

## His Unlikely Lover Novel Chapter 5

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### CHAPTER FIVE

The three words blindsided him and rang like a bell in his mind. His throat went dry with the astonishing realization that this wasn't some bizarre, fleeting aberration. That he really wanted her and would continue wanting her until he had done something about it.

Under him, over him, in front of him—he wanted her any way he could have her . . . He wanted her more than he wanted his next breath and it was insane! He dragged his apologetic eyes up to her embarrassed golden regard. How the hell did you tell your friend that you wanted to sleep with her? But that that's all you wanted from her. He was honest enough to admit that he desperately wanted to have sex with her—why now, after all these years? He had no clue but that was what he wanted. What he didn't want was anything more than that. He loved her but she wasn't a woman he could ever envision spending his life with. They were too different. The woman of his dreams was tall, graceful, refined, and had an immaculate sense of style and design. Bobbi was the complete opposite of that woman.

But how could he propose no-strings sex to this woman who meant so much to him and expect to still retain a friendship after the affair ended? Bobbi would expect more from him and he could very well wind up breaking her heart. That thought was perfectly unbearable.

Bobbi folded her arms tightly across her chest and lowered her eyes to her plate, she knew that her cheeks were blazing with color but she couldn't do much about that at the moment. She wished that the floor would just open up and swallow her—she was so embarrassed. Thankfully he wasn't staring at her traitorous breasts anymore; instead he was focused intently on his plate, with his jaw clenched and his hands curled into fists on the table. He was concentrating so fiercely on that plate that she half expected it to start levitating.

"I'm sorry . . ." The words were so quiet they were practically swallowed up by the buzzing conversations of the crowd around them, and if not for the fact that he had raised his blazing eyes to meet hers, Bobbi would have dismissed it as imagination. "That was completely out of line."

"Which part? Your comment about the way I dressed or your reference to my . . ."

She nodded down at her breasts which were still shielded by her crossed arms. She watched as his eyes drifted back down to her chest and lingered for a long moment before jerking back up to her face.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“I made it personal—I shouldn’t have brought your . . . your body into it,” he admitted.

“It was already personal when you criticized the way I dressed,” she pointed out.

“Bobbi, we’re surrounded by men, not all of whom know you . . . and those shorts would tempt a saint.” She was riveted by the dull red that stained his cheekbones and narrowed her eyes as an intriguing possibility occurred to her.

“Do they tempt you?” Right—she needed a filter between her brain and her mouth—because she couldn’t keep saying every single thing that popped into her head. Yet . . . the red stain on his cheekbones darkened and spread inexorably.

“No! Of course not . . .” She kept her eyes trained on his face, fascinated to note that he couldn’t quite meet her eyes and for the first time ever felt in control and powerful around this man who so unsettled her at times. She deliberately dropped her arms and braced them on either side of her plate, before leaning toward him. She was rewarded by the brief, panicked glance he directed down at her cleavage before dragging his eyes back up to her face—and even then he couldn’t seem to look higher than her mouth. Deciding to test him even further, she flicked out her tongue to moisten her lower lip and noted the convulsive movement of his throat as he swallowed while his eyes tracked the slow, deliberate movement of her tongue with ferocious concentration.

“I’m not changing the way I dress after all these years, Gabe,” she told him—and his eyes snapped back into focus as they met hers. “It’s never bothered you before, so what’s different now?”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Two blatant lies in as many minutes. Bobbi was starting to enjoy herself.

“Then why mention it?” she pushed.

“Just forget I said anything.” He picked up his knife and fork with hands that were trembling ever so slightly. She didn’t respond and kept staring at him until he put the cutlery down again. “You don’t understand men, Bobbi . . . they’re easily aroused and . . .” Her rich laughter cut him off and the sound halted his awkward lecture mid-sentence.

“Gabe, I’m not naïve. I don’t need you to explain the birds and the bees to me. Trust me, you’re years too late with that particular lecture.”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?” His voice had taken on a dangerous edge and she merely smiled at him.

