

A fake dating sports romance

FAKE A CHANCE ON ME



REBECCA CHASE

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Trigger Content Warnings
This book contains the following themes:
Swearing
Spicy scenes
Infertility
Gyne problems

This book is dedicated to all those who've sat in a doctor's office and been told something that broke their hearts.

Well done for getting through that.

You are not your illness or disability.

You're a fighter, and your story isn't over yet.

Chapter One

GABI

“I t’s got to be tonight,” Gabi mumbled. She stood on the outer edge of her feet as the lift climbed towards the upper floor of the rooftop bar. Rose, her housemate and only friend, promised to meet her there once her fiancé’s suit fitting was over.

Gabi licked her dry lips as she reread the email update from her consultant.

She scrolled past the date of last week’s appointment and the generic details about her syndrome that were at the top of every letter from the hospital.

The man beside her cleared his throat, and she tucked her phone closer and stepped away so she was pressed against the corner of the metal box.

Shame about her secret condition fit her better than the floaty summer dress she’d stolen from her sister’s wardrobe.

She fiddled with the vodka miniature in her pocket. She should drink it before she reached the bar to gain confidence, but what would the man with the sea air fragrance standing in the lift with her think?

Gabi stared at him beneath the edge of her dark fringe. With his back to her, she let her gaze linger on his broad shoulders. His bulk and dark blond hair reminded her of the bad angel with the dirty mouth from the romantasy book she’d finished reading in the middle of the night. She stifled a yawn. One more chapter wasn’t a

great idea when, several hours later, you were teaching screaming seven-year-olds.

As his muscles rippled beneath his checked shirt, she pegged him as more of a stacked superhero than an angel.

Still bad, though. She smiled.

He gawked at his phone.

With a lifetime of anxiety, she recognised it in others. He tapped his mobile and stared at the screen while hunching his shoulders. She resisted the urge to tell him it would be okay. If the last years taught her anything, life was shit, and you couldn't do anything about it.

The stranger pushed up his sleeves, revealing tanned forearms covered in fine blond hair. The veins on the sexiest forearms she'd seen in her adult life pulsated as he fisted his hands.

He muttered something Gabi couldn't hear and returned to staring at his phone.

Gabi's gaze travelled to his butt. It clenched under her stare, and her eyes nearly popped. The man looked over his shoulder as if he knew she was staring, and Gabi quickly returned to her consultant's email on her phone.

Gabriella has shown through her diligent dilation exercises over the last year that penetrative sex is possible without an operation...

Diligent dilation exercises was a weird way of describing nightly pressing increasingly larger little plastic tubes resembling dicks inside herself to stretch her vagina, but that was their wording. At least now, she used vibrators, as advised by the hospital nurse, instead of the clinical plastic things, all to have penetrative sex—except that was just conquering the physical aspect. The other barriers were impassable. Her sad sigh drew the attention of her lift buddy, and she dropped her head quickly. She couldn't talk to guys, let alone fuck them.

... The hospital psychiatrist, Dr. Adams, has worked through the emotional impact of her syndrome and of having penetrative intercourse.

Only doctors and psychiatrists could describe something that filled the books she read, featured in her favourite videos, and fed her nighttime fantasies in such a clinical way.

Dr. Adams will discuss the other emotional impacts of the syndrome with Gabriella at their next online session.

She bristled. The other emotional impacts were for future Gabi to worry about. She stared at the jittery stranger's forearms again. She licked her lips as she watched his massive hands tap his phone. One could easily pin her wrists above her head while the other slid between her thighs. She lifted her hair off her neck to cool herself.

He resembled one of her favourite superheroes, Thor. She'd read too much spicy fan fiction about him. Getting fucked was feasible in the books she read, but it was impossible in her life. She couldn't go up to a random guy in a lift and explain sex would hurt, and she might not be able to do it, anyway.

Tim, aka Prick Face, was the last guy to touch her intimately. That was four years ago, just after her eighteenth birthday. She gritted her teeth. He'd told everyone she was a freak the day after she tearily made him stop because it wouldn't work.

Which is why you're here. The psychiatrist, nurse, and consultant all said you're ready.

The only people who touched her now were employed by the hospital and used a gloved finger to test how deep she was. Her stomach turned. She wanted to go home and hide under her blanket, but if she did that, she'd never have sex and get over this condition. She was a freak. Prick Face would be right.

Time for liquid courage.

With her fumbling hands, she yanked the vodka miniature from her pocket. It slipped from between her sweaty fingers. It hit the lift

floor with a clink but didn't smash.

She dropped to her knees as it rolled across the floor.

The force of her drop sent her phone and a card with her challenge for the evening written on it tumbling from her hands. She hated carrying bags, but this was so much worse.

Her lift companion dived to his knees.

She kept her head down as he handed her the miniature.

"One of those days, eh?" His deep voice warmed her skin. "You know, you're seconds away from a bar. You don't have to drink in the lift." There was a tease in his voice.

"Um," Gabi replied. The vodka was meant to give her the courage to speak to men. If she was going to be having sex with one tonight, as per her challenge now the hospital said her body was ready for it, she needed to speak to them. Well, needed to speak to just one.

Her cheeks heated as she met his beautiful blue eyes. She unscrewed the vodka miniature and downed it. His eyes tracked her throat as she swallowed the burning liquid.

With her empty, rumbling stomach and low alcohol tolerance, the vodka should kick in rapidly.

She grabbed her phone from the floor and spied the challenge card. She'd created it last weekend when the email first came through from the hospital, and proceeded to decorate it with hearts and dicks while Rose drank wine.

As she threw herself across the small metal box to reach for the challenge card, the stranger grabbed it. Her body sprawled out. Her hand was on the cusp of the credit card-sized note as he turned it over in his hand.

Her stomach clenched with anxiety as he mumbled the challenge. "'Gabi, you need to get fucked.'" He spluttered and dropped the card before seizing it again. He stared at her as he sucked in deep breaths. "Are you Gabi?" His voice was hoarse and his eyes wide.

The lift dinged, and the door opened onto a busy bar.

She snatched the card and jumped up, pulling down her dress, which had caught on her Wonder Woman knickers.

She ran into the crowd, letting it hide her as she searched for Rose, and escaped from the fixed stare of the stranger with the beautiful eyes.

* * *

Ten minutes later, with another drink in her hand, Gabi swept her long black fringe from her eyes and stared at the exit. The blond guy stood near it with his friends, a bunch of men with similar bulk. He was blocking her escape.

Gabi fiddled with the hem of the cotton summer dress.

The blond guy searched for something as the guy next to him chatted animatedly with his hands in the air. His lips tilted, and Gabi pressed her fingers to her mouth. He had a beautiful smile. She shook her head. He was too hot for her.

Her head dropped as all the crumbs of confidence she'd gained since moving to town a year ago threatened to disappear.

I'm fading into the background.

The place was buzzing with the Friday night after-work crowd, and there were so many confident women there. They laughed, their hands lingering on their arms of the men they chatted to. *I can't do that.* She'd rather talk to them about their workout routines or how she intended to decorate her classroom for Easter.

With her head down, she spied her cleavage, which she always kept hidden. She was torn between trying to be proud of her body and not wanting to give anyone the wrong idea. She lifted her shoulders to emulate the confidence of the women around her, remembering she'd shown her knickers to the guy in the lift when she dived for her challenge card.

She glanced again at him. What was on his phone that had made him so anxious in the lift?

He glanced in her direction, and she hid behind a tall man who reeked of cigarettes. The tall man turned and winked at her. She pegged him as twenty years older, the same age as Rose. A man with experience could help with her challenge, but with his full beard and beast-like body, he reminded her of her sister's fiancé, a local premiership rugby player.

Gabi opened her phone to her notes app and found the list she made the same night she'd decorated the card that had made her lift companion choke.

Mr. Cherry Popper Challenge.

It was a list of the things she was and was not looking for in the man she would lose her virginity to. It included no beards and no smokers. The older guy was off the list already. She didn't want to associate the smell of her first time with yellow-stained fingers.

She squeezed past the older guy and eased away from the window, where the city's bright lights shone through the floor-to-ceiling glass. She neared the bar as she tapped out a message on her phone.

Predictive text thwarted her efforts, or maybe the alcohol had kicked in. Rose was late, as Charlie, her fiancé, had a suit fitting that had gotten out of hand, whatever that meant. But she needed a wing woman so she could find someone to lose her virginity to.

"I've not seen you here before," the older guy said, following her.

Gabi: Please hurry. This guy, who isn't ticking anything on the list, is chatting to me, and I've already shown another my knickers.

Rose: I'm on my way. Don't talk to anyone until I arrive, and stop showing your knickers.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

Gabi's awkward laugh came out as a hiccup, drawing a raised eyebrow from the barman.

"No—yes, kind of," she mumbled.

At six foot, he towered over her. The way he ogled her breasts confused her. She wanted to feel womanly, something that had escaped her when she'd become an adult, but she was tempted to bolt when this guy stared at her with intent.

She looked to the exit again and caught the eye of her blond superhero.

He said something to the guy next to him and pointed at her.

She needed to escape. She wasn't going to have sex tonight. At this rate, she'd remain a virgin for the rest of her life.

Chapter Two

LUCAS

“She’s carrying a card that says she needs to get fucked,” Lucas said, pulling on the back of his neck as he stared at the dark-haired woman.

Gabi.

“Don’t go there, little brother,” Henry replied.

Lucas shrugged as he surveyed the bar. A couple of beautiful women winked at him. As a local rugby player, he was used to the attention, and he often welcomed it, but he wanted to discover Gabi’s story and see those Wonder Woman knickers up close.

He loved Wonder Woman. Gabi’s accidental underwear flash in the elevator nearly made him forget the message from the woman he’d told two years ago to never contact him again.

Henry stared him down. “Remember what Coach said after I finished your physio session.”

“Nope,” Lucas lied, although his grin was unstoppable.

“I knew you’d say that, so I recorded it.” Henry flicked through his phone. “Here we go.”

Coach Charlie’s voice boomed from the speaker, making the women with his two teammates chuckle.

“Listen here, Lucas. I’ve had enough of you bringing this team into disrepute. We may be the second-best team in the premiership, but we’re a family, and we mean a hell of a lot to this town.”

“But I’ve not done anything that bad.”

"That was when you sounded like a pathetic loser, remember?" Henry nudged him. Lucas responded by thumping his smug brother on the shoulder.

You've featured in more newspapers in the last year than the rest of the team. You've had more success with women than you've had against the opposition, and that's saying something, because you're the best forward we've had in the last ten years."

"So what's the problem?"

Lucas sensed the spittle flying from their raging coach's mouth, even on the recording.

