

## His Unlikely Lover Chapter 3

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### CHAPTER THREE

The sharp knock on her door left no doubt in Bobbi's mind as to whom was on the other side of the wooden barrier. She sucked in a deep, calming breath before walking over to open the door.

The first thing she noticed was that he had thankfully put on a pristine white T-shirt before coming to her door and had removed the sunglasses. It didn't stop him from still looking incredible though, especially since his skin had bronzed a shade darker in the morning sun and contrasted attractively with the crisp whiteness of his shirt. She forced that thought from her mind and smiled up at him with just the right amount of friendliness and apology.

"Gabe," she exclaimed, sounding absolutely thrilled to see him. "I was just coming down to have a chat with you." She turned her back and walked back into her room, glancing over her shoulder to be sure he followed her inside. He was very careful to leave the door slightly ajar, probably terrified that she'd attack him again. She successfully hid her grimace by heading for the comfortably overstuffed pair of chairs that were situated beside a huge picture window overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and sank down into one, curling her legs and dragging her feet up under her butt, trying to keep her posture as relaxed and nonconfrontational as possible. He warily sat down in the second chair, which was angled to face hers.

Unlike Bobbi he seemed tense, both feet were braced on the floor, giving him the appearance of someone who would bolt at the slightest provocation, and his hands were precisely placed on the armrests of the chairs with his fingers curled around the edges. He couldn't seem to meet her eyes, which just about broke her heart.

“I’m sorry about last night.” She tried for casual but the words were soft, filled with regret, and the tiniest bit wistful. His throat worked as he swallowed.

“Yeah? Which part?” That threw her somewhat. She hadn’t expected him to ask for specifics.

“All of it. Getting drunk, kissing you . . . touching you.” She watched as his fingers clenched the armrests and brought her regard back up to his face. He had his eyes averted and was staring unseeingly out at the horizon, where the shimmering cobalt-blue ocean blended seamlessly with the azure blue of the sky.

“Why did you do it?” He asked, his voice gruff, and she blinked. This wasn’t the way she had pictured this conversation going at all. Gabe was supposed to gratefully latch on to the excuse to maintain the status quo of their friendship. He wasn’t supposed to ask speculative and penetrating questions.

“What?” She stalled for time, hoping to give him the chance to withdraw the question when he figured out that he was just drawing out the uncomfortable situation longer than was necessary.

“I asked why you did it?” He repeated, leaning forward to bring his sharp gaze onto her face and watching her every reaction with a maddeningly impersonal expression.

“Why did I get drunk?” She deliberately misunderstood, hoping again that he would grab onto this avenue of escape. There was a long pause while he continued to study her with those eyes that missed nothing. She kept her friendly smile pasted to her face but was gradually aware with each passing second how very fake it must look to this man who knew her so well.

“You know what I meant, Bobbi, but if you want me to spell it out—why did you kiss me and why did you touch me?” He leaned forward even more, bringing his elbows to his thighs and clasping his hands loosely together in the empty space between his knees.

“I was drunk.” It was all she could do not to stammer. She kept her eyes up and kept that damned fake smile plastered on her face.

“You said I was your date,” he reminded her, and she froze for the briefest of seconds before forcing a laugh out of her tight throat. She managed another one and then another until the sound that emerged almost resembled her natural laughter.

“Oh my God, Gabe . . . you had me going. So serious . . . Why did you kiss me? Why did you touch me?” She did a terrible impression of his voice, deepening her own to

try and mimic his. “But the date thing? You know how drunk I was when I said that! Why else would I have said it? I thought you were angry with me or something, but you’re having me on aren’t you? Don’t scare me like that!”

His eyes had narrowed on her laughing face, but he leaned back in his chair and allowed a small smile to play about his lips. He seemed content to let her latch on to what she considered to be an “out.”

“I’m not angry with you, sweetheart,” he said softly. “I was worried about you. I still am . . . you haven’t eaten much today.”

This was the Gabriel Braddock she had fallen in love with, the one who treated her with a gruff tenderness when he was alone with her, who cared about her well being and always seemed to want what was best for her. When she was growing up, she had loved him like her own brother. In fact, in some ways, she loved him more than any of her brothers.