“That’s nothing you need to concern yourself over,” she said dismissively, with a flick of her hand. She picked up her own utensils and dug into her meal with relish,

suddenly feeling inordinately cheerful. “Eat your lunch, it’s getting cold.” He bristled at the dismissal and even though he tried to broach the subject again, she ignored him and raved about the Corvette instead, telling him what she had planned for the car.

“I know you think I’m being foolish by investing so much into this,” she said after running out of steam since Gabe had contributed nothing more to the conversation than grunts and nods, making her sharply aware of the other criticisms that he had leveled at her business sense earlier before he had distracted her by bringing her lack of dress sense into the conversation.

“I would be less concerned if you had a long-term plan for the business,” he admitted. “But I didn’t mean to make it sound like I had no confidence in your ability to make a success out of the shop, Bobbi.” Unfortunately, that was exactly how it sounded and Bobbi was still hurt by his lack of faith in her. Gabe had always made her feel like he had the utmost belief in her ability to achieve everything she set her mind to. That’s why the doubt, the outright cynicism, she had heard from him earlier had cut so deeply. Now, she shrugged and—as she always did when he inadvertently hurt her—brushed it aside in order to make him feel better.

“It’s okay.” It’s not okay. Her subconscious was riled. “I know you’re just concerned.” I don’t need your concern! I need your support. I want you to have faith in me and in what I can do.

She didn’t voice what she was really feeling—as was always the case when it came to Gabe. She remained mute . . . for the sake of their friendship.

Relieved to have things back on an even keel, Gabe smiled at her. He hadn’t even glanced at her breasts in over ten minutes and he’d barely thought about them in well over a minute. Thankfully she’d left her uncomfortable line of questioning behind and they were back in familiar territory. His unfair—if not unfounded—zinger about her plans for Jason’s car had been forgiven. Things were practically back to normal . . . until Jason ambled over to their table with a tall, smiling guy in tow.

“Hey guys, mind if we join you?” He didn’t wait for an affirmative and dragged a couple of chairs over and waved the guy into one before plonking down into the other.

“Gabe, Bobbi, this is Kyle Foster—an old friend of mine.” The man reached over and shook Gabe’s hand firmly before angling his chair toward Bobbi’s and taking her hand in a gentler grasp and bringing it to his lips.

“Charmed.” He grinned and Bobbi laughed—clearly enjoying the guy’s smarmy attentions.

“So Bobbi, huh? That’s an unusual name.” He kept his voice low and intimate and it grated on Gabe’s last nerve.

“Well, it’s Roberta, actually. Roberta Richmond.” Gabe couldn’t believe he’d just heard that. She never told anybody her full name. For her to simply volunteer it was highly unusual.

“So Gabe, I wanted to ask for your advice on a couple of investments I’m interested in making,” Jason was saying, trying to gain his attention but Gabe could barely focus on his friend, far too interested in the low-voiced conversation between Bobbi and Foster.

“Hey, mate,” Jason waved a hand in front of Gabe’s eyes, demanding his attention, and Gabe blinked over at him.

“What?” he snapped, his voice low and frustrated. Jason leaned in toward him.

“Work with me here, bro.” He kept his voice low enough for only Gabe to hear. “Kyle wanted to meet Bobbi. Guy’s smitten—so give him a chance to chat her up. He’s a decent bloke.”

He was setting Bobbi up with this jerk? Gabe practically choked on a sip of beer and had to do everything in his power not to glare at Jason. He focused his attention back on Bobbi and Foster and was alarmed to note that the guy was whispering in her ear and she was listening to whatever he was saying with a delighted smile on her face. That smile was goddamned radiant and it set his teeth completely on edge. Gabe couldn’t remember the last time she had smiled at him like that. In fact, he couldn’t recall her ever smiling at him like that.

“Bobbi,” he growled. “Time to go.”

