

His Unlikely Lover Chapter 2

CHAPTER TWO

Something—some small, rodent-type creature—had died in her mouth. Why else would the latter taste so putrid and feel so furry? And some cruel prankster had glued her eyelids together, because she couldn't seem to open her eyes.

She groaned and the small sound set a tsunami of pain into motion in her head. Even with her eyes closed it felt like the room was spinning, and the vertiginous sensation made her feel sick to her stomach. She was almost certain she was going to vomit. She gritted her teeth and breathed through her nose, trying to quell the nausea.

Was she ill?

“Bobbi?” Even though the word was whispered, it sounded like a gunshot in the silence and she winced.

“Gabe?” she whimpered, managing to unstick her eyelids at last and peer at him. The room was dim, with only one wall lamp spilling the barest amount of light across half of his face. “I’m sick.”

“Have a sip of this water,” he instructed, and his neutral tone set her mind at ease. He slid a hand beneath her neck and gently helped her sit up. She tensed, and shut her eyes again, trying to keep her breathing deep and steady.

“You need to puke?” he asked gruffly. She shook her head and clamped a hand over her mouth.

“Give me a second,” she groaned from behind her hand. “I’m okay.”

“Come on, drink the water.” He held a glass up and she took it in both of her trembling hands. He closed his own hand over hers to keep the glass steady and guided it to her lips. She took a sip, then another, and then realized that she had a raging thirst and gulped the rest down eagerly.

“Good girl,” he praised, still in that quiet whisper. He refilled the glass from the carafe on the pedestal and this time handed her a couple of aspirin to go with it.

“I drank too much champagne, didn’t I?” she asked as she remembered, and he nodded, his face expressionless. She downed the aspirin and handed the glass back to him. He placed it on the pedestal with that precise economy of movement that she always found so inordinately fascinating about him. How could such a large man keep his every movement so neat and controlled?

“I’m sorry. You should go back to the party. I think I’m okay now.”

“The party’s mostly over,” he said. “There are a few stragglers still lingering, but it’s only a matter of time before Sandro loses his patience with them.” She smiled weakly at that and sank back against the headboard, shutting her eyes for a second.

A sinking feeling of dread was starting to form in the pit of her stomach. Something wasn’t right. She had done something at the party and the exact details remained infuriatingly elusive and couldn’t seem to take any coherent shape in her mind.

“Try to get some sleep,” he instructed.

“I just woke up.”

“That wasn’t sleep,” he corrected. “You had passed out.”

“Charming.” She snorted.

“Indeed.”

“I’m sorry I spoiled your evening,” she whispered.

“You didn’t.”

“I did. I . . .” And that’s when she remembered. Her eyes flew open to meet his enigmatic stare and her hand fluttered helplessly to her lips. His eyes seemed to darken as they watched her fingers trace the outline of her mouth, but it could merely have been a trick of the light. His face still held very little expression.

“Oh my God.” How much had she revealed? Had she said anything? She tried to remember everything that had preceded the kiss, but it was all frustratingly hazy. “I’m sorry. I was . . . drunk.” She had forced herself on him. The very idea of how she must have behaved was horrifying.

“I know. Forget about it.” There was something off about the cadence of his voice and it worried her. Had she irreparably ruined their friendship? Would they ever get past this? Had she told him she loved him? She had all but violated him and had even fooled herself into believing that he had returned her kiss.

She buried her face in her hands, absolutely mortified—after years of self-restraint and hiding the nature of her feelings from him for the good of their friendship—she had probably destroyed that same friendship on some drunken whim.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, Bobbi, there was no harm done.”

No harm done? She peeked at him from between a gap in her fingers—not quite sure how she felt about that. Relieved? Or even more humiliated because her kiss had had so little impact on him?

There was still no expression on his face. Gabe had never been one to wear his emotions on his sleeve. He was the most self-restrained man she knew, but she could usually read him better than this—one couldn't be a friend to someone for nearly twenty years without learning his moods, but he was a complete mystery to her at this moment and it confused her.

She needed to get away from him for a few minutes, needed to gather her thoughts and compose herself. She pushed the bed covers down to her hips and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She sat there for a couple of seconds, swallowing down the nausea when her movements caused the room to swirl sickeningly around her.

“What are you doing?” he asked, and in her disorientated state it almost sounded like there was a slight edge of panic in his voice.

“Bathroom.” She kept her response succinct, not really feeling capable of saying anything more than that. He used his feet to push the chair farther away from the bed, giving her room to maneuver.

“Thanks.” She glanced down at him and caught a flash of something dark in his eyes. She paused—not certain of that look—but then his face went back to that maddeningly neutral expression. She sighed quietly and wobbled to the en suite, shutting the door firmly.