Billy, Edward, and Clyde had never listened to her aching desires to be like the taller and prettier girls at school. They hadn’t been the ones to comfort her at fifteen, when she had lamented her lack of feminine curves. None of them had been interested in her disastrous crush on Timothy Carfield, the handsome captain of the rugby team. Gabe was the only one who had been there for her during those painful teenage years, before she had adjusted to the changes in her own body and admitted to herself that she would never be like those girls in school, that she had no desire to be like any of them. He had listened, he had advised and had always known exactly how to cheer her up whenever her adolescent fantasies of fitting in had ended in disaster. So often she had trudged home from school and straight to the Braddock house to tell Gabe about whatever humiliation she’d had to endure that day. Depending on the scope of the catastrophe, he would produce ice cream, take her to the movies or drive her down to the closest junkyard—his least favorite place in the world—where she could happily scrounge around for car parts. And so often, he had simply hugged her and told her that everything would be okay.

Bobbi had no pride where this man was concerned. She was desperate to keep him in her life and if it meant slowly bleeding to death from every tiny, slashing wound that his romantic indifference inflicted on her, then so be it.

Still the last day and a half had exhausted her and she just wanted to get home and lick her latest wounds in private.

“I don’t really want to stay for lunch. I just want to get home and sleep,” she told him, and he frowned at her sudden mood shift.

“You haven’t eaten yet,” he reminded.

“I’m not hungry. I feel too sick to eat, and I’d really prefer to go home. If you’re hungry we could stop for some fast food or something.” It was a thirty-minute drive from the affluent coastal suburb of Clifton, Cape Town, where Sandro and Theresa lived to Bobbi’s and Gabe’s homes in Constantia, which was a suburb located in the heart of the Cape Winelands. On a clear day like today, in his sleek Lamborghini, Gabe could do it in less time than that.

“If you’re sure?” he asked with marked reluctance.

“I’m sorry. I’ve totally ruined this weekend for you, haven’t I?” She felt awful about that. She would have to take a minibreak from Gabe after this weekend, focus on her business, and maybe spend more time with her female friends.

“You haven’t ruined it,” he said with a slight smile. “Not at all.”

Gabe watched the relief flood into her expressive amber eyes and the tension seep from her shoulders. She had tried to be so casual and unaffected but had failed miserably. He knew her too well to be fooled by the lighthearted act she’d just put on for him. Something fundamental had shifted in their relationship, and while she was desperately scrambling to take them back to where they had been before The Kiss, Gabe perversely wanted her to acknowledge that she had kissed him and touched him because she had wanted him. Not because she had been drunk and exercising flawed judgement. He knew that he was being an idiot. He should have grabbed onto the lifeline she had thrown him and their friendship with both hands, but it just grated to see her sitting there trying so desperately to look relaxed.

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On the positive side, she looked like herself again. She was wearing an old pair of denim shorts that had been hacked off at mid-thigh and her favorite Pink Floyd T-shirt, which was faded and torn in places. Her hair, which he had never paid particular attention to before, was a silky mess that was long in the front—with her side-parted fringe sliding over her left eye—and short in the back, just brushing at the nape of her neck. The glossy black stuff sleekly conformed to the pretty shape of her head, and while it hadn’t been styled in ages, it still gave her an appealing gamine quality, which when combined with her pretty, thickly lashed amber eyes, flawless golden skin, and irregular features, made him want either to ruffle her hair in affection or kiss her senseless. And therein lay the negative side of the situation: she looked like Bobbi again, his familiar and lovable best friend, his unkempt Runt, but damned if he didn’t still want her. It wasn’t an easy thought to adjust to, and it made him feel vaguely

uncomfortable—like it was somehow wrong to want a girl he had known for most of his life.

He cleared his throat and tested a perfectly bland smile on her—it seemed to work because she relaxed even further.

“Why don’t you get your stuff packed and meet me downstairs in ten minutes?” he suggested. “We can say our good-byes and be on the road.”

“Sounds good.”

They left twenty minutes later, and Bobbi curled up in the luxurious black and red leather bucket seat of Gabe’s gorgeous Lamborghini Aventador. On any other day she would be crooning over the car’s features and begging Gabe to let her drive it, but right now she wanted to avoid all conversation with him. He put on some music, seeming content to let her pretend to doze in the passenger seat. It was classical music of course—Gabe had sophisticated tastes, evidenced by the clothes he wore and the classy women he dated. Bobbi had never really known how she had managed to remain so firmly entrenched in his life despite their differences. She’d always assumed that she was a remnant of his youth that he enjoyed clinging to. After all he still remained friends with her brother, Billy, and most of their other childhood mates.