The problem is our press team constantly puts out your fires. The fans hate you. You're destroyed daily on social media, and I'm spending my spare time keeping the town from grabbing pitchforks and hunting you down while justifying my decision to keep you playing."

"That was my favourite bit," Henry whispered.

"You're supposed to be the team physio and osteopath, not the team shit stirrer."

Meanwhile, on the recording, Lucas mumbled something inconsequential and was ignored as their coach continued his character assassination. *...while I'm supposed to spending my spare time planning my bloody wedding and keeping my beautiful fiancée, my Rose, calm and happy."*

"Yes, you are." That was Josh, the team captain. "My mum deserves the best wedding day."

You're my ongoing headache, Lucas. I don't want any problems for the next two months. You'll be an exemplary member of the team. You'll do charity work, be a delight in interviews, and spend every night at home, especially tonight, because you have a game tomorrow."

"You've failed already," Henry said as he nudged him, spilling his pint.

You'll do whatever it takes, even if it means dating a sweet, lovely woman so the town falls in love with you both. It worked for Aidan," he said, referring to the team's best former player. "If you don't behave and follow my rules, I'll bench you for the rest of the season."

Their coach's voice was hoarse from the volume of his lecture.

"Yes, Coach."

"I didn't catch that. Do I make myself clear, Lucas?"

"Coach, yes, Coach," Lucas shouted back like he was responding to an army colonel.

"And you'll all help him, won't you, team?"

"Coach, yes, Coach," twenty players and staff shouted.

"Good, because so help me, god, I'll bring the wrath. You'll all spend the next two months running extra laps, performing extra drills, and learning what I'm really like when I'm angry. And now I've got to sort out last week's after-game debacle. Why did you have to tie our team's mascot to the pitch goalpost, for fuck's sake?"

Henry switched off the recording.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "What he doesn't know won't hurt him. I'll get her number. I need a win tonight, and getting a pretty woman's phone number is a win." Maybe if he acted like a cocky guy, the truth wouldn't eat at his confidence like acid on his skin and he could return to be the guy he was four years ago.

Henry gripped his shoulder. "Why?"

Lucas shrugged. Only his housemate and teammate Max, who also happened to be Coach's son, knew his past, and that was how it would stay. Why did the only woman he'd once loved have to message him tonight?

He needed something to distract himself. Otherwise, he'd spend all night debating his reply and mess up tomorrow's game.

"I just do. And I'll be very respectful." He winked. "I've never had a complaint from a woman."

Except from the one who'd used him and dumped him for his old boss. Lucas was the team bad boy, not the guy suffering years after being made to feel like he wasn't enough before getting bullied out of his old club.

Gabi flipped the hem of her dress she'd spilt her drink down.

"There's something familiar about her," Lucas mumbled.

Henry huffed. "You've probably slept with her. This town is made up of people who hate you and people you've fucked."

As the woman squeezed her plump lips to the side and glowered at the wet patch on her dress, Lucas was certain he'd never seen her naked. He'd remember those beautiful bee-sting lips if they'd stretched in that mesmerising O as he thrust into her. He shifted in his chinos and attempted to hide his growing erection.

An older guy chatted to her. She pulled back as he moved closer. She kept glancing at Lucas. She must want him to save her.

"I'm going over," Lucas stated, grabbing his cider.

"You'll get benched." Henry stood in his way. "Stay away from her. I recognise her, too, but I can't remember where from."

Lucas paused. "Weird. Outside of the rugby ground, you and I move in very different circles," Lucas said, referring to how Henry spent all his time away from work with his nine-year-old daughter. "That reminds me, I owe Amy five quid. She sold me a friendship bracelet, and I haven't paid her."

"She told me that was a gift. She's such a cheeky swindler."

The man speaking to Gabi was getting closer. She flinched as he wrapped a strand of her hair around his finger.

Lucas stormed over.

"Shit, I remember why I recognise her," Henry called out. "Lucas."

But it was too late. Lucas had a woman to save.

Chapter Three

GABI

Gabi edged away from the guy in front of her until her back hit the bar. He'd chatted with her for five minutes, and her lack of response spurred him on. So far, he'd scored one out of ten on her cherry popper list, and that was a pity one.

With her five-foot height, she couldn't see past him. She gulped her drink and gripped her phone again. Rose should be here soon. The vodka Gabi drank in the lift and the two since hit hard. Her eyes blurred as the older guy flirted.

The dilation exercises sent her libido roaring to life this year. This was another thing her psychiatrist had discussed with her, in addition to watching women-friendly porn as she did the exercises to help her associate the action with sex. It had certainly helped her vocabulary, although she hadn't had the chance to use her wild libido with anyone.

Her body was confusing, and her mind was worse, but neither were attracted to this guy.

"Do you come here often?" he asked with a hoarse laugh.

Rose said not to talk to anyone, but how did you politely tell someone to get lost without speaking? She needed to look for someone who was more fitting for her list and who didn't make her feel so uncomfortable. If she sat on a stool she'd be at a better height to see if Rose arrived and be in the barman's sight for more drinks.

She spied an available stool nearby.

"Has anyone told you you're the perfect height for blow jobs?" he asked.

Her head whipped around. "I'm also the perfect height to bite a cock off accidentally." *Which is pretty likely, seeing as I've never given a guy one.*

The guy smirked. "Worth the risk."

"Baby, I'm so sorry I'm late," her blond lift companion said, appearing from behind the guy.

He kissed her cheek, making her belly flutter.

The older guy shirked off, and her blond stranger gazed down at her.

"I hope it was okay to do that. You stared at me like you wanted me to rescue you."

"It was perfect timing. Thank you." She attempted to clamber onto the stool. Rose should be arriving soon.

She struggled at the combination of the high stool and her vodka. Although her earlier run had helped her overthinking, it made her thighs ache so much they hampered her progress in sitting. She lifted her knee onto the stool and attempted to pull herself up.

"Do you want a drink?" the blond asked huskily.

"I want to get on this fucking stool."

His hands warmed her hips as he wrapped them around her waist and lifted her onto the stool. His forearms flexed, and his biceps tested the seams of his top. His fingers didn't pinch her skin. Instead, he held her like she was worth something. She gazed at his chest, now at the same height as hers, as he ensured she was secure before easing away.

She licked her lips and stared into his eyes. "You really are a superhero."

He puffed out his chest. "Are you a fan of all superheroes or just Wonder Woman?"

Shit. He was referring to her accidentally flashing him in the lift. "I like Thor," she stuttered.

He smiled. "I prefer Batman. He's got that bad boy side."

Her face heated, but the buzz of her phone was her second rescue of the night.

She checked it as the man watched her. His brows squished together as if he were trying to decipher her mind's mysteries.

Good luck, buddy. Even my psychiatrist is clueless.

It was her housemate.

Rose: Sorry. Charlie's with me to sort out one of his players he's heard is here. He's arguing with the bouncer about who England's greatest rugby player was. Men! If it goes on much longer, I'll come up on my own. Don't get in any difficult situations without me.

Gabi sighed. Everyone in her life was either married or engaged. And she just wanted a boyfriend. *But I must get past this situation first.* She'd have sex just to know her body could do it, and then she'd pursue her dream of having a boyfriend. If she lost her virginity first with someone who was purely a hookup, she wouldn't worry that a guy she cared about would dump her because of her messed-up body. She wouldn't repeat the past.

She stared at the blond with a wrinkled nose. She liked it when *he* touched her, and he was hot. But was he an option for her challenge?

Just keep him talking until Rose arrives. She'll help.

"Technically, I shouldn't talk to you," she said. "My friend's arriving soon."

"Do you want to drink with me instead? I promise not to ask you about your hobby of biting cocks."

Gabi giggled.

Funny, tick! She wanted someone funny for her first time.

He grinned. "It was the perfect comeback. I mean, how do you respond to a comment like that?"

"Fuck knows." She turned to the barman. "Can I get a water?"

He nodded.

"Cider for me," the blond replied. "I'm Lucas."

"Gabi."

She held out her hand. She blamed the alcohol on how she stared at his massive hand in hers. She was horny and tired, both of which were alcohol induced. She should cut back on the drinks, or she'd never get through her fuck. She needed to be relaxed, according to the medical team, but her only experience was a humiliating, painful, and unsuccessful two minutes. Her psychiatrist told her there was hope, but it was a hard to hang on to after everything.

She sipped the water and vowed to sober up while staring at the way Lucas swigged his amber liquid and licked a drop from his lips.

Thick tongue, tick! It wasn't on her list, but according to her consultant and nurse, she needed to have a lot of foreplay during her first time to relax and prepare her body. A man with a thick tongue might be good at foreplay. That was what the porn she watched while doing her dilation exercises suggested.

She tried shifting in her seat to look at him, but she was a little wobbly from the alcohol. Suddenly, Lucas straightened her stool.

Her stomach rumbled or fluttered or did something weird.

"Hungry?"

She nodded, and he pulled an energy bar from his pocket, ripped it open with his teeth, and slipped it into her hand. "It always helps me when I'm a little...merry."

Understands my body's needs and has food to hand, tick! I'm going to need food for my sex marathon.

"You look more like Thor than Batman," she said before rubbing her face. He chuckled. "Ignore I said that. I get drunk quickly, but I sober up quickly, too. Ignore everything I say or do in the next five minutes."

He smiled and leaned forward. She took turns between sipping her drink and nibbling the energy bar. She pressed the bar between her lips as she stared at him.

His thighs were like girders. She sighed softly as she imagined him in shorts, his thighs flexing beneath her. Although he was performing well on her tick list, she couldn't predict whether he'd keep her safe and make her first proper time good.

Wolfing down the last third of her bar, she ducked her head and studied him through her lashes. His toes tapped against his stool, making his knee bob. Even that action made him appear less anxious than when he'd been in the lift, gawking at his phone. Curiosity at what turned him into this cocky guy from the one in the lift poked at her.

"You said before you shouldn't talk to me," Lucas said. His blue eyes glimmered under the bar's low lights. "Is it because of my reputation?"

Her breath hitched. "What's your reputation? Are you a villain?" It would affect his standing on her list, which, so far, only included him.

"I've been called the villain before, in so many words." His lips moved slowly.

"I'm going to need more information."

"Are you researching me?"

"Not just you," Gabi replied before shaking her head. She closed her eyes tightly to stop her from touching him as she murmured, "I need to stop talking."

"Okay..." He drew out the word. She opened her eyes again.

His furrowed brow made his stubbled face cute enough to touch. She lifted her hand and moved to brush his cheek.

Okay, still drunk.

But it didn't deter her. This was why she needed to drink if she was going to have sex. It lowered her inhibitions, emboldened her, and stopped her worrying about everything.

Anxiety was exhausting.

