

His Unlikely Lover Chapter 1

CHAPTER ONE

Roberta Richmond was a fool. At least that's what she told herself. Because only a fool would stand idly by while the man she loved romanced another woman in front of her very eyes. But it wasn't the first time she had done so, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Yes, indeed, Roberta Richmond was a colossal fool.

Time for you to move on, Bobbi, she told herself, grimacing when the aforementioned man placed his hands on his latest conquest's naked back—how low was the back of that dress anyway? One could almost see the top of her butt crack—and steered her toward the dance floor. It was unacceptable really; he had brought Bobbi to this party. So why was it okay for him to hit on other women?

Because he's your friend, her inner voice shrieked at her.

"Oh shut up," she said out loud, and a couple of the people standing nearby directed startled glances over at her. "Not you," she clarified. They moved away anyway, making her feel like even more of a social pariah.

Great.

Gabriel Braddock, her longtime best friend—the object of both her teen and adult fantasies—was whispering something into that woman's ear, and she laughed in response. Beautiful, vibrant, tall, and built—she epitomized femininity, something Bobbi sorely lacked.

"You look rather lost over here, Bobbi." The hostess of the party, her good friend Theresa De Lucci, had moved over to join Bobbi in her Lonely Loser's Corner. Theresa held up a flute of champagne, onto which Bobbi gratefully latched.

"Great party," Bobbi told her after taking a thirsty sip of the fizzy drink, and Theresa smiled.

"I could almost believe you meant that, if not for that glower on your face," her friend teased, taking a sip of her own drink.

"I'm sorry, it's just . . ." She sighed. Her eyes drifted miserably over to Gabe again. "Who's the babe?"

"That's one of Sandro's sisters, Rosalie," Theresa informed her, and Bobbi caught a flash of sympathy in the other woman's eyes before lowering her gaze back to her champagne. "She flew in from Milan yesterday. She's just ten months older than Sandro, so they're very close. Unfortunately none of his other family members could make it."

“Well, that explains the astonishing good looks then.” Bobbi laughed bitterly.

“Bobbi.” Her friend paused before taking a deep breath and continuing. “I’m going to give you the same advice that Lisa gave me when I was having problems in my marriage—you’re either going to have to do something about the way you feel or you’re going to have to move on.”

“It’s that obvious?” Her horrified eyes latched onto Theresa’s, and she was relieved when the other woman shook her head.

“To me, yes. I can recognize unrequited love when I see it.” Her friend reached out and gave her a one-armed hug. “And I’m here if you need to talk to someone.”

“Thanks.” Bobbi’s eyes drifted back to the couple on the dance floor.

“If it’s any consolation, Sandro would probably go ballistic if Gabe messed with his sister. He can be a bit protective—especially over Rosalie.

“Stop looking like it’s the end of the world and try to enjoy yourself, okay? You’re making me feel like an awful hostess.” Theresa’s gentle teasing made her smile.

“Oh heaven forbid.” Bobbi raised a hand in mock horror. “This is a great party and you know it.” It was Theresa’s husband’s birthday party. It was supposed to be a surprise party, and while Sandro had acted surprised, Bobbi knew—thanks to Gabe—that the Italian had been far from startled. Theresa was terrible at subterfuge and hadn’t been able to hide her plans from her husband. According to Gabe, Sandro had known something was up for weeks, but in an effort not to disappoint Theresa, he had gone all out with the shocked reaction.

“He wasn’t at all surprised,” Theresa confided in Bobbi, a sweet smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Startled that the woman’s thoughts had so accurately mirrored hers, Bobbi directed a questioning glance her way.

“Sandro,” Theresa clarified. “He wasn’t surprised. I could see through that act a mile away—but it’ll gut him to know that I know that he knew about the party. So I’ll just keep on pretending to believe he was surprised.” Theresa paused for a second, absorbing her words before laughing. “God, that all sounded like the setup to a terrible joke.”

“Your explanation did get rather complicated,” Bobbi agreed.

“Love often is complicated,” Theresa quipped, and Bobbi sighed as she took a sip of champagne and directed her troubled eyes back to Gabe.

“Isn’t it just?”

Gabriel Braddock reluctantly relinquished his hold on his gorgeous dance partner and let her go with a lingering kiss to the back of her hand. She was totally off-limits, of

course, as his good friend's sister. There wasn't a chance in hell he'd indulge himself with this exotic beauty. It would create too many complications in his structured life. She wasn't his type anyway. He preferred blondes—but this was one brunette for whom he would gladly have made an exception. He glanced over at Sandro . . . yep, the guy was staring daggers at him—so that meant Rosalie was still very much forbidden fruit. Too bad. She was charming. He always enjoyed her company and was naturally attracted to her. Still, he had managed to keep their brief interactions over the years limited to harmless flirtations.