She flipped over in her seat to face the window and opened her eyes to focus miserably out at the passing scenery. Gabe handled the car competently of course. He did everything competently—Bobbi didn’t. She was a mess, the only thing she had done properly was open her auto shop and even that fledgling venture was floundering.

The car was slowing down and she frowned, they were only halfway to Constantia. She sat up in time to see Gabe turn in to the parking lot of a popular franchise restaurant.

“I’m starving,” he said by way of explanation. “And you could do with some food too.”

“I’m not hungry,” she repeated, pushing her hair out of her eyes and absently noting that she needed a haircut, the fall of hair that kept flopping into her eye was becoming an irritant.

“I don’t care. You’re eating.”

“Oh my God, you’re such a bossy bastard,” she griped; it wasn’t the first time she had made the complaint, and he grinned and replied the way he routinely did.

“It’s my best character trait.” She rolled her eyes, relieved to have fallen back into their familiar banter.

They got out of the car, which had drawn a crowd of admiring boys and men. There were a few women too, and they cast speculative looks at Gabe’s tall, handsome frame, but none of them seemed to notice her of course. That was always the case—she often found herself overlooked when she was standing beside him. She would be relegated to nothing more than an insignificant bystander beside someone so charismatic, and yet, Gabe never overlooked her. He’d go off and flirt with the women and laugh with the men, but he always made his way back to her to side to check if she needed anything. More often than not, he hurried to find her in order to share an amusing anecdote or a juicy bit of gossip about someone in the crowd.

Gabe ignored the people milling around the car and took hold of Bobbi’s elbow in order to safely lead her through them. She ignored the familiar jolt of sensation she always felt when his bare skin touched hers, but for some reason he broke stride after that initial touch and frowned down at his hand where it gripped her elbow. It was a barely noticeable moment, but Bobbi found herself obsessively wondering about it throughout the lengthy seating and meal selection process. Had he felt that current

too? Before now it had been wholly one-sided, with only Bobbi feeling that frisson, but after Gabe's hesitation, she wondered if just maybe he had felt it too.

She looked up into his familiar features and was disheartened to note that he didn't look the slightest bit disconcerted and sighed quietly at that ember of hope in her chest that just wouldn't die.

One of his elbows was on the table and his chin was resting in the palm of his hand as he stared unnervingly at her. His free hand was toying with his fork.

"When was the last time you heard from Chase?" She felt the need to break the lengthening silence between them.

"A couple of days ago. On Skype. He seemed . . ." He sighed and shrugged, his concern for his twin brother obvious. Chase was an award-winning photojournalist and regularly traveled to war zones around the globe. He was currently covering a civil war in the Middle East and a number of journalists had already been kidnapped and murdered in the area. Bobbi knew that Gabe had been urging his brother to come home and leave this one be, but Chase was a stubborn man. "He seemed tired. Distracted."

"I'm sure that he's fine," Bobbi comforted. "He knows how to take care of himself. He knows what precautions to take."

"Hmmm . . ." Gabe sounded unconvinced, but he forced a smile. Bobbi wasn't fooled by it and dropped her hand over his larger one on the table.

"You know what your problem is?" She asked with a slight grin, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Do tell?" he invited.

"You're so bossy and arrogant that not being able to keep everybody you care about well and safe just chafes at your ego." She kept her tone light and it worked, coaxing a smile from him.

"Yeah, well, if everybody just followed my advice, their lives would be so uncomplicated," he teased.

“Because you always know best, right?”

He gave her a smug, condescending nod.

“Naturally.”

“Well, you’re going to have to let everybody lead their own lives and instead focus on your own because you’re surrounded by stubborn people who hate being dictated to,” she reminded him, glancing up when the waitress brought their drinks. Realizing that she was still holding his hand, she released her hold abruptly and grabbed her Coke—grateful when the cold condensation on the outside of the glass neutralized the annoying tingle in the palm of her hand. She drank thirstily, abruptly grateful for the fizzy, cold drink as it hit the back of her parched throat. She was more dehydrated than she knew. She hated that she was proving Gabe right once again and tried to disguise her thirst from him by reluctantly wrenching her lips away from the straw.