Gabi gasped as Lucas pressed his cheek against her palm. His light hair scratched her, but beneath that, he was soft. She gazed at his thick forearms. Were they as soft?

"Do you like my tattoo? I got it on a bet," he said, pointing at the Batman logo tattoo on his right forearm.

"You are a bad boy like Batman, then." She reached out in wide-eyed wonder. "Did it hurt?"

She stroked her short nails up and down his skin until she reached the crease below his bicep. He shivered beneath her hand.

"A little. I'm not great with pain. Have you got any tattoos?"

"No. My sister says I am too much of a 'good girl' for something like that. She'd kill me if she found me chatting up strangers in a bar. But she doesn't get to run my life. She doesn't even know me."

His eyes widened over the rim of his bottle. "Good girl?"

Gabi pressed her lips together, but the need to chatter dogged her. "Yeah, but I'm not...well, I don't want to be." This was her chance to segue into her challenge while she still had enough liquid confidence in her system.

Lucas's lap tremored, catching her attention. He coughed loudly, but his groin transfixed her. "I don't want to get a good girl in trouble. I should tell you a joke, or we could talk about your sister. Why doesn't she know you?"

Gabi sighed. "You'll find it boring."

"Try me."

Gabi shrugged. "She left home when she was a teenager. There was an incident where someone told lies about her and my dad

believed them. Until last year, I hadn't seen her for nearly ten years."

"Is she older than you?"

"Yep. That's probably part of the problem. She's really overprotective, and so I don't tell her anything. I think she feels guilty for not being there for me when I was a teenager."

"Did something happen when you were a teenager?"

Gabi shrugged. "Nothing she needs to know about. If I tell her, she'll feel even more guilty for not being around for me. Her current guilt makes her overprotective enough."

He tapped his chin as he stared back at her.

She must return to her challenge. Anything to stop his questions. He was looking too hard below the surface, and she was only here to find someone to lose her virginity to.

She focused on the most important item on her list. "Are you a good lover?" she asked abruptly. Two crimson spots appeared on his cheeks. "Are you blushing?"

"Fuck no. I don't blush. It's just hot in here, and I was surprised by the change in conversation. How about another water?"

"Sure."

"So, my joke," he said as the barman placed two glasses of water on the bar.

"You're avoiding my lover question because you're crap in bed." She still needed to tick good kisser off the list. She should have asked that first.

He laughed. "Far from it."

She licked her lips slowly under his hungry gaze. Heat crawled up her limbs from the intensity of his blue eyes. His cock juddered.

He caught where she was staring. His voice deepened. "I don't want to corrupt a woman of..."

"Twenty-two. You?"

"Twenty-six. The thing is, Gabi, I don't want to corrupt you. Is your sister scary?"

"Terrifying."

"And would she kick my arse if she found us doing anything?"

"Without a doubt. Unless you're a good boy."

He laughed loudly. "She'd definitely kick my arse. I'm not a good boy."

"What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

Lucas's forehead wrinkled as he sipped his drink slowly. His lips quirked into a devilish smile. "I'm torn between telling you something bad or something so bad that your sister would lock you up for speaking to me."

Gabi rolled her eyes. "Start with the bad rather than the really bad, and we'll go from there."

"The event that sticks out was when I ran naked down my street."

Gabi shrugged. "It doesn't sound that bad."

"It was during a street party for my neighbour's eightieth birthday. The party woke me when I was trying to nap, so I thought I'd help them wrap it up quickly. My neighbour saw everything."

"And loved it, no doubt."

"It got me laid," he said with a smirk.

She gasped. "With the eighty-year-old?"

Lucas chuckled. "No, with her adult granddaughter. She asked to go back to mine, and then we had sex with the windows open." He leaned forward again. His hand rested on the bar beside her. "Loudly."

"I'm not sure I believe you, but it leads me to another question." Her voice dropped as a slow smile tugged at his lips. "I read somewhere you can tell how good someone is in bed by how they kiss."

He rubbed his jaw, tempting her to touch him again. "I'd be up for testing that." He held his hand up. "But not if you're really drunk. I'm not that guy."

"I'm tipsy enough to know I want this and have the confidence to kiss a stranger, but not so tipsy that you're pushing me to do something I'm not desperate for," Gabi replied.

"The perfect amount," he growled as Gabi leaned into the gap between them. She fisted his shirt.

He smiled in the smooth yet cocky way men who know they're hot can. "You've got beautiful lips, Gabi. And I can't stop staring into your green eyes. I guess you've been told that before," he said. His voice thrummed through her.

She shook her head.

"Then you've spent too much time with jerks. You're fucking stunning. Kiss me before you realise I'm not good enough for you."

She pressed her lips hard against his. They were warmer than she expected. He tasted like alcohol and apple juice. He hummed, and she pulled away quickly.

"That's not enough of a kiss for even me to show you how good a lover I am."

Fuck. He said all the right things. *Tick!*

She held her breath as he tucked his finger under her chin and pulled her lips back to his. Her whole body eased closer, and his hand slid into her hair. The scent of sea air accompanied his movement, and she forced her fears away.

She ran her tongue across the seam of his lips, and he opened them to her. He clenched her waist and bunched her dress. He groaned into her mouth as she deepened the kiss further, massaging his tongue and teasing his control.

Adrenaline rushed through her limbs. She wobbled on her stool and fell into him. He held her gently on his lap. His cock was nearly as hard as his steel thighs. It pressed between her legs. Her stomach danced.

Whoops and hollers came from where his friends stood, and he gently lifted her back on her stool. She gave his lip one more lick, relishing his taste.

Great kisser, triple tick!

"So fucking sexy," he whispered against her lips.

"No, I'm not." She swiped his compliment away with her hand.

Lucas's hand heated her skin. She parted her thighs even as she remembered the times she'd been told as a teenager she wasn't the hot sister.

Lucas's blue eyes met hers with an intensity that took her breath away. "You're beautiful, sexy, and an incredible kisser. Trust me." He brushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

Gabi's shoulders rose as she smiled.

"Can I get your number?" Lucas asked as she chugged the last of her water.

"Not yet." She should discuss the challenge first. Gabi licked the water droplets off her lips as he stared and shifted his trousers. "And I don't want to be another reason you stare anxiously at your phone."

His brow furrowed.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to say that. It's just that, in the lift, you seemed stressed. I'm a good listener if you want to talk about it. An even better one when I'm not drunk," Gabi explained with a wincing smile.

He flexed his jaw briefly. "There's nothing to talk about. I was fine. It's just a message I need to sort out. Nothing gets me anxious, not even beautiful women staring at my crotch."

Her face burned, making him smirk.

He clasped his hands in his lap, directing her attention to his dick again. It felt big when she was on his lap. *Not a tick*. He was probably too big for her. She needed small for her first proper time if she stood a chance at enjoying it.

He inched closer on his stool. Her thighs were spread wide, and he slotted his legs between hers, making her stool wobble. She reached for him and breathed in his aroma of woody tones and sea air. She groaned at how delicious the combination was on him.

"Back to your phone number. Maybe my joke will convince you to give it to me." He cleared his throat. "How many Giants rugby players does it take to clean a trophy cabinet?"

She shrugged. "I'm not into rugby."

He cleared his throat noisily as her hand lingered against his. "I'm guessing you're not local because you can't live in a rugby town and not be a fan of the Bulls."

His eyes locked on hers, and she rubbed her thumb against his palm. He returned her touch and stroked her thumb, pressing it into his hand.

"I've lived here a year." Tingles ran up and down her spine, and she hummed quietly.

"You've been to a game, though?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I've no interest in it."

"You have to come to a game. I'll get you tickets. I can get you the best seats: front row, the middle of the seated stand. You'll see everything."

"I can get the best tickets, but I prefer to read sports romances over watching the sport. My future brother-in-law is the team's captain, and my best friend and housemate, Rose, who's also his mum, is marrying the coach in two months. I'm a bridesmaid."

Lucas froze.

"Earth to sexy man."

He let go of her hand and crossed his arms, drawing her attention to his thick biceps. He slid back on his stool. "You're Evie's sister? Fuck! You're Evie's sister. That explains what you mean about her being scary. I'm fucking terrified of her. And that's why you're familiar. You were at her ballet school's dance show last year."

Gabi nodded.

"And that's her dress. She wore it to our house once before she got together with Josh."

"Her boobs look better in it."

His head dropped, and he stared. Blokes never stared at her chest. When she was a teenager, all the guys asked where her sexy older sister with the big tits had gone.

Lucas shook his head and locked eyes with her. His voice rose. "Your friend is Rose King, who's marrying Charlie, the coach of the Bulls, in two months."

"I already said all that," Gabi repeated. "Were you staring at my boobs?"

Lucas choked. Gabi stood and patted him hard on the back.

"Ouch, woman," he replied, grabbing his drink and gulping it. "How are you that strong?"

Gabi shrugged. "How are you that weak?"

He glared at her, and her gaze fixed on his lips.

"No more kissing, even though fuck, *that* was a kiss," he mumbled, although the way he stared at her made her desperate to straddle his lap and demand more. She repositioned herself between his legs.

He swallowed, making his Adam's apple bob. "In fact, no more kisses, chats, or anything else. You're sexy as hell, but you can't tell anyone we kissed or spoke."

"We were seen." Gabi pointed to his friends, who waved.

Lucas grumbled. She bit her lip at the sound.

"Stop doing that. It makes me want to kiss you, but we can't kiss again," he moaned.

"Why?"

"Because then I'll do whatever I can to take a sober you to my bed, and I can't sleep with anyone for the next two months, especially not someone who might tell my boss, who is desperate to bench me."

"Fully sober me might not want to sleep with an arrogant, sexy bastard." *Who scored nearly maximum points on my list.* Gabi pouted.

"Sexy, eh?" He smirked before smacking himself. "Fuck. Everything you're doing turns me on. I want to kiss that pout right off your lips."

She ordered a double shot of vodka and downed it. It burnt her throat hotter than the stare of her blond Batman.

Then she flipped the back of her dress still caught on the stool behind her. He growled loudly. His hands slid to her waist and gripped it tightly. They were hot through the cotton of her dress. Her stomach swirled. Gabi could meet her challenge and get over her issue tonight.

He lowered his head and whispered in her ear, "Even the way you flip your dress turns me on." His words sent shivers down her spine and heat between her legs. "I keep remembering your Wonder Woman knickers from when you accidentally flashed me in the lift."

She pushed her chest out and attempted to answer like a confident person would, "Do you want to see them again somewhere private?" She tipped her head like Evie did when flirting, but it lost some of its impact due to her slight slur.

His eyes were big as he gulped loudly.