Jason swore, keeping his voice low so that only Gabe could hear him. “Come on, Gabe . . . they’re hitting it off.”

“I don’t mind driving her back to her shop,” Foster volunteered. Gabe was about to tell him what to do with that unwelcome offer when Bobbi agreed to the guy’s suggestion. He was completely outvoted when Jason enthusiastically agreed that it was a brilliant idea.

“Bobbi?” He kept his voice reasonable and his eyes level but she barely glanced at him.

“I’m fine, Gabe, I’m sure Kyle will make sure that I get back safely.” Her casual dismissal stung like hell, and Gabe felt irrationally betrayed by it. He dug his wallet out of his jacket pocket and left enough cash on the table to cover both of their meals. He strode away without a backward glance, ignoring the chorus of cheerful “see you’s” that followed him out the door.

When he got to his car, he braced his hands on the roof of the car and dragged in a deep breath. He glanced through the pub’s windows and saw Bobbi laughing at something Foster had just said and barely refrained from kicking at his tire.

Okay, so he was attracted to her but he couldn't possibly be jealous, could he? Bobbi hooking up with some other guy might be just what he needed to get over this ridiculous desire he felt for her.

He shook his head, ran a hand through his hair, and climbed into his car. He was just overtired and horny. He needed rest and a woman in his life. Rest he could take care of immediately, and he had always had a few prospects in the female companionship department. He just wished he could drum up a bit of enthusiasm at the thought of spending time with some other woman when it was Bobbi that he couldn't stop fantasizing about.

Bobbi genuinely liked Kyle Foster; he was witty and charming and she found herself enjoying his company on the drive back to her shop. When he drew the car to a stop, she invited him in to have a look around.

"I'd love that," he enthused, climbing out and hurrying around to the passenger side to open the car door for her. It was a charming gesture that very few men had ever performed for the tomboyish Bobbi, and she was completely flattered by it.

"Wow, this is amazing, Roberta." He sounded suitably impressed as he walked around the shop, running a light hand over the tools before pausing in front of the Corvette where Craig was currently using the overhead hoist to remove the engine. The older man managed a distracted greeting before focusing his attention back on the car.

"Thank you," she murmured. Kyle turned to her with a warm smile on his attractive face.

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"So . . . I was wondering if you'd like to go out sometime? Lunch or dinner, maybe?" She was on the verge of making up some lame excuse when she stopped herself. Why not? Gabe would never return her feelings and she couldn't keep turning down perfectly nice guys in the hopes that he would someday come to the unlikely realization that she was the one for him. But then she thought about his bizarre reaction to the way she was dressed earlier and found herself indulging in a bout of entirely self-indulgent what if's . . .

"Roberta?" Kyle's quiet voice jerked her from her favorite fantasy of Gabe sweeping her up into his arms and she shook herself. It would do her good to go out with a man as something other than just a buddy—but with the way she felt about Gabe, it hardly seemed right to string along a perfectly lovely man like Kyle.

"I'd like that . . . very much actually," she said uncertainly. His smile widened and his eyes crinkled appealingly at the corners. He wasn't as gorgeous as Gabe but then few men were, and Bobbi resolved then and there to stop comparing every man she met to Gabe—it wasn't fair. Kyle was tall, he had shaggy dirty-blond hair, and kind gray eyes and the masculine craggy features of an outdoorsman. He was a landscape

architect and all the time he spent outside had darkened his skin attractively. He also seemed to like her—shorts, tank top, unstyled hair and all—and that soothed her ego after her lunchtime conversation with Gabe.

“I sense a ‘but’ in there somewhere,” he observed, watching her carefully.

“But . . .” But what exactly? But she was in love with her best friend? But she was longing for a guy who was oblivious to her charms? Every thought that popped into her mind seemed stupid and irrational. She was a fool. She wasn’t blind to that truth but she still couldn’t help . . . hoping. She sighed quietly. “But I’m kind of in a really weird place right now.”

He seemed to think that over before nodded thoughtfully.