Gabe groaned softly and ran his hands roughly over his face and into his hair—he sat there for a brief moment, hands clenched in his hair before inhaling deeply in an attempt to calm himself. He had been doing pretty well, had had the situation under control. She was his friend, they had grown up together—there was absolutely nothing but friendship and deep affection between them. That was the way it had always been, the way it would always be.

So why the hell did the sight of her in that tiny white tank top and those skimpy blue boy shorts send his blood pressure sky-rocketing? He'd seen her in similar clothing before, seen her in less really—but he'd never fully appreciated the pert perfection of her small breasts and had certainly never wanted to cup the firm, ripe curve of her butt before.

And even worse, the inescapable realization that she was wearing absolutely nothing beneath all that innocent cotton had him fighting a losing battle to keep his inevitable hard-on at bay.

One kiss . . . one damned kiss and he was behaving like a teenager with his first crush. He needed to regain his perspective here. He needed to put these unsettling and erotic thoughts aside.

With that in mind, he pushed out of the chair and walked over to the bathroom door, listening for a few seconds to ensure she wasn't sick again. He knocked quietly.

“Bobbi?”

“I’m fine,” she called back. “I just need . . .” The rest of her words were said too quietly for him to catch.

“If you’re sure you okay, I’m heading off to bed, okay?” He waited, but she didn’t respond. “I’ll be in the next room. I’ll leave the adjoining door open. If you need anything, just let me know.” God, he hoped she wouldn’t need anything. It would be bad enough getting any sleep with that damned door open between their rooms.

“Okay,” he heard her say, the word soft and uncertain.

“Good night.”

“Night.” Her response was faint.

He stood there for another few seconds before shaking his head and striding toward her bedroom door, collecting his jacket along the way. He was in his own room a few moments later and went straight to the adjoining door, knocking once before opening it. Her room was still empty and he heard the sound of running water coming from the en suite.

He shed his shirt and jacket hurriedly and took less care putting them away than usual. He wanted to be in bed with the lights out when she returned. He didn’t want to see her or speak to her again tonight. Everything would be back to normal in the bright light of day. It had to be . . .

He had stripped down to his trousers by the time she stepped back into her room, and the shadow her small figure cast on her bedroom wall startled him into pausing while unbuttoning his fly. His hands dropped to hang loosely at his sides. He was facing the adjoining door; his intention had been to keep an eye on her room in case she needed him, but her abrupt reappearance had caught him off guard.

She froze when she saw him and her eyes dropped to his naked chest. He swallowed audibly as her eyes tracked over his body . . . God, he could feel her gaze brushing across his skin like a brand.

“Don’t.” The word jerked from him involuntarily.

“I can’t not . . .,” she said hoarsely, taking a small step toward him and then another and another still. He was helpless to stop her and watched her approach until she stood right in front of him. A mere handsbreadth away from him, so close he could feel her heat being absorbed into his naked skin.

“Bobbi.” He tried to instill some sense of warning in his voice, but her name on his lips sounded like a plea. His hands clenched into fists as he fought his desire to touch her.

“You’re gorgeous,” she whispered in a reverent voice. He watched fascinatedly as she lifted a hand, and in that moment felt absolutely powerless to stop her from touching him. His breath sawed from his lungs in an uneven whoosh as the silky pads of her fingertips traced delicately from the outer edge of his left clavicle straight across to the other end of his right clavicle. Her fingers drifted down to his shoulder before scorching their way over his chest, skimming over his flat nipple in the process. He shuddered and the sound that was torn from his throat was halfway between a long groan and a sigh. The noise startled her into jerking her hand away and she peered up at him uncertainly. He almost howled in disappointment, aching to have her hand back on his skin, but not daring to touch her for fear that he’d be unable to stop until he had her naked and writhing beneath him.

Her luminous amber eyes searched his sherry-colored ones for an infinite amount of time while he tried to regulate his uneven breathing. He had no idea what she saw because she seemed to nod to herself before returning to the task at hand. Her fingertips began their agonizing exploration again and his knees nearly buckled in response as her hands fluttered to the center of his chest, exploring the texture of the fine hairs sprinkled there before following the trail down . . . past the taut ripples of his abdomen, tracing the faint circle of hair around his belly button before resuming the path even further down . . .

“No.” Unfortunately, reason reasserted itself when he discerned exactly where she was headed. He caught her hand just before it reached the fly of his trousers. He was so damned hard he was straining against his zipper and eagerly seeking her delicate touch.

“Gabe.” This time she was the one pleading.

“Go to bed, Runt, before we do something . . . ill-advised.” He used the nickname deliberately, wanting to shock them both out of this erotic haze and it worked—too well. He watched her flinch and pale and steeled himself against the pain he had caused her with his deliberate callousness. She yanked her hand from his grasp and reeled away from him.