Chapter Four

LUCAS

Lucas shouldn't be talking to Gabi, but her innocent teasing as she gazed at him with those big green eyes made his balls ache. But it was more than that. She'd recognised his anxiety in the lift, and even when he was teasing her, she'd worried about him. He'd barely thought about the unopened message on his phone until Gabi mentioned it. He probably wouldn't have kissed Gabi like he had if his night hadn't started with a message from the woman who tried to destroy his career.

But he regretted nothing about his kiss with Gabi and hoped she didn't either.

Memories of things Josh had said about Evie's sister from the locker room made him pause. Josh worried because since she'd moved to town, she hadn't attended a rugby game, gone on a night out, or dated anyone.

And what was with the notes she kept making on her phone and her disbelief in herself?

His curiosity towards women with issues got him into trouble last time, but from where he stood, it was the only thing Gabi had in common with the woman from his past.

Lucas cleared his throat. "You're offering to show me your knickers?" He shook his head and closed his eyes tightly. "No. I'm not taking advantage of a drunk girl."

"I'm tipsy, Lucas. You wouldn't be taking 'vantage of me.' She sighed loudly. "You'd be helping me."

"Helping you?" Lucas's brow furrowed. With this beauty in his bed tonight, he'd forget the message searing into his phone. But she was Evie's sister, and she knew Coach.

"But maybe we shouldn't." She shuffled her feet, and her forehead wrinkled.

The barman leaned across the beer-soaked bar.

"Lucas, your brother says if you want to keep your career, go to the stairs right now. The bouncers called. Coach is in the lift, and you can't be caught here, especially not with her. Henry said she's Josh's future sister-in-law and teaches at Amy's primary school."

"Fuck," Lucas called out. He planted a kiss on Gabi's cheek.

Rose reached Gabi's side. "I'm sorry I'm late. Wedding stuff." She turned and gaped. "Lucas Knight? Fuck, Gabi. What the hell are you doing with him?"

"What does that mean?" Lucas queried.

"He's tickled most things on my list," Gabi murmured.

"You mean ticked?" Rose asked.

"That's what I said. He tickled most things on my list, and he saved me from this other guy who said my height would make me perfect for the jobs," Gabi said, dead-eyeing Coach's fiancée. She spoke slowly, like she was desperately trying not to slur. Her double vodka shot must have hit already. "You know the kind. Blow jobs," she hissed.

Rose shook her head.

"But Lucas is the good kind of bad guy, like Batman." She giggled and lowered her voice and growled, "I'm Batman."

The temptation to kiss her smiling mouth was like the devil on his shoulder.

"Maybe I should watch Batman porn tonight," she mused.

Rose grabbed her shoulders. "Gabi, let's get you water."

"I've already drank loads." Gabi waved her off. "What I'm saying is that Lucas is the kind of guy I need for the challenge, and I reckon he'd make the fucking amazing. Maybe I'll even come."

There's no maybe about it. I'd have her coming on my mouth, my fingers, and my dick in every room of my place. He licked his lips.

"If Josh and Evie—not to mention Charlie, who's ten steps behind me—found you trying to sleep with Lucas Knight, the player

with the worst reputation, who causes trouble wherever he goes—”

“Where the fuck is he?” Charlie, with the broad shoulders and body of a former rugby player and world-class scrum forward, boomed from the other side of the bar.

“Shit,” Lucas mumbled.

Henry’s eyes widened, and his teammates cowered as Charlie shouted at them.

Lucas ducked and lowered his hulking form to the floor.

“Are you hiding from Charlie?” Gabi asked, bending down and wobbling. She gripped a leg of her stool. “Or are you going to go down on me here?” she teased, and he held his fist to his mouth to stop his laughter. “It’s not a no, but—”

Rose pulled her back up. “I know you need to get fucked, Gabi, but not tonight. You’re too drunk to enjoy it, and there’s plenty of time.”

Gabi sighed. “I’m tipsy, and I sober quickly. He makes me feel confident, which never happens.”

She shook her head, and her eyebrows knotted. Her shoulders hunched a little as she bit her lip. It was like watching anxiety climb in real time. It must be exhausting to be like that. The woman he’d once loved made him feel like that.

“Fine,” Gabi agreed, her head dropping. “Maybe I need more time. But please help him out of here without Charlie seeing. I owe him.”

Rose huffed. “I will because he rescued you, and I don’t want Charlie to burst a blood vessel shouting at him. Gabi, wait for me over there and drink a pint of water. Lucas, go home now. I’ll buy you time.”

Charlie strode between tables as Henry and his teammates tried to distract him, but there was every chance someone else would reveal Lucas’s location.

Lucas sneaked towards the exit.

He had been cocky earlier about being benched for two months, but that was before he’d remembered they’d be playing the Giants, his former team, at home in eight weeks. He must play that game. He had scores to settle, especially after playing badly the last time they met. The Giants’s coach laughed when he got pulled off the pitch last year, and the woman from his past, the woman he’d dated before she married his old coach, would probably be there, too.

Although he didn't want her, he wanted to prove that he was something after she'd made him feel like he wasn't enough.

A bitter taste caught in his throat.

"He's here, Henry, don't lie to me. I'm meant to make wedding favours tonight while my fiancée drinks with her housemate, but instead, I'm looking for that bellend." Charlie's voice reverberated off the walls.

Lucas crept closer to the stairs. A couple of lads pointed at him, probably locals he'd pissed off at some point with his shitty behaviour. Apart from his teammates, no one in this town was on his side, and he hadn't drawn any fans from the interviews where he'd accidentally insulted their past prize player. He'd also insulted the mascot, but that was no accident. He hated that guy.

Lucas was metres away from the stairs. He could nearly taste freedom.

A stranger stepped in front of the exit door.

Charlie shouted, "I'll give anyone here twenty quid if they can tell me where he is."

The bulky stranger in front of him sneered.

Lucas was done for.

"Here, Charlie," the stranger shouted as someone grabbed his hand and pulled him into the lift. The doors closed as Charlie turned.

* * *

On the other side of the lift stood a wide-eyed Gabi.

He sucked in oxygen.

She was *his* superhero now.

Under the lights of the lift, she was already less flushed.

"You looked like you needed saving," she whispered, as if Charlie might still hear them.

"And what do you need?" In the bar, before they were interrupted, she'd said he'd be helping her. Adrenaline shouldn't control his actions, but that was one of his problems. According to Coach, so was his arrogance and inability to shut up.

She sucked on her lower lip before answering, "You read my challenge for tonight." As she said it, she pushed the loose strands of

hair away from her face, and her eyebrows knotted.

"I want you to be sure. I want to hear you say it," he murmured, trying to build her confidence and rip the anxiety from her. The lift descended, and the number ten illuminated the floor they passed through. They'd be out of the lift in the next few minutes and never see each other again if he didn't make a move now. Evie and Josh would probably kill him for speaking to her. "I want the sexy woman standing in front of me to tell me her challenge."

She swallowed and flicked her hair from her face again.

"Tonight, I wanted to—I mean, want to—get fucked," she stuttered quietly. He had so many questions, but they were already passing floor seven.

"And you want me to be the one to fuck you?"

She nodded, lifting her chest and clearing her throat.

She wobbled on her heels and stumbled. He held her gently. Her big green eyes locked with his, and she whispered, "You ticked everything off my list. And if sleeping with you is anything like kissing you, then I'd like that."

He licked his lips slowly as he spied how she stood on the sides of her feet and fiddled with the cuffs of her denim jacket.

"I can't. But not because I don't want you." She sighed sadly and drew her thumbnail across her lower lip, staring into the corner of the lift. Her dejection did nothing to reduce his curiosity or need to remove it. "Princess, I've wanted you since you first ran out of the lift."

The nickname suited her. Everything about tonight reminded him of *Cinderella*, a movie he spent many months watching with his niece on the sofa after her mum left.

"Then why?" Her eyes were tight with suspicion. He stood close enough to touch her. He tucked the long strands of her fringe behind one ear.

He continued to thumb her hair while he whispered, his lips brushing her neck, "If I were to fuck you, I'd want you completely sober. I'd take you out for dinner and tease you all night. I'd tell you everything I had planned and offer you tempting promises. I'd graze your thighs with my fingers and get hard when you whispered your need for me."

She leaned into him, and he questioned why he'd made promises he couldn't keep because of their impossible circumstances.

"And then?" she murmured. The sweet sounds from between her lips spurred him on. She opened her legs to ease him closer.

"Then we'd go home, where I'd slowly undress you. My lips would replace your clothing. I'd taste you, make you moan, and leave you begging." He nearly choked on the desire swelling through his words.

Her skin flushed, and she wetted her lips. The intensity of her green-eyed stare, coupled with her cheeky comments in the bar, left a thought teetering in his mind.

Who is this woman really?

His voice was gruff and affected. "And then, when you've spent all day aroused and needy..."

"Don't stop," she begged.

He cleared his throat but couldn't remove the gravel stuck in it or the heat firing through his stomach. He gritted his teeth, brought his fingers to her jaw, and held it as he licked his lips and stared at her.

"I'd finally kiss your soaking pussy. I'd lick and suck and slip my fingers in you until your back bowed and you screamed my name."

"And then?" she panted as she gripped his shirt. It was as if she was already on the edge.

"And then I'd slide my—"

DING.

The lift door opened, and Rose pushed him to the side. "Charlie's on his way down the stairs. You need to go."

Lucas kissed Gabi on the cheek. "You were perfect, princess. So sexy and beautiful and more than I could've dreamed," he whispered before sliding out and between the bouncers.

"You're going to need to sleep at Charlie's tonight, Rose. It's vibrator time." Gabi's mumble carried on the wind.

"TMI!" Rose shouted.

Lucas grinned like a greedy bastard and swaggered down the street. Making a beautiful woman horny was the win he'd needed tonight.

Chapter Five

LUCAS

Lucas sat in the changing room as his phone beeped with multiple notifications.

He checked the last conversation between him and Lexi, but she hadn't messaged since last night.

Lexi: I miss you.

Lexi: I miss kissing you. I wish Claude made me laugh and turned me on like you used to.

He'd tapped his thought out in the lift before deleting it.

And I used to wish you hadn't pretended we were forever when I was a fling while you searched for someone better. If only I'd known you were using me to get to my boss.

The last time they'd kissed was three years ago on the day she'd dumped him for Claude, his coach at the Giants. As she rolled out of bed, she told him she was moving on with someone "a little more what she wanted." As Lucas suffered at the club while she flaunted the relationship, she'd implied it was Claude's ambition, maturity, arrogance, and money that had attracted her. Lexi liked to pursue, and Claude made her work for him.

At first, every time he'd thought about Lexi, it was like fire ants crawling around his brain, but he'd got through it, ignoring social media requests and making a new life for himself with the Bulls. It was two difficult years, but he'd done it even though he'd caught

her staring at him during games when the Bulls had played against the Giants. Just three months ago, she kept catching his eye and waving, even in her husband's line of sight.