When she glanced up at him, he was grinning and she was happy to note that the deep-seated concern he had over his brother’s welfare seemed to have been pushed to the back of his mind for now. Proving him right in this instance was well worth it.

“Thirsty?” he asked casually, and she tossed a napkin at him.

“Okay, I’m thirsty, and once my lunch gets here I’ll probably realize that I’m famished too so you’re right once again. Try not to gloat too hard, you might break your ego bone or something!” He laughed outright at that and she was happy to have coaxed the sound from him when he had been so depressed just moments before. She tried not to think about how pathetic she was: living for the sound of his laughter and proud of her measly ability to tease him into a good mood. She really needed to stop living her every moment for this man—with her only solid accomplishments in life being how often she had made him smile or laugh.

She watched in exasperated affection as he neatly arranged the condiments on the table to his liking: salt, pepper, tomato sauce, chutney, mayonnaise, and mustard—always neatly lined up from left to right like good little soldiers. It was something he always did and they were all used to it.

“You want to come over tonight? For popcorn and movies?” he asked unexpectedly, moments after their food arrived. Bobbi, who had indeed discovered that she was ravenous, paused in the act of lifting her burger from its plate and watched as it messily dripped sauce and melted cheese over her hands. She put it back down without taking a bite and reached for a napkin to wipe the juice from her hands. Gabe had taken a huge bite out of his steak sandwich and was chewing slowly as he contemplated her from across the table.

“I’m rather tired,” Bobbi said after a long pause. She picked up a knife and sliced her burger into four neat sections, which was more in keeping with the way Gabe ate and

quite uncharacteristic for her. Bobbi never minded getting her hands dirty, be it with food, soil, or grease. But for some reason right at that moment, with him watching her—she felt self-conscious about getting bacon grease, sauce, and cheese all over her face and hands.

“I didn’t mean as soon as we got home,” he clarified. “I thought you might want to get some sleep first, come around later.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea,” she said, and he pinned her with an accusatory glare.

“Why not?”

“Gabe . . .”

“Bobbi, either we’re okay after what happened last night, or we’re not. Which is it?”

“Are we okay?” she asked in a small and uncertain voice, and he sighed softly, carefully putting his sandwich down.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I want us to be. But . . .”

“But?” she prompted, and he sighed again before gesturing toward her plate.

“We’re going to talk about this at some point, Bobbi . . . but right now I need you to finish that burger. You have to eat something, and if we get into this now, we’ll talk and you won’t eat.” Frustrated, Bobbi glared down at the quartered burger on her plate and lifted one of the portions to take a nibble. He went back to his own sandwich and an awkward silence reigned between them until the last morsel had been consumed.

He paid for their meal and escorted her back to the car, which still had its fair share of teen admirers taking showboating cell phone photos around it. The boys looked both disappointed and awed when Gabe and Bobbi climbed into the car. One of them asked how fast the car went, and Gabe wound down the window to answer him patiently. The questions came thick and fast after that, and after answering a couple more, Gabe excused himself and started up the car, gunning the engine impressively for his admiring audience before pulling away at a disappointingly respectable speed. Bobbi rolled her eyes when she noted a few crestfallen young faces in the rearview mirror and mustered up a bit of empathy for them despite her lack of energy.

They were back on the road in seconds and there was more silence until Gabe switched the radio back on. They didn’t speak again until the car slid to a stop in front of her front door. He switched off the engine and turned in his seat to face her, one arm curled over the steering wheel and the other across the top of his seat.

“So, sevenish?” he asked, and she played with the seat belt clasp, keeping her eyes down. “Bobbi? Don’t do this. Come on, look at me.” The plaintive note in his voice compelled her to obey and she reluctantly lifted her eyes to meet his. He smiled warmly at her when she looked at him.

“Are you coming over?” he asked again and she nodded, feeling like an idiot for being unable to stick to her resolution to take a break but unable to deny him.

“What movie?” she asked.

“Let’s go for a classic, what about Aliens?” he suggested, naming one of her favorites, and she sighed before nodding. “Great! I’ll see you then. You’re fixing the popcorn.”