“I won’t pressure you but I’d like to know if you’d be open to the idea of drinks some time in the future once you manage to find your way out of that weird place?”

“Yes,” she said with a relieved smile. “Definitely.”

“Here’s my card.” His hand brushed against hers when he handed the slip of paper over and Bobbi was disappointed when she felt nothing close to what she felt when Gabe’s skin accidentally touched hers. She really was a lost cause.

“Thank you,” she said, running her fingers over the raised lettering on the no-frills business card. She really didn’t know what else to say to him and he seemed to sense it and ended his visit soon after that.

“I really hope to see you again soon,” he said as she walked him to his car and smiled somewhat uncomfortably. Bobbi had been out of the dating game for more than a year, choosing to focus on her business instead, and even before that she had only dated sporadically because most of the guys she knew were the buddies she had grown up with. The few men who had shown a romantic interest in her had always been on the losing end of an inevitable comparison with Gabe.

So she stood in the parking lot and watched another perfectly fine man drive out of her life and felt like an idiot for yet again closing herself off to other possibilities. It was a cycle she couldn't seem to break.

"Look at you," Craig teased softly after Bobbi had changed back into her overalls and joined them on the floor again. "Leaving with one guy and coming back with another."

"Gabe's not a 'guy' he's just . . . Gabe," she muttered, keeping her eyes down and Craig snorted.

"Sure he is." That sarcastic rejoinder had her head snapping up to meet his regard in alarm.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, her face hot with embarrassment. Craig darted a quick glance around the room to ensure that Sean and Pieter weren't listening to their conversation, but both of the other guys were focused on their own tasks.

"You know what I mean," the older man said seriously. "You like him. I have two teenaged daughters and you're about as transparent as they are when it comes to affairs of the heart." How humiliating to be compared to adolescent girls.

"Fantastic," she said beneath her breath. "This is getting ridiculous."

"Didn't mean to embarrass you, boss. I just liked that you came back with the other guy. Time for you to stop mooning over that Gabe with his fancy suits and shiny shoes. This new guy looks like he knows how to get his hands dirty."

"He's not the new guy," she corrected, wondering miserably why she was still talking about this with him. Craig was the last person on earth she would ever consult on matters of the heart. For his anniversary last year he had forgotten to make reservations at the fancy Italian restaurant his wife had been hinting at for weeks before the big day and had made it up to her by microwaving a pizza and serving it

with boxed wine. Needless to say he had slept on the couch that night—a fact that he had lamented over for days afterward. He still couldn't understand his wife's "unreasonable" reaction when he had gone all out to serve it with paper napkins and a couple of scented candles. He'd even used paper plates so that she wouldn't have to worry about washing up.

"Anyway there's no old or current guy either, so let's just drop this ridiculous subject and get back to work." He shrugged and did as he was told. Bobbi watched him leave and was tempted to call Kyle and take him up on that drinks date.

Gabe was restless . . .

There was no other word to describe the way he felt. He couldn't settle down. The house just seemed empty and huge. It was the first time he'd ever felt that way about his home. While he co-owned the house with Chase, his brother also owned an apartment in Camps Bay and often stayed there when he was in the country. Of course, he had a housecleaning staff, but none of them lived on the premises.

Gabe hadn't shared the house with anybody in years and he was usually content with the peace and quiet. Tonight though, his excess energy was driving him crazy. He had contacted a couple of the women in his so-called "black" book (it was in fact just a folder on his phone) but in the end hadn't been able to summon up the energy or inclination to arrange a date with any of them. He had ended the calls with vague promises to contact them again "sometime" and now found that he was unable to concentrate on anything.

He glanced at the clock—it was just after eight—and decided to head out to Manny's for a couple of drinks. A few of games of darts, entertaining company, harmless flirting . . . just what the doctor ordered.