And now, she was back in his head, crushing his emotional freedom.

Last night with Gabi was a surprise, like a breath of fresh air, with her chat and her Wonder Woman knickers and that fucking kiss, and then, in the lift, how she came apart with a whispered promise. Lucas gripped the locker room bench.

It didn't matter.

Gabi was another unattainable woman with mysteries who would make him long for more, even though it would probably hurt him. And hurt her.

"You're fucked up," he mumbled, easing off his suit jacket. He didn't love that he had to wear a suit in and out of the changing rooms. He only put on his kit when he arrived, but some days, it was worth it to watch women swoon as he passed them.

Max joined him on the bench, shirking off his jacket and readying himself to change into his kit. "Talking to yourself again, mate?"

Lucas shrugged at his housemate and best friend.

Another message lit up on his phone, and Max stared at it.

Lexi: Claude ignores me. He doesn't love me anymore.

"Lexi," Max said flatly. With his golden hair and boyish good looks, he resembled your average guy next door, but he was the wisest person, and from seeing him with his fiancé, Jack, he was also the most caring.

I got lucky coming here, even if it was to escape.

"Lucas, she's bad news."

"I know." Lucas tapped his mobile until Max took it off him.
"Read the messages."

Max did and huffed, returning the phone. "She's obsessed with what she can't have, and she knows she can't have you anymore."

"It took ages to stop loving her, but even if she was single, I wouldn't want to be with her."

"But you're thinking about replying."

Lucas shrugged. "I know I shouldn't, but I'm worried about her. When we were together, she told me how difficult her past was."

"Even so. You can't let her in. I know you never proved it, but she set you up," Max said, referring to the night Lucas had been made to look like the other man so that Lexi could make Claude jealous when he got cold feet a week before the wedding. Lucas thought he was supporting an old friend by listening to her pre-wedding jitters, but the reporter who caught her leaving his house suggested otherwise. "Claude bullied you out of the Giants. She told you that you weren't enough, but you are. The people you let close see that."

"So just you, my brother, and my niece."

"Don't let Lexi's words fuck up your head. And don't worry about her. She lost your care the moment she used you to get Claude." Max grabbed him by the shoulders. "I'm going to be here for you no matter what. But don't be her confidant and the person she uses again. That's not friendship behaviour. Please." After Lexi left him for Claude, he'd attempted to keep his distance, which was impossible, as she came to every Giants practice and game, and because he'd still worried about her. But even though there were aspects of a friendship between them during that year before he left, he wasn't "the other man."

"I got this. I'm not going to let her get to me. I'm a total badass, remember?" he replied with a wink he didn't feel. "I don't understand why I still worry about her after how she treated me. Initially, I thought if I loved her harder, I'd be enough for her."

"Do you still love her?"

"No, and I haven't for a long time, but you saw what she said. Claude ignores her and doesn't love her. What if she genuinely needs a friend and doesn't have anyone else because of him?" Lucas sighed.

"It will be because of her own decisions. You have this pull to help women, and from what you say, you've had it for years," Max said, referring to one of their late-night housemates chats. "But she chose him."

"Because he's not a giant kid like me. He's more interested in kitchen design than superheroes," Lucas grumbled.

"You're not a giant kid." Lucas raised his eyebrow. "Okay, sometimes, you're a bellend. But you are amazing. You've been there for your niece since she was a sickly baby, not to mention the women from before Lexi whose lives you've changed."

"But Lexi broke that. I used to support and care for others, but now, I keep feelings out of sex. I only have one-night stands. I avoid relationships, and I establish the ground rules beforehand. I won't get in that situation again, although there was someone last night..." Max raised his brow. "It doesn't matter. She was just a friendly face when I needed one."

"You're a good guy, and Lexi isn't your problem. She's your history. You fell in love with the wrong woman and stepped away, and she probably still hates that she couldn't manipulate you to go against your morals and be her side piece. You liked playing with the Giants until Claude treated you like shit after she set you up to look like the other guy."

"I thought I liked playing there, but I ended up here, and I love you guys, especially you." Lucas pointed at Max.

Max chuckled. "I love you, too, but still."

Lucas tucked his finger in the knot of his tie and yanked it. "You're probably one of the few who are glad I'm here." He gave a hollow laugh.

Max's brow furrowed.

"You haven't seen the messages under my post about today's match?"

Lucas opened the post and held up his phone.

It was littered with critical comments.

Lucas is a prick who causes a fuckload of trouble wherever he goes.

I'd be ashamed if I were related to Lucas Knight.

Lucas is the worst thing to happen to the Bulls.

Get Lucas out of this team now.

"Bastards. I know you've got into fights on the pitch, but it's because you were defending us from the shitty comments we have to deal with. The fans don't see that, and the people who post on there are bitter. You're the best player on the team."

Lucas's head dropped to his chest. "I'd fight anyone I had to again if they came for my friends, especially you."

"I can handle myself. And the homophobic slurs have died down since you knocked out that player from Blanders."

"It was worth the red card, and he was okay. I probably shouldn't have tossed the ball off the pitch, though."

"It was just bad luck that it hit that reporter's coffee out of his hands."

Lucas chuckled. "He's been gunning for me ever since. He's the one who escalates the comments and finds the worst stories about me. Everyone loved me when I was younger, and now all the fans hate me. Getting away from the Giants was a necessity, but I didn't think I'd be detested even after two years."

"Maybe you shouldn't have shoved our mascot in the bin last spring after he threw your kit in the showers."

"I hate that guy."

"You never told me how your feud started."

"I thought I was chatting up his mum at that welcome drinks when I arrived. It was actually his girlfriend, and she dumped him after realising she could do better." Lucas looked at the ceiling to avoid Max's stare. "And then I slept with her, and she told him that she'd orgasmed for the first time with me."

"Fuck."

Lucas winced. "I know. But that doesn't excuse all the shit I get from local fans."

Heavy footsteps thudded in the corridor. Lucas slid his phone into his pocket.

"Tell Dad what you're dealing with from them," Max explained.

"He knows. I told him when it escalated several months ago. He doesn't think I'm helping myself with my behaviour, including that fight I got into at that nightclub with the local football team when I called them soccer pussies for dropping down in the league."

"Weren't your words, 'You've gone down lower than I went on your mums last night'?"

Lucas's face heated. "Yeah, I went a bit far with that one. But I won the fight."

"And got the whole team banned from the nightclub."

"We were going to be banned anyway. I slept with the DJ and her best friend last month." Max shook his head. "At separate times, and

they knew about each other. The friend propositioned me after she heard me make the DJ come. I didn't know we'd get caught by the club manager."

"No more stories from you. There's a reason why I avoid you on nights out. It's harder to defend you when I know you're a bellend."

Lucas grinned.

"Lucas, I know where you were last night," Coach Charlie bellowed as he walked into the room, Josh behind him. "You got away with it this time, but next time..." He finished his sentence, pretending to slice his neck with his finger.

"No 'hello' or 'how are you, brilliant Lucas and saviour of the team'?" Lucas asked.

"Hello, Max."

"Hi, Dad."

Charlie returned to staring Lucas down.

"Do we have to start each game day like this?" Josh asked, referring to the regular fights between Lucas and Charlie as he fist-bumped Max and then Lucas. Since he was named team captain, he'd made a point of fist-bumping every team member on match days. "What's Lucas done now?"

"He kissed your fiancée's little sister," Henry commented as he walked into the room.

Everyone rounded on Lucas, who held his hands up in surrender.

"Henry, what the hell?"

Henry winced. "I didn't realise Coach was in here. And I did tell you not to go to her."

"Worst brother ever," Lucas muttered with a glare. "I was well-behaved when out—"

Charlie raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, when I *wasn't* out last night. I didn't talk with her or anyone. I was tucked up in bed with a protein shake, watching re-runs of *Antiques Roadshow* and contemplating today's plays. And if anyone says otherwise, I'll have words with them later."

"We'll have words later, too," Josh said to a wary Lucas. "If Evie finds out you've even sniffed the air around Gabi, she'll lose her shit, and trust me when I say you don't want an angry Evie. She'd take all of us on. No one hurts Gabi."

"Evie scares me more than Coach," Lucas admitted.

"Same," Josh replied.

"Dad," Max said, "have you seen the comments on Lucas's posts? Some of our so-called fans are getting nasty. It's not right."

Coach looked at Lucas. "How nasty?"

"I can take it." Lucas shrugged, although his shoulders tensed under the prospect of opening his social media apps again.

"You shouldn't have to. What happened the last time the team posted about bullying our players?" Max asked.

"It made it worse," Lucas said. "They hate me, and nothing will change that. I wish they hadn't taken my comments about Aidan out of context when I said their stats were wrong and I'd scored more tries than him. I'm in awe of him, and I wasn't calling him a bad player. He did great things when he played for this team. The fans love him, and he was way more of a bad boy than I am."

Leaving the team would solve the daily barrage of insults, but he didn't want to leave this town and his brother, niece and friends.

"Hold on," Charlie interjected with a suspicious smile. "I've had an idea. Do you remember when Aidan dated Sophia?" Charlie said, referring to the former captain and the sweet charity worker. "The town fell in love with him. Maybe you and Gabi wouldn't be a bad match."

The four of them stared at Charlie, each with a wider mouth than the other.

Josh sucked in his lips and shook his head. "Fucking hell, Boss. Don't joke about that. Lucas isn't right for Gabi, and Evie would be livid."

Coach opened his hands wide. "What if I wasn't joking? A couple of public dates between Lucas and the lovely Gabi, a primary school teacher who hasn't caused any trouble in this town, unlike a certain dickhead rugby player—"

"Hey," Lucas said, but everyone focused on Coach.

"It would go a long way to helping his reputation, because if she's willing to date him, he can't be a total dickhead. And that should give me less fires to put out in the run-up to my wedding." Charlie looked at the four. "What I say goes no further than this room." They nodded under his death stare. "Gabi's only friend seems to be my fiancée. Rose said she'd like Gabi to socialise a bit more. She hasn't seen much of this city since she moved here, and if Rose and I were to move, then Gabi wouldn't have anyone but her sister. Not that we're going anywhere."

Max side-eyed Lucas, and Josh shook his head.

Coach continued, "Besides, it would be good for her to get out from under Evie's shadow. She's too overprotective."

Josh attempted to interject.

"I said what I said, Josh. Evie is a special breed of woman, and you've said she's been intense with Gabi since she arrived in town last year."

Josh shrugged. "Their history and relationship are complicated. Either way, it doesn't matter. Evie won't go for it."

"I'll talk to Evie," Charlie said more confidently than anyone else believed.

