, recognizing the voice as Theresa's. Her friend knelt down on the grass beside her and pressed a towel to the profusely bleeding cut on Bobbi's eyebrow.

"She's fine," Gabe reassured. "The sight of her own blood makes her a bit queasy." Of course he would know that embarrassing fact about her.

"Take care of her, will you?" Gabe handed her care over with one last grim look down at her before trotting back out onto the field.

Theresa sucked in a shocked breath, and Bobbi looked up at her in alarm. Was the cut worse than it seemed? Was that why her friend seemed so appalled? But Theresa wasn't even looking at her; the other woman's eyes were fixed on something on the field. Bobbi watched as her friend cringed and followed the direction of her stare to whatever was happening out on the field. The guys were all huddled in a tight circle, and Bobbi couldn't quite make sense of what was going on.

"What's happening?" she asked, her injury forgotten.

"Gabe and Max just got into a bit of a shoving match." Theresa, usually so kind and gentle, seemed to find that fact hilarious.

"Oh my God. That idiot," Bobbi moaned, pushing herself up unsteadily before standing up on wobbly legs. Theresa held on to her arm, obviously afraid Bobbi would lose her balance. She shook off the remnants of her dizziness like a dog shaking off water and marched purposefully back onto the field.

The other guys had managed to separate the two men and Gabe was standing off to the side with Sandro. He was still glaring at an unconcerned Max, who was ignoring him and calmly chatting with Chase. It was clear from the handsome Italian's stance that Sandro was trying to keep Gabe calm.

"Sandro, would you excuse us please?" Bobbi planted herself between the two men, and Sandro shrugged.

"I'll get the grill started. I think maybe my Theresa is hungry. I say this match is probably over."

"Yeah, getting the braai started is a good idea. I doubt any of us are in the mood to finish this game," Bobbi agreed, and Sandro walked off to where Theresa stood waiting for him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Bobbi turned on Gabe, who was watching her with a moody expression on his face. His brow lowered at the sight of the blood on her forehead and the rapidly forming bruise on the left side of her face. Bobbi knew she looked awful but wished that fact wasn't so clearly reflected in his disgusted expression.

"Look at you," he muttered. "Just look at the state of you! How am I supposed to even consider having a real relationship with a woman who wears overalls to work, hasn't styled her hair in years, never wears makeup, and has grease under her fingernails? And then there's this tendency of yours to get into the weirdest bloody situations. You get hurt and bruised and scuffed up. How am I supposed to deal with that, for God's sake? I can't keep you insulated against the entire world. I just can't. How would you fit into my life? Where would I even put you?" The words were despairing and made no sense to Bobbi. She was just so astonished by this meltdown from a man who was

used to keeping his cool. “I need someone else, someone who knows how to dress and handle herself in public, someone who won’t show up at events with questionable bruises . . .”

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please just stop, Gabe. Before you say something that we can’t come back from.”

“Don’t you understand?” His voice was edged with panic. “We’re already done . . . When we were just friends, your rough and tumble ways didn’t bother me half as much. The way things stand between us now? I just can’t watch you get hurt anymore.”

“Then stop hurting me.” Her quietly wailed plea seemed to register and the panicked glaze left his eyes to be replaced by a different kind of alarm. She shoved against his chest with both hands with enough strength to send him staggering back a step. The rest of the group was trying to maintain a discreet distance but she could see that they were all hovering close by, probably not sure if they should intervene or not. “Just stop hurting me! Because that’s all you’ve been doing. You don’t think I’m good enough for you. Did you think I was ever unaware of that fact? But, I swallowed my pride and allowed you to hatch this insane arrangement—God I hate that word so much—between us. Any romantic notions I had about you died that night in my father’s den. Because I was imagining a real relationship with you, while you were trying to fix it so that we could shag regularly without anybody ever finding out.

“I felt small and cheap and stupid but I allowed it because I knew that it was the only way I could have you. I knew it was my one chance to be with you.” Her eyes were burning with the tears she refused to shed. Gabe looked completely shell-shocked and his own eyes were suspiciously bright. “And that’s on me. I should have refused but I was in love with you. I had been for years and I knew that it was the best damned offer I would ever get from you. I told myself if that was all I could get of you then I’d take it, but you know what? I deserve more than that. More than you and I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to figure that out.