So he was more than a little confused when he found himself ringing the Richmond doorbell less than fifteen minutes later. There was no answer at first so he depressed

the button again and listened to the deep bingbong echo through the house. He was about to ring it for a third time when the door was jerked open by a frazzled looking Mike Richmond. The tall man glared at Gabe over the rims of his glasses for a few moments before stepping aside and allowing him in. He didn't say anything, merely led the way to the den. The room reeked of cigar smoke—it was the only room where he was allowed to indulge in his habit—and there was a movie paused on the big screen smart TV.

Eyeing the older man once more, he saw that Mike was wearing a handsome smoking jacket—a prank gift from Bobbi—and a pair of comfortable slacks. He appeared to be having a relaxing evening in his man cave. Mike Richmond rarely relaxed, so Gabe felt a bit guilty for disturbing him.

“Something wrong, Gabriel?” the older man asked, refilling a Waterford crystal whiskey glass and lifting the matching decanter questioningly. Gabe nodded and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. He usually changed into less-restrictive clothing after coming from the office but he was still wearing his crisp shirt and suit trousers—at least he'd lost the tie and jacket somewhere along the way.

He took the filled whiskey glass from Mike, unbuttoning his cuff at the same time and rolling the sleeve up to his elbow before switching the glass to the other hand and doing the same with the opposite cuff. Mike had dropped down into his easy chair again and was watching him with those astute amber eyes that rarely missed much. Gabe avoided his scrutiny and sat down opposite him, taking a sip of the Glenlivet and leaning back on the leather recliner with a slight sigh.

“Well?” Mike prompted after a long silence, taking a puff from his cigar.

“Can I have one of those?” Gabe asked, and Mike waved the blunt cigar at the table between their chairs to the mahogany humidior residing there.

“Help yourself . . .”

Gabe grunted a thanks and took his time picking one of the expensive Cubans. When he found one to his liking, he rolled it appreciatively between his thumb and index finger and took a deep whiff before reaching for the cutter and snipping off the end.

“What are you watching?” Gabe asked around the cigar that he now had clenched between his teeth. He rarely lit the cigars and he wasn’t sure if he’d indulge tonight either.

“Die Hard,” the older man answered.

“Aah. One of the good ones.” Gabe grinned.

“You’re not going to tell me what you’re doing here?”

“It’ll keep,” Gabe responded, picking up the remote control that was resting beside the humidor. “I’d rather watch John McClane kick butt.”

It was another half an hour filled with witty one-liners and loud explosions before either of them spoke again.

“Bobbi not in?” Gabe asked casually, blowing on the end of the cigar that he’d lit ten minutes earlier. “She loves this movie.”

“I haven’t seen her but Faye told me that she’s gone out with some friends. About damned time, you ask me,” Mike muttered, keeping his eyes on the screen.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the girl seems to forget she’s female half of the time. It will do her a world of good to spend time with other women. And your buddy—De Lucci’s—wife is a damned fine lady.”

“So she’s not out with that guy?”

The older man’s gaze sharpened.

“What guy?”

“She met him at the pub this afternoon and left with him. I thought she might have gone out with him . . .” And the thought had made him feel close to murderous. Mike continued to inspect him with those shrewd eyes. “Uh . . . anyway, do you know what time she’ll be home?”

Mike shrugged, shifting that uncomfortable stare to the television screen and wincing as he watched Bruce Willis drag his bare feet through broken glass.

“Who knows? These things can go on for hours.”

“Is it safe for her to be out that late?” That pulled Mike’s attention from the on-screen action.

“It’s none of my business how late she stays out. I’m well aware that she’d be living on her own by now if not for the fact that she opened her shop. I can’t tell her what to do.”

“You’re not concerned?”

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“She won’t drink and drive, she won’t take risks—she’s perfectly fine.”

“Anything could happen . . .”

“What’s this really about, Gabriel?” he asked astutely, and Gabe backed off immediately. How could he answer a question he didn’t know the answer to?

“Nothing, I was just a bit concerned. You’re a wealthy man, Mike. Have you even considered that Bobbi could be at risk because of that?”