"Do I get a say in this?" Lucas asked. "What if I don't want to do it? And more importantly, who's to say Gabi wants to do it?"

"You're always telling me you can get any woman," Max said.

"Not you, too! I thought we were friends," Lucas asked with a palm against his heart.

Max shoulder barged him. "It would be good for you to have someone nice in your life even to just meet up with," he said. He looked at Lucas's phone as a message from Lexi flashed. "It might help you."

"It will help your reputation in this town. And as you're meeting as friends, I don't need to worry," Coach said. His pinched eyes gave a warning that made Lucas shudder. "Make sure you don't do anything other than a friendly date, though, or I'll cut your balls off."

Lucas gripped his crotch. "Not Pinky and Perky," he said.

"You named your balls?" Josh rubbed his forehead. "Only you, Lucas."

"One thing, though," Max piped up. "How are you going to get Gabi to agree to this? Because from what Evie's said, there's no chance."

They stood in a circle, considering the question, when a quiet voice asked, "Get Gabi to agree to what?"

They turned to the doorway. A slouching Gabi stood beside a foot-tapping, red-faced Evie. Gabi bit at her lip and avoided eye contact with everyone.

"You're in so much trouble, Josh," Evie growled. "And when I'm done with him, you're all next."

Chapter Six

GABI

Gabi counted her breaths in and out as the four men watched her. Players pushed past her, joining the small group in the locker room, and she recoiled slightly.

She recognised some of the players from the previous night. Her stomach turned as she recalled what she'd said to Lucas.

I'm never drinking again.

Henry nodded in her direction. "Hey, Gabi. Lucas, you haven't met Gabi, as you weren't at the bar last night." He winked hard at Lucas, who rubbed his brow.

"Hello, Gabi," Charlie said, cutting off the lads. His smile was wide and his hand outstretched.

Gabi shook his hand. From under her lashes, she surreptitiously glanced at the furrowed-headed Lucas, who sat behind Coach. He was the hottest guy she'd ever seen, and she'd kissed him! She briefly tapped her lips, struggling to remember every sensation. Her gaze travelled down to his thick biceps and forearms.

She stepped back, and Lucas's eye caught hers. Her mouth dried.

"What are you up to, Charlie?" Evie said, standing between Charlie and Gabi and inadvertently blocking Gabi's view of Lucas. "You never smile."

"You don't need to protect me," Gabi whispered. She pushed her hair out of her face and stepped to the side to glance at Lucas again.

He still stared at her. Heat filled her cheeks, and she ran her nails across the cuffs of her hoodie, which she gripped in her fists. Her fingers tingled at the memory of his stubble.

With his big blue eyes and messy dark blond hair, he was hot enough to rival the guys on the posters she stuck to her walls as a teenager.

She shook her head as she broke eye contact with Lucas and studied the changing rooms. Each player's kit hung on the back of a door, waiting for them. The men sat in suits, which did nothing to suppress Gabi's desires. Lucas's tie was pulled out a little, giving him a dishevelled sexy demeanour that made her suck in a breath. The smell of sandalwood, musk, and spice filled the room. Gabi licked her lips as she got a flashback of Lucas's scent of wood and sea air. She wanted to bury her head in his neck.

But that was the sort of thing drunk Gabi did.

Today, at her first rugby game, her churning stomach reminded her she'd be happier at home, hiding in her room, until her fantasies of Lucas and the words he spoke the night before were forgotten. Heat filled the space between her thighs as she remembered his whispered promises in the lift. According to Instagram, he was a cocky player in more ways than one, but a slight quiver hit her limbs when she recalled his lips brushing her ear.

"All right, dickheads," another guy from the bar shouted as he strode into the room.

He was a beast. Did they all have the bodies of gym worshippers? She'd have to find gym videos of rugby players to get herself off the next time she did her set hospital "exercises." Her psychiatrist had recommended a site with women-friendly porn. She'd watched most of those videos and could recall her favourite parts, including the dirty talk, but thick-thighed rugby porn was worth searching.

Gabi shoved at the protective arm Evie placed in front of her. Evie spent most of her time overcompensating because she wasn't around when Gabi was a teenager, and since Gabi had moved to Evie's town, they were struggling to forge a relationship. Gabi chewed her lip. Evie's guilt from not contacting Gabi for ten years and missing nearly half her life seemed impossible to get past, especially with her overprotectiveness. And that was why she couldn't tell Evie about the impact of her illness and how she'd

found out about her syndrome. Evie's guilt would destroy the small progress they'd already made.

The beast-like man, whose trousers strained at his thick thighs, winked at Evie. "Hey, sexy. It's been a while."

"Back away from my fiancée, Gavin," Josh grunted.

Gabi recognised the name of Evie's ex-boyfriend, Gavin "The Destroyer" Burke. Gabi instantly hated him. He'd treated her sister abysmally—according to Josh, anyway.

"I've got this," Evie said in Josh's direction before turning to Gavin. "Back off, Gavin."

Gavin laughed as he stripped out of his suit.

"Gavin, can you not? My sister is right here," Evie snapped.

"I'm sure she's seen a sexy naked fucker before," Gavin replied as he undid his trousers.

Gabi gulped audibly as everyone looked at her. She couldn't think of a comeback. It was easier when she was chatting with Lucas.

Lucas's gaze settled on her. Her traitorous eyes kept seeking him out. He made her body burn. She balanced on the edge of her trainers, another one of her nervous habits she hadn't grown out of.

"Back to this thing you want Gabi to agree to," Evie said. "What is it, and how many of you do I need to shout at for you to understand it won't be happening?"

Josh spluttered, "It's nothing."

Coach held out his hands. "Evie, we want Gabi to go on a couple of dates with Lucas to stop him from getting in trouble and to help fans warm to him. We'll do a couple of positive press stories, and that's it. Nothing dodgy will—"

"Nope. I know what you rugby players are like, and he's a bad 'un." Evie pointed at Lucas.

"Don't I get a—" Gabi uttered.

"Evie has a point," Josh stated. "If I had a sister, I wouldn't want Lucas to date her."

Gabi huffed. "I'm—"

Charlie cut in, "She'll get some nice meals out of it, and she can pick half the locations. It will be fun."

Gabi sighed and tried to speak again, but everyone argued.

"Shut up!" Lucas shouted. Gabi froze as he stood and walked between Charlie and Evie.

Charlie folded his arms and glared at Lucas.

"Gabi is trying to talk," Lucas grunted.

Everyone stared at her again and she gulped. Lucas's gentle smile made her heart flutter. No one did that. At the school where she taught, she was harassed by one of her colleagues, and the other teachers pretended not to see it. Gabi stared at Lucas again. He winked, and her stomach bottomed out.

Silence descended as everyone waited.

Gabi cleared her throat noisily.

"I'll consider it. Can we go and find our seats for my first-ever rugby match?" she finished quietly before turning on her toes and bolting from the room.

* * *

"He'll hurt you, Gabi. I've dated enough rugby players in the past. I thought you wanted a nice boyfriend," Evie explained from their front-row seats in the stands. Gabi sighed. Evie was quiet for the first half, but now, into the second, there were no signs of her yielding.

"It's fake dating, Evie. He can't hurt me, because it doesn't mean anything," she hissed.

The roar of the crowd meant Evie couldn't reply. Lucas scored another try. At least, that was what the two aged fans behind her said. She was learning a lot from their commentating on the game with opinions on positioning, tactics, and players' techniques.

"Did you see the fight he started? He grabbed that player like he was going to punch him. If not for Max and the ref separating them, he'd have smacked him and been sent off. That could have cost us the game," one of the men said.

Lucas had butted heads with someone, but it hadn't started with him. The opposition player said something to Max, and Lucas had barrelled up and grabbed him by his shirt collar.

"It's frustrating that he's such a good player, because he's a waste of space otherwise," the other guy grumbled. "The sooner Lucas Knight gets bought by another team, the better. I don't care how good he is. He's reckless and a showboater."

Lucas gyrated his sexy ass to the entire crowd. Fans from both teams booed loudly. A pull on her heart to defend him rose, but she

remained silent.

She barely knew the guy.

But he'd defended her to Evie. No one else in the locker room had the guts to do that.

"He hates this town, too. Did you read his interview in the local paper? He called us a bunch of locals who wouldn't know a good rugby player if they scored with their sisters. And he talked disrespectfully about Aidan last year. The guy needs to go," the other man replied.

All Gabi saw was excellence.

She giggled at his showboating. He'd performed a dance move for every try.

If she were as good as he was at anything, she'd show off, too.

Any time someone got in Lucas's space, he knocked them down. No play happened near him without him getting involved. He fought to protect his teammates and ensured that if they got the ball and space, they'd run without opposition. Every player who came up against him hit the ground within seconds.

The other team's inability to score was a testament to his hard work, and now, in the last twenty minutes of the game, where every player looked like they'd dragged themselves back from hell, he was jumping around.

Gabi was as horny as she had been at the bar. It wasn't just the effect of alcohol. This neediness to be touched was all him. He reminded her of the blond in the porn she'd watched this morning when she was meant to be continuing her "exercises." She'd imagined him in the starring role, his knees on the ground as he eased her legs apart.

But that image was overwritten by Lucas on the pitch. She gulped as his shirt gripped his muscles. His shorts would be indecent in any other situation. From their seats, she spied the flush of his cheeks and the sweat on his body. She bit her lips as he stretched his arms up high and moved his neck from side to side. He sucked water from a bottle during a break in play, and she fixated on the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

She shifted in her seat as the game restarted. Lucas ran at another player, a guy who was attempting to tackle his teammate. Lucas hunched as he pushed the towering titan backwards. Her mouth hung as his thighs rippled and flexed. The power in his legs and

chest kept the guy at bay. His shorts pushed higher, and sunlight highlighted his tightening muscles. The hem of his shorts neared his groin, displaying the golden skin of his right thigh.

I want to ride that thigh.

She covered her mouth as the referee stopped play.

Lucas turned and winked at her. When had he learned where she was? He was a cocky bastard when he was on the pitch and was as cocky off it, if last night was anything to go by.

Gabi wriggled in her seat and pushed her fringe from her face, remembering his hand in her hair and mouth at her ear. His lips had brushed casually against her skin. At least he'd been far enough away to not overhear when she'd shouted about her vibrator.

Lucas stretched his legs while staring directly at Gabi. He moved his arse side to side, and his thighs tensed and pulsated with each stretch.

He was so fucking sexy, and he knew it.

"No, no, no. Even fake dating Lucas will hurt you. He's a player, and all he cares about is sex," Evie grumbled as the men behind them moaned about Lucas's attitude and lack of respect for the game. "He's banned from nearly every bar because he loves trouble. He's slept with half the town, and I've read enough online gossip to know he'd sleep with you and ditch you. He wouldn't want a relationship."