She turned and fled, slamming the adjoining door shut and leaving a turned-on, frustrated, and confused Gabe standing in the middle of his room with one hand absently rubbing at the dull ache in the center of his chest.

He felt like a man who had just lost his best friend.

After a restless night, Bobbi felt ill-equipped to face Gabe the following morning. She had been up for hours and had listened to the house come alive outside her door. It was the first week of January, so the guests who had opted to stay the night awoke to a bright, beautiful summer morning. The plan was to have a buffet breakfast and a poolside braai for lunch, and as she listened to her friends’ cheerful chatter when they

walked by her closed bedroom door all she wanted to do was curl under the nearest rock and die.

She still didn't know what on earth had possessed her to touch him the way she had. Her only excuse was that there had been just enough alcohol left in her system to lower her inhibitions and give in to the overwhelming temptation to caress him. That was most certainly the flimsy explanation she would offer when she summoned up the guts to talk to him about it.

Bobbi knew that Gabe had vacated his room at seven thirty; she had listened to the quiet rustling coming from the other side of the wall as he had showered and dressed. The tension that had taken up residence in her neck and shoulders had only fled after she'd heard his bedroom door open and then close again. She had held her breath for what seemed like an eternity when his quiet footsteps had halted for a brief moment outside her door before moving on.

She had tried to formulate a plan of action—an emergency blueprint on how to get through this day and the ones to follow. It wouldn't be easy—but she stood to lose too much if she messed up these next crucial days. She had to weigh the cost of her friendship with Gabe against the fresh anguish she felt every time he treated her with such casual, impersonal affection. Years of the same had taken its toll and after last night, she knew that she couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't stand on the sidelines and watch as every leggy blonde who crossed his path snagged his attention while she never warranted a second glance.

And really, why would he look at her? She was good old Bobbi, his surrogate sister, the girl who had tagged along behind him and his friends when he was a boy. The girl who had made a pest of herself and who would never outgrow the condescending nickname Gabe and her brothers had bestowed upon her.

It was after ten before she summoned up the courage to leave her room and make her way down to the pool. Only the De Luccis' most intimate group of friends remained: the Palmers—Rick, Lisa, Bryce, Bronwyn, and their toddlers—and Max Kinsley, Rosalie De Lucci, Gabe, and Bobbi. Everybody was already gathered beside the pool, either lounging in the sun or splashing about in the water.

Theresa, who was feeding her fourteen-month-old daughter at the patio table, was the first to spot her.

“Bobbi,” she called with a warm smile. “Good morning. How are you feeling?” Bobbi cringed when Theresa's voice drew everybody else's attention and a multitude of good-natured salutations came her way. She managed a sickly grin and waved back in everybody's general direction—almost preternaturally aware of Gabe, who was sitting on one of the loungers wearing nothing but board shorts and a pair of sunglasses. His superb body was bronzed and toned, with not a spare bit of flesh anywhere to be seen;

he was lean and fit and perfectly proportioned. A quick glance his way confirmed that he was studying her but she couldn't tell what he was thinking, not with those mirrored sunglasses hiding his striking eyes from her. He had a proud nose, just slightly too long but it went beautifully with his bluntly defined cheekbones, which in turn slotted into his narrow, craggy face magnificently. All of that, combined with his thin bow-shaped upper lip and the full sensuous curve of his lower lip, made for an unconventionally handsome man. His dark brown hair, glinting with the faintest hints of auburn beneath the morning sun, was always conservatively cut and brushed and lent him a sophisticated air that went well with his reserved personality.

He was her complete opposite in every way, and she knew that he would never belong to her. They were friends who came from similar backgrounds but occupied totally different worlds. As she joined Theresa and Lily at the patio table, she knew that it was time to let the fantasy of any kind of romantic involvement with Gabriel Braddock go—and it broke her heart.

“Are you okay?” Theresa whispered, and knowing that Theresa was asking about more than her physical condition, Bobbi shook her head. She reached for Lily's chubby little hand and lifted it to her mouth for a kiss, disguising the flash of tears in her eyes.

“Oh Bobbi . . . ,” Theresa murmured, trying to hide the distress on her face. “I'm so sorry.”

Lisa ambled over to the table and grinned at them, but the smile faded immediately when she discerned something was wrong.

“What's up?” she asked in concern, as she sat down next to Bobbi.

“We can talk about it later. Tomorrow maybe, at our girls' night?” Theresa said, the mere suggestion telling Bobbi that the other woman was aware of how close to the proverbial edge Bobbi was. They usually had their girls' nights on a Saturday but rescheduled to Sunday because of the party. Lisa nodded but remained by Bobbi's side, seeming to sense how much her friend needed the emotional bolstering. She started chatting about the party and her wry observations about some of the guests soon had Theresa in stitches and even coaxed a smile or two from Bobbi.