“We’ll toss a coin for the honor,” she responded casually, taking her cues from him.

“Nope. I called it already,” he said smugly, and she punched his shoulder affectionately.

“Stop changing the rules,” she protested, lining up to take another shot at his shoulder, but he caught her fist in his, preventing her from making contact. It was something he had done countless times and he usually released her hand immediately, but this time his head was bent and his eyes were fixed on the sight of her small fist held captive in his. He turned their hands over and used his other to unfurl her fingers one by one—taking the time to stroke each one as he uncurled it—until he held her open hand palm up. He traced the lines on her pink palm slowly and thoroughly, not missing a single one. His gentle touch made her skin burn, and Bobbi was vaguely aware of the fact that her breath was coming in ragged gasps.

“Gabe?” Her voice was embarrassingly shaky but it seemed to snap him out of whatever daze he was in; his head jerked up and his eyes met hers in alarm. There was a dull red streak running across his cheekbones and his eyes still looked unfocused.

“What the hell is going on here?” His voice was low and rough and shaking almost as much as hers had been. He looked genuinely unsettled, but he still hadn’t released her hand and his thumb was absently stroking back and forth across the callused pads beneath her fingers. He held on for a moment longer before dropping her hand rather abruptly and turning to face front again. Bobbi looked at his profile, aching to reach out and stroke that clenched jaw and smooth out the tense lines that bracketed his mouth. She curbed the impulse and instead held her hands tightly clutched in her lap.

“I’ll see you later,” he said curtly. Hurt by the dismissal, Bobbi turned to open the door. She was in the process of shutting it behind her when his words halted her movements. “Bobbi . . .”

She turned back expectantly but he seemed at a loss and she watched his throat work as he swallowed down whatever words might have emerged.

“Later,” she said, putting him out of his misery. She walked away without looking back.

As usual the house was as silent as a tomb when Gabe got home. His mother, Lucy Templeton-Braddock Colbert, the sole heiress to one of the most profitable vineyards in the country, had moved out nearly ten years ago after her marriage to Francis Colbert—wealthy entrepreneur and all-round good guy. The same couldn’t be said for the loser who had fathered Gabe and Chase and who had run off to “find” himself in Southeast Asia when the twins were eight years old. As far as Gabe knew, Leighton Braddock was still blowing his seemingly endless trust fund while emulating Leo Di Caprio’s character from *The Beach* somewhere in Thailand. Gabe felt nothing but a distant bitterness on the rare occasions that he actually thought of the man whom he had worshipped as a boy.

Gabe had been mildly shocked when his mother and Francis had produced a baby girl less than nine months after their marriage. He and Chase doted on their ten-year-old

half sister, Kim, but saw her very rarely. Gabe was too busy with GNT—Global Network Television—a subsidiary of Bobbi's father's multimedia conglomerate, Richcorp, and Chase was usually off working in some far-flung place.

Gabe headed straight for the den, poured himself a scotch, and downed it in a single gulp. He shuddered as the liquor burned its way down his gullet. He couldn't think straight and the alcohol hadn't helped at all, instead he found himself recalling how small and delicate Bobbi's hand had felt in his and how erotic he had found the contrast between the calluses just below her fingers and the softness of her palm. Naturally that thought was immediately followed by how that same hand had felt trailing across his naked flesh the night before and . . . yeah, he was hard as a rock again. He glared down at his crotch irritated, confused, and aroused all at the same time.

He didn't even know why he had insisted she come round for movies later. Part of him wanted them to get back into their usual routine and another part of him, the one he was staring at right now, was hoping that they would be anything but normal tonight. That part of him was completely okay with more kissing, caressing, and tasting. Yes, a little more and then some of what they'd shared last night, thank you very much.

He dug into his back pocket for his mobile phone—thinking of cancelling—but the thing started vibrating even as he reached for it. Hoping it was Bobbi wanting to cry off and thus saving him from doing it, he didn't bother to glance at the caller ID before connecting and lifting it to his ear.

“Yes?” His eager greeting was met with a long, crackling silence. It was a bad line and he immediately knew who it was. His stomach sank as he imagined the worst. “Chase?” There was more static before he heard his brother's faint voice at the other end of the line.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Are you okay?” Gabe asked, envisioning bombs and snipers and IEDs. His hand tightened around the phone when he heard nothing but crackling.