But the reasons Evie gave as a warning fit Gabi's remit for a guy to lose her virginity to.

Gabi knew what she wanted, and his name was Lucas Knight.

She fiddled with the card in her pocket she'd taken out with her the night before. She didn't need to read it to remember what it said.

Gabi, you need to get fucked.

If someone else saw it, they'd think it was a silly joke, but it wasn't to her. Gabi glanced at Evie. Would she ever tell her about the syndrome she was diagnosed with? If Gabi could just get sex out of the way, then Evie would never need to know.

Gabi chewed her lip.

If Evie found out what she'd gone through, with her ex shaming her at school and how doctors had spoken to her, she'd carry even

more guilt for not being around. She'd realise how alone Gabi had been without help from their mum, who'd refused to talk about what was happening with her body. It would break Evie, and it wasn't worth its impact on their tentative relationship.

Gabi had spent the past year hiding her treatment for MRKH syndrome, or Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser syndrome, as it was sometimes called. Only Rose, the head at the school where she taught, and a handful of medical professionals knew. Gabi only told the head because of the number of hospital appointments she'd needed to attend over the last year.

Lucas gave her one last wink and then ran towards something resembling a cheerleading squad, or what Derek behind her called a lineout. Josh tossed the ball from the sidelines. With Gavin "The Destroyer," Lucas pushed Max in the air to catch it.

Gabi pulled at the collar of her hoodie until Evie glanced at her and huffed.

People like Josh and Evie saw someone who spent most of their time at home or the gym hiding. But that wasn't the truth. Five nights a week for the last year, she'd dedicated half an hour to doctor-assigned "exercises" so that, one day, she'd be able to have penetrative sex.

And now, she was ready. Physically, at least.

Her body had failed her at birth, but her condition hadn't been diagnosed until last year. She was still ashamed of her taboo condition. No one talked about women born without a womb and with a short vaginal opening. Maybe she'd have sought medical support before moving to town if they had.

The two minutes of pain with her boyfriend when she was eighteen wouldn't be her only sexual experience. She had a goal, and maybe Lucas would help her achieve it.

Over the last months, she'd secretly vowed to have sex with someone who knew what they were doing and to whom she had no emotional attachment. Involving her heart would complicate it, especially if she couldn't have penetrative sex. If she could, she'd start dating without stigma.

It was time to grasp her goal with both hands and stop feeling abnormal.

"I'm going to do it with Lucas." She pulled down her sleeves to hide the goose pimples on her skin. She thought again about the

video she'd watched that morning. Gabi blushed as she imagined straddling Lucas as he told her all the ways he'd made her come. Evie side-eyed her. "Go on the dates. That's what I'm going to do," Gabi said loudly and quickly as her arms trembled.

And she'd do everything to overcome the struggle that had dogged her for too long. If he wanted to, she'd have sex with the bad boy, Lucas Knight.

Chapter Seven

GABI

The slow whir of the treadmill accompanied Gabi's cool-down after her run. Pretty girls in teeny shorts and men more suited to *Love Island* than the local community centre gym flexed their biceps while stalking around weights they weren't strong enough to lift.

Pop music played in the background of the gym's happy hour, Happy Tunes for a Happy Workout. Gabi didn't care what the gimmick was called as long as she worked out to her secret love, One Direction, while listening to Rose, who ran next to her.

She tapped along as she caught the eye of the man who'd offered to help spot her in the past. He looked away quickly, probably remembering how much he'd struggled and wobbled under the weight of her barbell.

Lucas could easily hold her barbell in one hand and her in the other. Remembering how he'd slammed into huge men at last week's game still left her breathless.

Rose stared at her from the treadmill beside her. Gabi had just admitted her plans for her first fake date with Lucas the next night. "I can't believe you waited until now to tell me." Rose squealed as she slowed down from her run. "I've been busy with wedding planning, but you could have mentioned it sooner."

Gabi breathed slowly as she continued her walk. Her eyes sparkled in the mirror in front of the treadmills. This was her real

happy place. Here, no one told her what was wrong with her or made her feel less.

"I needed to pretend it wasn't happening in case I lost my confidence and ditched the plan." Gabi's lips quirked.

"When Charlie told me his idea, I laughed at him. I was certain you'd say no. Are you hoping for a relationship with Lucas?" Rose asked as she came to the end of another "Forties bride-to-be" workout.

Gabi shook her head. "Nope. I felt bad for him after hearing how much the fans hate him. The ones behind me at the game were the tip of the iceberg. He's an arse, but he's funny, too. I've watched replays of his interviews. Either he doesn't care about playing the media game, or he wants the town to believe he's a jerk. The comments on the videos were cruel. Some of them talked about him like he was a murderer, not a local rugby player. No one should be treated like that. If I can help with that, great."

"And the bonus is you get to go on a date with a guy who knows about women," Rose added, panting.

Gabi's heart sank. It was as if bricks were attached to it, dragging it down. She hadn't been on a date since school. "Yeah. But it's a platonic fake date to help him with publicity."

"Lucas has a bad rep for more than shit interviews. Charlie said the rumour is he left his last team after sleeping with his ex-coach's wife."

"I've read that and more. It helped seal the deal. He's perfect for sex without emotional attachment."

"Yes!"

"Thank you for not judging me."

Rose smiled at Gabi's reflection in the mirror. "You know what I went through with Josh's dad," she said, referring to her ex-husband. Her ex had cheated on her with Josh's girlfriend, amongst others, as well as emotionally abusing her for the entirety of their marriage. "I say grab life while you can. You deserve fun."

"You're the best." Gabi blew her a kiss.

"What did Evie say? She must be pissed off."

"It took me hours to convince her to let me do this. She's called me three times in the last week with men she's met who would be more suitable. All of them are dads of children from her ballet school. It takes a fake date for her to tell me about these men. She's

trying to protect me. She was hurt by rugby players in the past, but she's marrying one now."

"Have you thought about telling her about MRKH?" Rose asked. "It might make her more supportive."

Gabi shook her head. "She'll be even more protective and feel guilty she wasn't there when I was a teenager struggling. It would break Evie."

"Fair enough. So, presumably, Lucas is the chosen one? Is tomorrow night the big cherry popping?" Rose said referring to the title of Gabi's list that detailed qualities men she'd wanted to lose her virginity to must have.

Gabi laughed. "Not tomorrow. I'm going to speak to him about it if I can build up the courage."

"Just promise me you won't rush into anything. It might take him time to understand," Rose replied. They walked over to the mats to complete their after-run stretches.

"That's what my psychiatrist said." Gabi gritted her teeth. "We were supposed to talk about the infertility part of my syndrome yesterday evening, but I was panicking about Lucas. At least if he's just the person I lose my virginity to, I don't have to worry about telling him I can't have kids."

"What do you mean?" Rose lay on the mats and sat cross-legged to stretch her hamstrings.

"When I choose to date, how will I know when to tell the guy? Too early, and he might freak because I'm already talking about adoption and surrogacy, my only options, and too late, and I risk getting hurt because he doesn't want to continue a relationship with me."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"I should have thought about it sooner." Gabi lay on the mat and pulled her leg across her. A couple of guys looked over, but she ignored them. To be confident enough to sleep with someone and maybe one day have a boyfriend, she needed to get past this hump.

"My psychiatrist said talking about sex with Lucas might be difficult because of my ex-boyfriend making me feel like a freak." She bit the inside of her cheek. Other people in their early twenties didn't put this much planning and pressure into their sex lives – they just did it. "I have to be prepared for him not wanting the responsibility of helping me."

"That's a lot to stress over."

"Yeah." Gabi picked at her gym shorts. She wasn't sure if she'd tell Lucas about the syndrome. She wanted him to find her sexy, like when they had been at the bar, and not an experiment. She'd spent enough time feeling like a freak and didn't need him knowing about her body in that much detail.

Get the sex done.

That was the plan.

"At least Charlie had been my teenage boyfriend before my husband came along. He knew a lot of my stuff already, but it took time for me to trust him again. Are you sure you don't want to do this with a boyfriend? It would be safe and in a trusting relationship."

Rose and Evie both protected her in their own way, but they didn't understand what it was like to live her life. No one could.

"I don't want to get hurt by someone I matter to, and that matters to me. Thus, emotion-free sex. I've got to check he's interested and then get the job done. One night. Task complete."

Rose stared at her. "From what Charlie says, Lucas is a dog, so you don't need to worry about his interest."

Gabi's breath caught in her throat, and she sat up to stop from choking.

Rose handed her water and patted her on the back. "Not that you're not gorgeous and funny and kind and...bugger. I mean, I doubt he's choosy, but if he were, he'd still choose you."

Gabi sipped at her water, staring at a contrite Rose over her bottle.

Gabi's phone buzzed against the mat.

"Shit," she replied. "It's Pam."

"Queen Bitch." Rose grumbled the nickname she'd given Gabi's colleague.

Gabi answered the phone in a subdued tone, "Hello, P—"

"What have you done? The classroom is a mess," Pam screeched down the phone.

There wasn't a long enough gap in Pam's rant to explain she'd decorated it for Easter.

"Get back here now and take it down," Pam shouted. "It doesn't fit with the aesthetic we agreed on. It's so twee."

"I thought the head said it would be okay."

"We don't do homemade decorations at this school. We're a private school, not like the ones you trained at. And it's distracting from the display I made to inspire the children academically. They shouldn't be having fun when they're not excelling." Pam hung up.

"What's her problem?"

"The Easter decorations. The children loved it when I decorated at Christmas, and they can't stop talking about the sports decorations I put up every few months." Gabi shoved on a hoodie and let her hair down so it wouldn't keep the kink from her hairband all night. "As this is my first Easter at the school, I displayed eggs and chicks in pastel colours. I want the kids excited when they come in for their Easter bonnet competition later this week on the last day of term, but Pam wants the children to focus on their studies. I guess she has a point."

Gabi wasn't exceptional at anything like Evie was with ballet or Rose was with interior design, but she was okay at many things. She liked being creative, and she loved making the kids smile, even if the politics around teaching frustrated her.

"They're seven years old. They're allowed to enjoy Easter," Rose grumbled as she rolled her eyes. "The way she treats you makes me sick. I know she has an issue with Evie's former job as a glamour model—"

"She has a problem with everything. She moaned this morning about my sheltered village background and my dad being a church minister."

"But you don't go to church anymore."

Gabi's face dropped. She still struggled with her diagnosis and what that meant for her identity. "And I don't talk about religion or Evie or do anything to cause trouble, but it doesn't stop the daily berating." Gabi shrugged. "But there's no point arguing. The headteacher is her auntie."

"There is still a point, but I get that's not who you are. Promise me you won't take everything down. Leave some of your creativity up to make the kids happy."