She tried not to notice that Rosalie De Lucci was in the lounge next to Gabe's, tried to ignore the way he'd occasionally lean over to say something to the bikini-clad woman, and tried not to cringe when he laughed at something the woman had said. But all the not noticing was taking an emotional toll on her and she excused herself with a bright, completely fake smile about an hour later—saying she needed another nap before lunch. It was obvious that neither Theresa nor her cousin believed her, but they let her go.

Gabe surreptitiously watched Bobbi leave. She hadn't so much as glanced at him this morning, while it had been all he could do not to openly study her. She had been wearing the tiniest black bikini he'd ever seen. Nothing fancy, just a simple string bikini that sent his blood pressure soaring and made him infinitely grateful that his board shorts were baggy. It clung to her perfect body in all the right places, and he had found himself fantasizing about untying the bows at her shoulders to reveal those sweet, pert breasts to his gaze.

God, so much for hoping things would be back to normal this morning.

She had spent an hour talking to Theresa and Lisa as if everything was perfect in her world, while he felt like his own life had just taken the turn into crazy town. It bothered him that she hadn't touched the buffet laid out in the chafing dishes on the other side of the pool. She needed to eat and stay hydrated. She hadn't even had a glass of juice.

His conflicting desires to take care of her or throw her on the nearest flat surface and bury himself in her were confusing to say the least, and he felt like he had lost his mind somewhere between last night and this morning. He slowly became aware of Rosalie De Lucci leaning toward him and recognized that the high note, which had entered her melodic voice, signified a question. He had been so absorbed by his thoughts that he hadn't heard a word of what she'd been saying.

"Pardon me?" he prompted, focusing his attention back on the lovely woman lounging beside him.

"I asked if you were okay? You seemed preoccupied."

"I'm fine . . ." He nodded, glad that the sunglasses hid the lie in his eyes. He was so far from fine it was ridiculous. He wasn't sure if he should talk to Bobbi about what had happened the night before or if he should leave it alone. This situation didn't lend itself to any of the usual precedents. Any other woman and he would have known how to deal with the situation—acknowledge the attraction and do something about it. Despite knowing Bobbi better than most other people, he didn't know her as a sexual being and it terrified him that he was suddenly so acutely aware of everything that made her female and desirable.

Sandro and Rick had headed toward the grill and were getting the fire started for the braai. Bryce and Max drifted over to the fire, as men tended to do at barbecues the world over, and a lively conversation about cricket started up before Sandro deftly diverted the conversation to his favorite sport and the men began to argue about the day's forthcoming Italian Premier League football matches. Gabe made his excuses to Rosalie, who had flipped over onto her stomach and seemed to be snoozing beneath the warm sun, and pushed himself off the lounge to join the men—thinking that the distraction would be exactly what he needed. But after standing there for a few

minutes, watching Sandro stoke the fire while Rick, his deaf brother, Bryce, and Max were engaged in a half-spoken, half-signed conversation about exactly how hot the coals should be before the meat went on the grill, Gabe found himself wandering away from the intense huddle of nouveau cavemen and toward the table where the women—who had been joined by Bronwyn—were sitting. They all looked up at the same time at his approach, making him wonder uncomfortably if they'd been talking about him. He briefly considered the notion that Bobbi may have confided in them about the night before but dismissed it almost immediately. Bobbi wasn't the type of female who had girly chats with other women about man-related problems.

“Hey.” He nodded casually and moved to sit down in one of the free chairs. The strained silence that greeted him made him reconsider his former opinion—they'd definitely been talking about him and he could feel a flush stain his cheekbones.

“Gabe,” Bronwyn greeted with a regal nod.

“Great party last night, Theresa.” He canted his beer bottle toward the pretty redhead and she smiled her thanks. The usually gregarious group remained unusually quiet and Gabe forged ahead uncomfortably. “Do you think . . . uh, Bobbi will be down again? For lunch, I mean. Has she indicated that she'll be down for lunch?”

“She's not feeling up to company after last night,” Theresa said in a gentle voice that seemed to be brimming with accusation and Gabe tensed, expecting censure. “You know . . . after drinking too much? The noise level out here was too much for her to deal with.”

He slowly and silently exhaled the breath he'd been holding. His own guilty conscience was making his imagination run riot . . . or maybe not? Theresa couldn't seem to meet his eyes and that pissed him off. He hadn't done anything to warrant being treated like a damned sex offender.

“I'll go up and check on her,” he mumbled, happy for a reason to leave the strained company and the excuse to go up and see Bobbi. He leapt to his feet, spilling some of his beer in the process, and rushed inside, not needing to look back to know that the women were watching his ignoble retreat.