“I deserve a real relationship with a man who loves me for who I am. Grease, calluses, unstyled hair and all. I’ll never be good enough for you and I refuse to twist myself up in knots over that anymore—because you know what? You’re not good enough for me either. If our so-called friendship has to be sacrificed as a result of all this, then so be it because right now I don’t know why the hell I ever considered you such a good friend in the first place.”

She ignored the look of slack-jawed distress on his handsome face and turned on her heel to stalk off the field. She brushed past the men who still stood around in stunned silence, then toward the women—her friends—none of whom she dared look at for fear of bursting into tears. Billy and Chase both looked like they wanted to say

something, but she held them off with a shake of her head. They retreated tactfully and she was grateful for that.

She was so distraught that she was halfway home before she noticed the tall man silently shadowing her.

“I’m not great company at the moment, Kyle,” she whispered, trying very hard to keep herself together.

“I’m aware of that,” the man said calmly. “I just figured that if you wanted to talk it would be best to do so with someone who won’t feel obligated to see ‘both sides of the story’ so to speak. Someone who’s one hundred percent in your corner and has no loyalty whatsoever to the other guy.”

“And you’re that guy, are you?” she asked softly. If she didn’t feel so completely gutted, she would have been charmed by him.

“I’m that guy,” he affirmed. “You don’t have to talk though. I’m just walking you home.” They were at the gate and out of sight of the football pitch when she turned to the tall stoic man with a wobbly smile.

“Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome.” The three words were delivered so gently that Bobbi couldn’t hold back anymore. This man didn’t know her; he didn’t know that she never cried . . . so it was perfectly okay to cry all over him. When her tears came, he made a deep, comforting sound in the back of his throat, folded her in his arms, and simply let her weep.

Gabe watched her walk away . . . and felt a staggering sense of loss that nearly sent him to his knees. There had been a chilling finality to her words that terrified him.

She was in love with him? How could she be in love with him? They were friends. They had always been friends. Even after this physical thing between them had popped up out of nowhere, Gabe had never doubted that one truth. So how the hell could she have been in love with him? For years? How could his friend have hidden something like that from him for so long? Did he even know her at all?

If he had had access to that one important piece of information, he would never have suggested a no-strings sexual arrangement between them. He would have known that it would hurt her too much. He would have backed the hell off . . .

He would have run scared.

And that was why she had kept it from him. She knew him better than he knew her. She knew that he wouldn’t have handled the whole love thing well at all. Why would she tell him when it would probably have destroyed their friendship? He sighed

heavily—the deep inhalation of breath intensifying the ache in his chest—and acknowledged that the friendship was pretty much destroyed now anyway. Neither of them had handled the situation particularly well and Gabe knew that he bore the brunt of responsibility for it. He had just lost it when he'd seen her take that body blow from Max and then the blood. He felt vaguely nauseated just recalling it. He had absolutely hated the sight of her blood. It had brought out a primal protective instinct that had made him want to pummel Max into the ground. He didn't understand it, but it had made him irrationally angry with both Max and with Bobbi for constantly putting herself in harm's way. How the hell was he supposed to take care of her when she was always doing things that could get her hurt?

He didn't know what was going on with him. He had never felt more lost and confused than he did at this moment. He was still standing in the middle of the football field and staring off in the direction Bobbi had taken. Kyle Foster had gone with her. He felt irrationally angry about that. Who did that guy think he was? He blindly moved to follow them, but Chase moved into his path. His brother's stance was nonconfrontational but immovable, nonetheless, with arms crossed over his chest and legs braced shoulder length apart.

“No.”

“I have to . . .”

“No, Gabe. You're not thinking rationally and whatever it is you're planning to do right now will most likely be ill-advised. Let her go for now.”

“I hurt her,” Gabe confessed helplessly. “I tried so hard not to hurt her but I did anyway.”

“I know,” Chase said, and his body language changed, softened. His hands dropped to his sides and his chest heaved.

“What the hell do I do now?” Gabe asked, and Chase hooked a hand around the back of Gabe's neck and tugged him closer until his mouth was next to his brother's ear.

“You leave her alone until you figure that out,” Chase advised—his voice a low growl. “And if you can't figure it out, then you let her go.”