“Of course I have. When my children were small I had security details on them, you know that. Now that they’re adults, my sons take care of their own security and Bobbi is well aware of the dangers. You know my daughter . . . stubborn to her core, that girl. So I compromised—I provide security at her shop but her personal life is just

that. No big, bulky men trailing after her wherever she goes. Now do you mind? I'd like to enjoy my movie without this constant chatter."

Gabe shut up but he was starting to feel restless again. How could Mike be so damned sanguine about Bobbi's safety and security? It wasn't anything Gabe had even considered until just now and he was suddenly petrified that Bobbi would be kidnapped at any moment. He had lost interest in the movie but kept his eyes pinned to the screen even while his mind raced. Why had he never considered the risks to Bobbi before now?

It was making him edgy.

He chewed the end of his cigar and glared at the screen without really seeing the action. As soon as he realized the credits were rolling, he glanced at his watch. Just after ten, too early for her to come home yet.

"What do you want to watch next?" he asked Mike, and the older man's brows leapt to his hairline. "One of the sequels?"

"Since you were barely paying attention to the last movie, I doubt a second one could hold your interest. Do you want to tell me what the hell is going on in that head of yours now, Gabriel? Something at work?"

"Nothing's going on . . . I'm fine. I just thought I'd come over and hang out for a bit."

"Hang out?" Mike Richmond choked back a laugh. "With me? I'm sure you have friends closer to your own age to hang out with."

"Well, I thought Bobbi would be around," he lied. "If you don't want to watch a movie, why don't we play a game of billiards?"

"Gabriel, I'm a boring old fogie and I'm headed to bed. Stick around and watch another movie if you really feel inclined to—help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Faye's staying with her daughter tonight, so you'll have the place to yourself."

“But . . .”

“But nothing. Set the alarm on your way out,” The older man pushed himself to his feet and ambled to the door. “Good night.”

“Night.”

Gabe sighed as the door swung shut behind the man and got up to flip absently through the selection of disks beside the Blu-Ray player. Deciding to stick to another modern “classic,” he inserted Con Air into the machine and halfheartedly sat back to watch. Ten minutes into the movie he picked up his phone.

Bobbi glanced down at her vibrating phone and did a double take when she saw who was calling. She ignored the call before refocusing her attention on Bronwyn, who was sitting in the center of their circle, and then blushing furiously when she caught sight of the object in the woman’s hands.

“Oh my God, that thing’s a monster!” Alice squealed.

“It’s got nothing on Bryce.” Bronwyn waved the thing in her hand dismissively.

“Or Sandro,” Theresa added loyally.

“Please, Rick could give that thing a serious run for its money.” Lisa giggled.

“Hmmm . . . now that I look at it from this angle it’s definitely smaller than Pierre,” Alice said with a barely suppressed smile. “Why are we doing this again? None of us really need these things.”

“Does anybody ever really need one that big?” Bobbi asked, appalled. Bronwyn was hosting a sex-toy party, and all the goodies were samples from a well-known adult shop in the area. The other four women all swiveled their heads in Bobbi’s direction, varying degrees of pity on their faces.

“And that answers your question, Alice. God, Bobbi, we need to find you a boyfriend!” Lisa groaned.

“We-ell, I kind of met a guy today,” she informed them smugly, and they all squealed, the gargantuan vibrator instantly forgotten. Bobbi really enjoyed these girly sessions with her friends. She had never really had much feminine influence in her life before meeting Theresa a couple of years before. All of her friends growing up had been male, and while Gabe’s mother and Faye had done their utmost to steer her in a more feminine direction, Bobbi had been so determined to fit in with her all-male family that the two women had given up halfway through Bobbi’s teens. It was only after meeting Theresa and the rest of the women that Bobbi had realized how very much she had missed out on in foregoing female friends for so many years.

“And you’re only telling us this now?” Bronwyn groused.