He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets—uncaring that it ruined the cut of the garment, which was uncharacteristic for him. He liked neatness. He liked to keep his jaw smoothly shaven, his hair conservatively cut and precisely parted, and his clothes immaculately pressed and tailored to perfection. He preferred to keep things as orderly and controlled as possible. Anything else and he started to feel frayed around the edges.

He glanced around the room and spotted a familiar ruffled figure—the one bit of chaos in his otherwise well-ordered life—and made his way over to where she stood. Their friendship surprised most people who didn't know them. They were complete opposites—Bobbi's untidiness against his neatness and her free spirit versus his buttoned-down conservativeness—and their friendship sometimes baffled him too. He'd known her for most of his life and was used to having her around—no, more than that, he enjoyed having her around. Gabe didn't confide in many people, but Bobbi was someone he trusted with most of his secrets. She listened to him and was his one constant. His mother and brother were preoccupied with their own lives; his father was a completely hopeless case. His other friends were mates, good for a laugh and a drink at the pub but not for sharing his deep and darkest secrets. When he worried about his brother, Chase, he knew that Bobbi would be there to listen patiently and offer words of comfort and advice. She understood him, and he appreciated that about her. He would be the first to acknowledge that he tended to take her for granted, but he couldn't quite imagine his life without her.

He watched as she tossed back the remaining contents of a champagne flute before substituting the empty glass for a full one from a passing waiter's tray. She was as dressed up as it was possible for Bobbi to get, wearing a shapeless navy-blue slip dress, one he had seen her in a million times before. It was her go-to party dress. It kind of skimmed her slender body, falling from thick straps on her shoulders, which seemed to have been designed to hide bra straps, to somewhere between her knees and her calves.

The dress was accompanied by clunky ankle boots that added absolutely no height to her five foot nothing frame, and the entire ensemble was topped off with some ugly plastic tribal jewelry—chunky bracelets that looked horribly out of place on her

delicate wrists, a pendant that appeared to weigh heavily on her neck, and truly awful hoop earrings that seemed to tug painfully at her earlobes.

Bobbi was a tiny waif of a girl, so her ghastly outfit seemed to be wearing her. The top of her head barely came up to his chest. She had slender arms and legs, a flat chest, and no curves to speak of at all. He supposed she was okay-looking as such things went, with luminous, thickly lashed amber eyes that shone like dark gold in the sunlight, a snub nose that was crooked as a result of a childhood fall, and a perfect cupid's bow of a mouth, which—in addition to her eyelashes—was one of the few feminine things about her. She had beautiful skin though, clear and golden, and her short, silky, straight black hair molded the elegant shape of her head.

“Hey, Runt,” he said by way of greeting, knowing that it aggravated her to be addressed as such. “You having a good time?”

“No,” she grouched. “You’re supposed to dance with me.”

“I am?” He was?

“You brought me here,” she pointed out, enunciating her words carefully, the way inebriated people tended to do when they were trying to convince others of their sobriety. “You’re my date. You should dance with me.”

“I’m your date, am I?”

“Stop talking to me like I’m a child.” Her words threw him. He did tend to speak to her in the indulgent, paternal tone her dad or older brothers used on her. It was easy for all of them to lose sight of the fact that she was a woman of twenty-six with her own business.

“I’m sorry.” Her pretty eyes reflected her surprise at his apology. She shrugged awkwardly, grabbing yet another glass from a passing waiter and downing it in almost one gulp. She swayed and he reached out to steady her, placing his hands on her slight shoulders.

“Whoa, Bobbi . . . how many of those have you had?”

“How many of whats?” she asked with a frown, and he grinned at her butchering of the language before elaborating.

“Of those glasses of champagne?”

“They’re called flutes . . . like a flute . . . like music. You know?”

“I get it,” he said, keeping his tone somber to match the earnestness in her voice. “So how many have you had?”

“What?”

“Never mind.” He decided not to push it when it was clear that she couldn’t quite muddle her way through the conversation. “Entirely too many, as far as I can tell. Come on, let’s find a quiet spot to sit you down.”

“I’m not tired. I want to dance.”

“You can barely stand,” he pointed out patiently. It wasn’t like her to get drunk. She was a lightweight when it came to alcohol and tended to restrict her alcoholic intake to no more than two glasses when she was in company.