“I’m on my way home,” Chase said after a moment. “Can you . . . can you pick me up from the airport on Tuesday? Not sure about the time . . . flying into Joburg. Getting the first available domestic flight from there. I’ll let you know when I know.”

“What’s going on?” Chase sounded off and it concerned Gabe. “Has something happened?”

“I’ve got to go,” Chase dodged his question. “Don’t tell Mum.”

“Wait, Chase . . .” The line was disconnected before he could say anything else and Gabe nearly tossed his phone in frustration. He immediately reached for the television remote and tuned into CNN. If anything out of the ordinary had happened, they would definitely have something about it. He skipped between the BBC and CNN, but there was nothing close to what his imagination had been conjuring up.

He was still urgently surfing news networks hours later when Bobbi walked into the den. It wasn’t unusual for her to let herself in. The light in the room had changed, dimmed somewhat, and Bobbi’s slight silhouette hovering in the doorway startled him.

“Bobbi? Shit . . .” He’d forgotten to cancel.

“Yeah, that’s what every girl wants to hear when she walks into a room,” she responded wryly before ambling in clutching a covered plate and wearing indecently short denim cut-offs that immediately sent his blood pressure soaring, combined with another of her ubiquitous tanks and a pair of trainers. Like the tiny black bikini that morning, what she was wearing wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen her in previously but he had never truly appreciated the golden glow of all that revealed skin before now. Every naked inch seemed to invite his touch, and he had to curl his hands into fists to prevent them from responding to that tempting invitation.

“Faye sent dinner; she’s convinced you’ll starve if she doesn’t feed you.” She held up the plate with a grin, referring to the Richmonds’ housekeeper. When Gabe did nothing but look at her from where he was seated in front of the huge TV, the smile slid from her face and was replaced with a concerned frown.

“What’s wrong?”

“Chase called,” he replied. Bobbi quickly placed the plate on the coffee table and sat down next to him.

“Is he all right?”

“I don’t know,” Gabe shrugged. “He says he’s coming home.”

“But that’s good, right?”

“Something’s wrong . . . he didn’t sound like himself.”

“Gabe.” She took his hand and he looked over at her. “He’s fine. You spoke with him. Focus on that. You’ll find out soon enough if something’s wrong. It’s better not to allow your imagination to run riot.”

He laughed softly.

“When did you get so wise, Roberta Richmond?” She winced at his use of her full name and he remembered that she had once likened it to a “superhero’s lame girlfriend’s name.” He hadn’t ever given it any thought before but he kind of liked the simple grace of the name.

“I’ve always been wise, you guys have just never appreciated my wisdom,” she scoffed. He smiled automatically and—while he was still worried about his brother—at that moment he was even more concerned with the way her shorts had ridden all the way up her smooth, taut thighs and he was pretty damned sure she wasn’t wearing a bra under that tank top. His eyes fell to her pert breasts and his breath hitched when her nipples tightened against the thin material.

Yep, no bra. She folded her arms over her chest, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

“Cold?” he asked. His throat had gone dry and had hoarsened his voice so that the word was barely a grunt.

“No,” she denied from between gritted teeth, keeping her arms tightly folded over her chest.

“You looked somewhat cold to me,” he pointed out.

“You were staring at me,” she hissed.

“And my staring made you respond like that?” She didn’t reply and he watched as gooseflesh broke out all over her body—with so much of her skin revealed it was hard to miss.

“I should go,” she said.

“I don’t want you to go,” he stated. She chewed on her lower lip, a habit that she’d had for years but had never before made him want to suck on that lip and lick the sting away until now.

“Then what do you want?” She asked, her voice laced with frustration.

You. He looked at her mutely for a moment, the word hovering on his tongue.

“I want to watch a movie and eat popcorn and forget this entire day happened,” he said instead.

“Then let’s do that,” Bobbi said, and he could hear the relief mingled with . . . disappointment? In her voice.

Well, damn. Could it be that Bobbi Richmond wanted him too? Well wasn’t that just frikken fantastic? Knowing that she may want him in return was going to make it so much harder for him to resist her. That was just one more complication he didn’t need. He needed to fix this fast.