“It didn’t come up before now,” she shrugged, deliberately casual. She winced when her words caused even more squealing. One of the things she would never get used to was how high-pitched other women could be. She really couldn’t fathom why they screamed so much.

“Tell us everything,” Lisa demanded, and everybody else nodded encouragingly.

“There’s nothing much to tell . . . I was . . .” Her phone buzzed again and she glanced at the display. Gabe, again . . . what was his problem?

“Is that him now?” Theresa asked, her voice—like her personality—gentler and less demanding than the other women.

“No. It’s Gabe,” she said with grimace, ignoring the call again.

“Is that wise?” Theresa asked again. “What if it’s an emergency or something?”

Bobbi sighed, conceding Theresa’s point.

“Well if he calls back she’ll answer it, just in case,” Alice said reasonably. “So tell us about this guy in the meantime?”

“There’s nothing much to tell.” Bobbi smiled. “Jason introduced us and he asked me out.”

“What’s his name?” Alice wanted to know.

“Is he good looking?” Lisa interjected.

“What does he do?” That was from Bronwyn.

“Is he nice?” Trust Theresa to ask that question.

“His name’s Kyle, he’s good-looking; tall and blond . . . wonderful gray eyes.”

“Just my type,” Bron sighed. Her husband, Bryce, was tall and blond.

“Mine too,” Lisa agreed; she was married to Bryce’s equally blond brother.

“Let her finish,” Alice prompted.

“He’s a landscape architect.” They all swooned at that.

“Outdoorsy,” Alice sighed blissfully. “I love them outdoorsy.”

“He does rock climbing to relax,” Bobbi continued, ignoring the interruption.

“Well, Rick would probably love him,” Lisa grumbled. Her husband was an adrenaline junkie who enjoyed any and all kinds of extreme sports. He had toned it a down a bit since the birth of their son the year before though.

“He’s very nice,” Bobbi concluded.

“But . . . ?” the ever-observant Theresa prompted. She might be quiet and sweet but she rarely missed anything.

“No buts . . . he’s nice, interesting, handsome, intelligent. I like him.” Now the rest of them were eying her skeptically as well.

“I’m with Theresa,” Bronwyn said. “There’s a but in there somewhere.”

Her phone buzzed again and she shut her eyes for a brief second before lifting it to her ear.

“Gabe?” Her voice was more abrupt than she’d intended it to be.

“Hey,” his deep voice sounded uncertain. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine . . . why?”

“It’s nothing . . .” There was a long pause. What was going on with him?

“Gabe, is everything okay? Is my dad okay? Billy?”

“No. Everything’s fine. It’s rather late, Bobbi.”

“I know. Which is why I don’t understand why you’re calling me.”

“When do you think you’ll be home?”

“What?” She actually drew the phone away from her ear to peer at it incredulously for a moment. “Why?”

“Your dad is worried.”

“He is? How do you know that?”

“I spoke with him earlier.” His voice sounded weird.

“Well then, I’ll call him and tell him not to worry,” she said, and there was another long silence before he spoke again.

“Don’t. He’s asleep.”

“What? Gabe, you’re not making any sense. Are you drunk?”

“No . . . I mean I had a few drinks but nothing . . .” He sighed, the sound an exasperated huff, and broke off in midsentence. “Look, I just wanted to know when you’d be home.”

“That’s none of your business,” she told him.

“Where are you? I could escort you home,” he suggested.

“For God’s sake, Gabe, you’re being ridiculous. I’m hanging up now.” She disconnected the call before he had a chance to respond and switched the phone off.

“And that,” Theresa said, pointing at the phone, “would be the but we were discussing earlier.”

“Oh he’s a butt alright,” Bobbi seethed, and Lisa grinned.

“Do you want to talk about what happened the other night?” Theresa asked and the rest of them nodded encouragingly.

“I was drunk and I kissed Gabe,” she said, and more than one pair of eyes widened; only Theresa looked unsurprised.

“What did he do?” Alice asked.