“I can stand.” She looked offended by his words and wriggled her shoulders out from beneath his hands to prove it to him. She swayed only a little without his support. “Come on, let’s dance.” She pushed past him and walked confidently toward the dance floor. When she got there and turned around to find him still standing where she had left him, she spread her hands in a what gives gesture.

He groaned to himself before making his way to her side. It would be best just to dance with her and get it over with. Arguing with her in her current state would cause a scene. He was being jostled by the crowd and felt a bit harried when he eventually reached her. She smiled up at him before latching her arms around his waist, resting her head on his chest, and snuggling up against him like a contented cat. Floored, he stood with his arms outspread—not quite sure what to do with them—staring down at the top of her silky head.

He hesitantly closed his arms around her slight frame while trying to maneuver away from her and force some distance between their bodies, but she’d latched on so tightly they wouldn’t have been able to squeeze a sheet of paper between them. He sighed and moved his hands down to either side of her waist and was surprised to discover that it was curvier than he’d anticipated. There was a definite, defined, nipped-in waist that curved out into gently flared hips. His hands spanned the entire length of her waist, with his thumbs brushing the underside of the slight swell of her breasts and his pinkie fingers resting on the flare of her hips. Before this very moment he had thought—when he’d given any consideration to the matter at all—that Bobbi was straight up and down. He never would have guessed at this perfectly proportioned, petite, hourglass figure.

Curious, he allowed his hands to explore further, moving one to her back and spreading his fingers so that it covered her entire narrow expanse. He angled his hand until the tips of his fingers just brushed at the swell of her butt and then was immediately besieged with guilt, as he comprehended that he was actually trying to cop a feel off Bobbi! What the hell was wrong with him?

He tried to move away again, but she moved closer, and he tilted his head to see her face. She was nuzzling at his chest, her breath hot against the naked flesh just above

his unbuttoned shirt. Strange, he didn't quite remember unbuttoning that third button or the second for that matter! He had only loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar.

"Hey, hold up there, sweetheart." He could feel her fingers busily working on the fourth button. "What the hell are you doing, Bobbi?"

"Dancing." Her lips brushed against his flesh as she spoke, sending hot darts of pleasure racing from the point of contact all the way down to parts he'd best not be thinking about right now.

"Okay. Enough, Bobbi. I don't know what you think you're doing, but it's gone far enough." He moved his arms back up to her shoulders and moved her away from him, using gentle force.

She kept her face angled down, and he used a thumb and forefinger to slant her chin up and meet her eyes. She possessed enough of her faculties to look embarrassed; a flush stained her delicate cheekbones and made her look somewhat feverish.

"What's up, Runt?" She winced at the nickname, and he immediately regretted using it. Not the best timing—not when something was clearly eating at her.

"I'm such a fool." Her voice was so low that he had to bend his head a few inches to catch the words.

"No, you're not. Why would you say that? Did somebody say something to upset you?"

She raised a slender, slightly calloused hand to his cheek and stroked the flesh softly. He found the combination of soft and hard on his skin disturbing and unthinkingly dragged his face away from her gentle touch, leaving her small hand hovering in midair. Her eyes immediately filled with pain, and he felt like a complete ass for putting that look on her face. He didn't know what was going on with her tonight, but he had no doubt that the amount of alcohol she had consumed would have her regretting her actions in the morning.

She dropped her hand down to her side, and he reached up to cradle her delicate face between both of his hands.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" he murmured, and watched with a perplexed frown as her eyes filled with tears. Bobbi hardly ever cried; in fact he could count on one hand the number of times he had seen her cry over the last twenty years. He didn't know how to respond to this. He watched as a single tear slid down her smooth cheek, until it collided with one of his thumbs and formed a tiny pool beneath the digit.

"I'm a fool," she repeated, her tone numb.

“Bobbi, I . . .” Every thought fled from his mind when she went up onto her toes and firmly planted her soft, sweet lips on his mouth, catching him in midsentence. The next breath he inhaled was hers. It filled his lungs and he held it in for one long, possessive moment until he had no choice but to relinquish it back to her.

Oh my God! It was the only coherent thought he had as he found himself taking control of the kiss that she had initiated, sweeping his tongue into the sweet, hot depths of her mouth, relishing the taste of her, the smell, the feel . . . God, she felt good—a small, perfect armful that he couldn’t seem to get close enough to. He moved one hand down to the small of her back, anchoring her to him, bending her backward in an attempt to get even closer.

Oh my God!

Every delectable inch of her was plastered to him from chest to thighs, and he wanted her even closer. Some distant part of his mind was making faintly alarmed noises, but most of his higher brain functions had short-circuited the moment her soft lips had touched his. Sure they’d exchanged kisses before, perfunctory pecks that were nothing like this. Where the hell had this come from?