“He kissed me back at first and then he stopped. And later that night, he was in his room with his shirt off and I . . . touched him,” she confessed, trying to keep her embarrassment at bay but failing.

“Touched him? How? Where?” Bronwyn questioned.

“His chest, he has a gorgeous chest.” There was a chorus of agreeing hums from the other women. “I touched him and he let me, before stopping me.”

“And what was this phone call about?” Lisa asked, nodding toward the phone in Bobbi’s hand.

Bobbi sighed and told them everything else that had happened over the weekend since The Kiss and leading up to the bizarre phone call. By the time she had finished they were all staring at her in disbelief.

“Firstly, Kyle Foster sounds adorable and if it weren’t for the fact that you’re head over heels in love with your idiotic friend, I would totally encourage you to tap that,” Lisa said. “And secondly, Gabe really is a butt but he sounds like a totally confused butt.” The other women laughed but Lisa ignored them, keeping her focus on Bobbi’s flushed face.

“Personally, I think he wants you and he has no idea how to deal with that,” Theresa stated.

“I agree,” Bronwyn said.

“Me too,” Alice concurred and Lisa indicated her agreement with a thumbs up.

“I’m not his type,” Bobbi said, shaking her head.

“I wasn’t Sandro’s type,” Theresa pointed out.

“Pierre preferred tall, skinny, flawless models,” the short, slightly plump, and scarred Alice said.

“Rick liked to date adrenaline junkies. A nerdy, bookshop owner was a far cry from his usual girlfriends,” Lisa added.

“Tastes change and what men—or women—think they want, isn’t necessarily the type of person they end up with,” Bronwyn said.

Sage words that made perfect sense of course, but none of them had had a years-long friendship to lose with the men in question. Bobbi shook her head and pointed to the abandoned vibrator that lay off to the side.

“What else can that thing do?”

“It can’t cuddle you afterward, that’s for sure,” Alice said with a frown.

“Or whisper Italian endearments in your ear.” This from Theresa who had a dreamy gleam in her eyes.

“Oh my God, you guys are the worst! I give up.” Bronwyn tossed the thing to the side just as her husband, Bryce, walked into the room. It landed at his feet and he looked down at it blankly. A flush crept up his face to the tips of his ears. His sharp ice-blue eyes flew up to meet his wife’s, and she had both hands over her mouth either to stifle a laugh or a scream, Bobbi couldn’t be sure which.

He said something in sign language that made Bronwyn go bright red, and the other women who could all understand sign language as well, laughed. Bobbi, who wasn’t as adept as they were, felt lost.

Bryce’s stern face melted into a grin, which made him go from scary to gorgeous in a split second.

“After Massive Marvin, nothing you ladies do can surprise me anymore,” he said in his carefully modulated voice, referring to a stripper they had all fawned over the previous year on another girls’ night. Bronwyn groaned and covered her eyes, causing Bryce’s grin to widen. “Anyway, I just came to check when you were wrapping it up? I’ve been getting frantic texts.”

“Sandro?” Theresa asked with an eye roll, once Bryce’s eyes were on her and the man shook his head.

“Surprisingly not. Gabe.” Every eye in the room focused on Bobbi, who felt her blood pressure rising.

“That . . .” Words failed her and she shook her head.

“Well it is getting late and we all have work in the morning,” Theresa pointed out. “And you have a long drive ahead of you, Bobbi.”

“And since none of you are going to buy any of this stuff, we may as well end now,” Bronwyn said.

“Hold on, I didn’t say I wouldn’t buy a pair of the . . .” Lisa glared up at Bryce, who was reading her lips avidly. “Do you mind?”

He laughed and left the room with a wave. The group disbanded soon afterward and Bobbi was left to seethe on the drive home. The roads were fairly empty, which cut ten minutes off her drive. She nearly bypassed her own driveway to head over to Gabe's but common sense prevailed; she would confront him in the morning. She'd had just about enough of him this weekend.