She tasted like champagne—sweet and tart—and her kiss effervesced through his system, sending his nerve endings tingling with ebullient messages that were hard to ignore.

He lifted his mouth from her intoxicating lips for a second, needing air, but all he inhaled was Bobbi . . . the heady scent of vanilla and freesias. Why had he never known how good she smelled before now? he wondered absently before angling his mouth to take hers again.

She murmured his name, and despite the music and noise swirling around them, the fractured sound registered just as he reclaimed her lips, and it was as effective as being doused in ice water. He jerked his head back and shook it to clear his befuddled brain.

What the hell am I doing?

He stepped away from her a second after that thought rang through his mind, putting some desperately needed distance between his aroused body and hers. He was still too close to her for his liking—her every gasping breath threatening to bring her chest within touching distance of his ribcage—but the crowd made it difficult to move farther away from her.

She had her face tilted up toward his, her heavy-lidded eyes were liquid with longing, her every breath emerged on a hitched sob, and her skin had a flushed, dewy look that immediately betrayed her arousal. It was all he could do to prevent himself from reaching for her again. She was drunk, he reminded himself. He was the one who had

to maintain control; he couldn't take advantage of her. It was unthinkable—this was Bobbi! That thought immediately dampened his arousal and brought his body firmly back under his control.

He clung to that: Bobbi. It put things into jarring perspective. He didn't know what the hell had just happened, but it had to have been a temporary aberration.

This was Bobbi.

He pushed memories of her as a small girl with a gap-toothed grin and pigtails into his brain, and then as an awkward preadolescent, a gawky teenager, and lastly a permanently disheveled young woman in overalls, with grease smeared on her face, and he immediately felt . . . less. Just less.

He forced one of his hands to reach for her elbow and ignored the residual tingling in his fingertips as he latched onto her silky skin. He dragged her to the side of the dance floor and looked around until he found an empty chair in a relatively quiet spot. He led her to it and urged her to sit down. She still looked a bit dazed and thankfully sat down without protest. He sank onto his haunches in front of her.

“Wait here,” he ordered, and she blinked up at him, looking totally out of it. “Bobbi, do you hear me? Do not move from this spot! I'll be right back.”

She nodded. He got up and headed for a refreshment table on the opposite side of the room, intending to get her some water. He glanced back and nearly stumbled when she brought one of her hands to her mouth and traced the outline of her lips.

Could she still taste him? He could still taste her.

He felt like his structured, well-organized world was on an express train to hell, and he needed to find the emergency brake immediately or his life would descend into absolute chaos.

Bobbi! He reminded himself sternly before turning and continuing his progress to the refreshment table.

Gabe had kissed her!

Okay, she was just sober enough to remember that she had kissed him first, but he had kissed her back! He had definitely kissed her back. That hadn't been her imagination. Had it? She could still feel the pressure of his warm, smooth lips on hers, the scrape of his just emerging stubble against her cheek. And she could taste the whiskey-tinged flavor of his tongue in her mouth.

But why had he left her here?

She accepted another glass—flute—of champagne from a handsome waiter and contemplated that question. He had left absolute ages ago. She stood up and swayed

before moving in the direction she was sure he had gone. Maybe he was with that woman again. Rosalie. Was he kissing her now?

She stumbled and bumped into someone.

“Roberta?” She didn’t need to see the owner of that dark, accented voice to know to whom it belonged. She grinned up at him.

“Aaah, the birthday boy!”

“Are you okay?” Alessandro De Lucci asked in concern, and she squinted up at him. He was a handsome man, but his two noses made him look kind of freakish.

“You should have that seen to.” She waved her gl— flute at him and he frowned.

“What? You’re not making sense, piccola.”

“That second nose . . . where did it come from?”

“Aaah. Too much champagne for you, I think.” He grinned, snatching her half-full gla— flu— whatever, and latching an arm around her waist when the unexpected move unbalanced her. “Okay, I’ve got you, piccola mia. Let’s find my wife and get you put to bed.” Theresa and Sandro had offered rooms to some of their guests who lived farther away, hoping to eliminate any incidences of drunk driving.

“Okay. I am rather sleepy,” she told him.

“I’m sure you are,” he agreed.

“You’re much nicer than you used to be,” she informed him drowsily, and he chuckled.

“So I’ve been told.”

Bobbi was gone! Gabe swore softly and frantically looked around for her in the throng of people surrounding him. He hadn’t been gone more than a couple of minutes. Where the hell had she disappeared to?

“Shit,” he whispered beneath his breath and pushed his way through the chatting, laughing groups of people. He spotted Max Kinsley, an old university friend standing at the far side of the room. Bobbi may have wandered over to chat with him . . . or dance with him. Would she have kissed him too? The question hit him like a fist to the solar plexus and expelled the breath from his lungs as he visualized Max with Bobbi in his arms, with his mouth on hers and his chest plastered to hers.

Hell no!

He told himself that the rage he felt at the vision that formed in his mind’s eye was the same protective instinct Sandro felt toward his sister . . . that had to be it.

“Where’s Bobbi?” He demanded to know when he eventually managed to reach Max’s side. The other man looked surprised by his question.

“No idea. You’re her minder, bro. Not me.” Seeing the truth on his friend’s face, Gabe’s eyes roamed the crowded room again. He couldn’t help picturing her flitting from one guy to the next, bestowing her dances and kisses freely on every one of them like some horny, drunken little fairy. She could get herself into some serious trouble if she ran into the wrong guy.

“Lose something?” a deep voice murmured from behind him, and he whirled around to see Sandro smirking at him.

“I assume you know where Bobbi is?” he asked. The other man took a lazy sip of whiskey before replying.

“Theresa just escorted Roberta to her room. She’s feeling the effects of too much champagne.” Gabe grimaced at that information; she could go from tipsy to violently ill in pretty short order. He should have known it would only be a matter of time before she got sick.

“I’ll take care of her and send your wife back down to you,” he offered, and Sandro nodded.

“That would be appreciated.”

They had put her in the room next to his, Gabe remembered. What had seemed perfectly acceptable just a few short hours ago now seemed . . . inappropriate.

He rapped on the door before opening it after the briefest of hesitations. Theresa De Lucci, looking stunning in her evening wear—probably by one high-end designer or the other, he wasn’t sure which, he never really paid attention to women’s wear unless he was in the process of removing it—was stroking a damp cloth over Bobbi’s face. She looked up in surprise when Gabe walked in.

“How is she?” he asked, shrugging out of his tux jacket and draping it carefully over the back of a chair so as not to wrinkle it.

“Somewhat under the weather,” Theresa said with a slight smile. “I think she got most of it out of her system though.”

“She doesn’t handle alcohol very well,” he stated unnecessarily.

“I noticed.” Her smile widened.

“She’s usually better at managing her alcohol intake. I don’t know what came over her tonight.” Theresa said nothing in response to that and merely continued to stroke Bobbi’s face gently.

“I’m sorry about this. Why don’t you head back to the party? I’ll take care of her.”

Theresa slanted her head questioningly. “Are you sure about that? I don’t mind staying with her.”

“Sandro’s already looking restless without you.”

She laughed with an indulgent shake of her head. “He has no patience with parties that serve no function other than an excuse for people to gather in a festive social setting.”

“All business all the time, huh?” Gabe rejoined, and she rolled her eyes.

“I’ve been attempting to change that, and he does try, but he tends to get short-tempered if I’m not around to make sure he maintains his civility.”

“You’d better get down there before he tosses everybody out then.” He ushered her out, and after one last look back at Bobbi, she left the room.

Gabe shut the door behind her. He stood there for a while with his hands braced on the door and his head bent as he steeled himself to turn around and walk back to that bed.

“Gut up, Braddock,” he whispered, thumping his forehead against the wood before pushing himself away from the door and turning back toward the large bed.

She was so small that she barely made a dent beneath the covers. He removed his diamond and gold cufflinks, slipping them into one of his trouser pockets, and folded his sleeves meticulously up to his elbows. He sat down on the chair so recently vacated by Theresa and forced himself to look down into her unconscious face.

It was just Bobbi. He nearly laughed his relief out loud. He didn’t know what he had expected, but this short-haired, golden-skinned, sleeping urchin stirred no desire in him—no crazy, ill-advised lust. Nothing close to it. He felt fondness, affection, even love. Every insipid emotion associated with platonic friendship one could hope for. No desire. None at all.

He shook his head, unable to keep the grin from his face.

“Thank Christ for that,” he whispered. He could only conclude that he’d been more affected by his dance with the stunning Rosalie De Lucci than he’d known. It was past time for him to form a new relationship. His last one had ended months ago and he’d been celibate ever since. The lack of sex seemed to be manifesting itself in seriously weird and unanticipated ways.

He linked his fingers and rested them on his torso before dropping his head back on the cushioned chair. He mentally inventoried all the single women he knew, with the intention of calling one or two of them up soon for some sexy times, and fell asleep in the middle of his strategizing.