"I love it when they're happy. I would have left the school by now if not for them." Gabi's lips drooped. "I'd best go. See you at home."

"You need to report Pam," Rose called out as Gabi headed out the door.

No one would listen to Gabi if she reported her. Pam told her that often enough.

Chapter Eight

LUCAS

Lucas rifled through the clothes littering his floor. His phone beeped.

A message from Lexi waited for him; reading it made him feel like a pin cushion had lodged itself in his throat. One wrong move and his internal organs would be slowly pierced until he was nothing. He'd messaged her the other night and told her not to contact him, but she hadn't listened.

Lexi: I caught Claude flirting with someone. I'm thinking of leaving him.

That was what she'd said when she'd turned up at his house the week before her wedding. Her vulnerability had pulled on him that evening because he knew her parent's break-up had left her longing for love, but she'd used him to make Claude jealous and get the power marriage she'd always wanted. When they'd dated, he'd given her that love and hoped it would be enough, never holding back. But it wasn't enough.

Now, his heart was healing, yet he couldn't block her. Why was he so fucked up that he cared about Lexi? Was he clutching at the version of himself that had always had a penchant for helping women, especially before Lexi?

Without replying, he tossed the phone down and rummaged through the clothes on the ground, grunting.

He held up a checked shirt that suggested “pulling a rugby fan” rather than “a date for the press with an intriguing, long-haired, shy beauty.”

He tossed it behind him.

Sitting in the pile of clothes, he remembered when Gabi stood up to Evie in the changing rooms.

And what was with the card she’d carried with her at the bar?

She’d gone there to get fucked.

He licked his lips when he recalled her whimpers from their moment in the lift and in every dream after that night. He wasn’t always the dickhead the press made him out to be, and he didn’t want to hurt her. But it was inevitable. He’d do it without trying because that was who he’d become after Lexi.

He scrunched his “pulling” Henley, which never failed when he went to bars, and threw it at the wardrobe.

“Max,” he shouted. “I need your help.”

“What’s up?” Max asked as he shoved a piece of jam-covered toast in his gob. He was the best friend Lucas hadn’t asked for but always needed.

Lucas picked up his clothes and dropped them down again.

“What do I wear on this fake date? All my clothes are suitable for training or for going to a bar to get laid. What do I wear to a fancy dinner at an Italian restaurant where the local press will ‘accidentally,’” Lucas said, making bunny ears with his fingers, “catch us as we leave looking happy but well-behaved?”

“I still can’t believe you’re doing this,” Max replied, tiptoeing through the clothes to search Lucas’s wardrobe.

“But you encouraged me.”

“I know, but you never do anything I tell you.”

Max held up a jumper with “World’s Best Son” on. His eyebrow quirked in a question.

“Mum sent that from Australia. Dad told her not to, but she missed me. They’re the ones that emigrated for goodness’ sake. She sent the same one to Henry,” he said with a shrug. “Throw it in the charity shop bag unless you want it. It’s too small for me.”

Max tossed it in the bag.

“I’ve got all this stuff and nothing to wear,” Lucas grumbled, pushing clothes to the side.

Max held up a coat hanger with a smart grey shirt on it. "When did you steal Jack's old shirt?"

Lucas shrugged and tried not to wince. "I wore it that time I nearly met up with Lexi."

"Moving on." Max dived back into the wardrobe.

But Lucas couldn't forget that night as easily. He'd lived in town for a month. Lexi sent him a message explaining she needed a friend and he was the person she could talk to about her family and Claude. Lucas stood around the corner from the restaurant, fighting with his conscience. She got out of the taxi in a skin-tight fuchsia dress and "the heels that always got me laid"—her words from when she was unpacking the day she moved into his apartment a month into their relationship.

He'd texted her to tell her he was ill and fled. He'd loved Lexi, but he'd never be a home-wrecker. He was trying to be a friend. She'd called immediately, but he'd ignored it. She added in her voicemail she'd booked a hotel room and wanted to chat about how if Lucas changed, she might leave Claude for him.

He spent the rest of the evening and most of the night coming to terms with being used and manipulated and feeling like he wasn't enough, even for the person he gave his entire heart to.

As he sat on the swing in his brother's garden in the dark, he'd vowed not to make the same mistake again. He'd sleep around but not be emotional support for anyone else, because even when he gave everything, he wasn't enough. That was who he was before Lexi, the guy who helped women with their problems. But Lexi had destroyed that person. If all he was good for was sex, then that was all he needed, and he'd never allow anyone to use him again or let anyone close enough to hurt him.

Lucas stood and nearly tripped over the pile of jeans between him and Max. "Should I wear that shirt tonight?"

Max undid the shirt and gave it to him. "Have you still got those blue suit trousers Jack and I gave you last Christmas? You're not going to fit into mine or Jack's."

"All right, Max, stop trying to shame my muscular thighs," Lucas teased, earning him a kick from his best friend. "They're in here somewhere."

Lucas dived into his wardrobe, eventually pulling out wrinkly trousers.

Max raised an eyebrow and hollered, "Jack, we need the iron." In Lucas's other hand was a blue woollen scarf. It smelt of Lexi. "Shit, the back of your wardrobe is like the ghost of Lexi," Max said, grabbing it off him.

"I never go that far back anymore."

The heavy jasmine scent turned his stomach. She'd gifted him the scarf "that matched his eyes" two months before she ditched him.

"You need to chuck this out."

"I will. I forgot I had it." He picked it up, remembering how the day she'd given it to him was the day she'd met Claude at Lucas's practice, although they didn't start dating for two more months. She appeared at every practice for the next two months, but he realised too late it wasn't to see him.

"Is she still messaging you?"

"Yeah. But I told her we can't talk. If I block her, she'll find another way to contact me."

He'd overheard her say to the wife of another player a month after her wedding, "As a trophy girlfriend of a man twenty years older than me, I knew how to get a reaction out of him, and that's how I got this." Her words and the way she'd wagged her wedding ring as she and her friend giggled were the push he'd needed to find another club.

"I could've coped with the bullying, but not the waiting for her to use me again." Coach Claude continued to torment him until he left a month later. The Bulls were two hours away from the Giants, but at least in this town where everyone hated him, he could breathe. "I can't believe I fell for her lies."

"Hey, it's okay," Max said, squeezing his shoulder. "The woman you fell in love with made out she needed better. The right one would never make you feel like you weren't enough. And those who care know you didn't sleep with her after she dated and then married Claude. The story was spun to make you the villain. You never crossed a line, and you were the friend she didn't deserve."

Lucas shrugged as he twisted the scarf. If it didn't smell of her, he'd keep it as a reminder to never fall for someone who'd use him again.

"Thanks, mate." Lucas forced a smile and attempted to kick his sour mood away.

"How are you feeling about the big date?"

"It's not a date," Lucas grunted. "It's a publicity stunt, which I'm doing for Charlie and because I care about the team."

And because he fancied Gabi. He had from the moment he'd seen a hint of her Wonder Woman knickers and her beautiful green eyes staring up at him. Watching her try to speak the other day in the locker room while everyone ignored her made him want to give her a voice and discover what problems kept her hidden. At least now, he had his barriers high enough that he wouldn't let her close emotionally. She wouldn't be another person who thought he wasn't enough.

He twisted the scarf in his hands again.

"Just make sure you behave, or Evie and my dad will compete to kick your arse."

"I know how to behave, and your dad has given me enough instructions, warnings, and safe conversation topics. Besides, from my conversations with Gabi, I've learned she's not the person her sister wants her to be. I'm looking forward to finding out more." Max raised his eyebrows. "Platonically."

"You're screwed," Max replied with a laugh until he clocked the scarf wound around Lucas's hands that now resembled boxing gloves. "And chuck the scarf. You've twisted it so much you're cutting off your blood flow."

Lucas unwound it and threw it at the charity shop bag. It missed and caught the edge of one of his open drawers.

Fucking typical.

Just like Lexi, it had no intention of being left behind.

Chapter Nine

GABI

Gabi sat at the table, fiddling with her serviette and wriggling in her leather pencil skirt. She couldn't stop her butt from sweating.

At Evie's insistence, she'd put on a blouse and work trousers, and then after Evie left the house to teach a dance class, Rose called her and cajoled her into raiding Evie's wardrobe, hence the skirt and crop top ensemble.

It didn't matter how often Rose told her she should be body proud; Gabi didn't believe it. However, her words about spending her twenties telling herself what was wrong with her body sat in her heart. Was she letting her life disappear because she was scared to fight her fears and claim her identity?

That was what tonight was about—hitting goals and moving forward.

Gabi stood and smoothed down the skirt, but her sweaty palms left marks on the material. She nearly knocked over her water glass, reaching for another serviette.

The maître d' glared at her and tsked.

She sat down sheepishly and focused on the high-backed chairs and velvet-embossed walls. Everything, from the skirt she couldn't walk in to the opulent décor, was out of her comfort zone. The only thing that brought her joy was the scent of creamy carbonara sauce and garlic. Her mouth watered, and drool settled on her tongue, but

it didn't stop her hands from trembling. She'd be too nervous to eat, anyway.

She baulked at the sight of the skin between her crop top and skirt. She yanked at the hem of the top to cover herself. The movement made her restricted boobs try and pop out the low neckline.

The sooner she was at home rather than waiting for a man who made a heat burn between her thighs by winking at her, the better.

Gabi checked her watch, but it was difficult to read the glowing numbers because her hands wouldn't stop trembling. She clasped them tightly in her lap and worked through the plans for getting home. She still had Pam's marking to finish. Apparently, Pam was too busy to mark her students' books, so Gabi needed to do her own and Pam's. Gabi tapped at the edge of the table. She should have told Pam no, but she'd accepted it silently, as usual.

She checked her phone.

Rose: You can do this, Gabi.

A shadow fell across her screen.

Gabi looked up. Lucas stared at her with parted lips. His thick muscles filled out his grey shirt, which was on the cusp of bursting. She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth.

"Wow. You look beautiful," he whispered before visibly checking himself. "I should have given you a lift here."

"For safety?"

"No, to watch your ass as you walked in. Is that a leather skirt?" He swallowed loudly.

"I took it from Evie's wardrobe. She wanted me to dress in her least sexy item."

"That's the least sexy? I'd love to see the most sexy, but only on you."

Gabi smiled before rolling her eyes. This was the Lucas charm Evie had lectured about her.

"Oh, I should stand," she said, remembering the dating etiquette Rose had explained to her. She wobbled on her heels and reached out her hand.

Lucas held it gently and brushed his lips against it.

Her face heated instantly, and she sat and covered her mouth in embarrassment at such a teenage reaction. This meal was going to be

impossible. She had serious things to discuss.

"Please don't do that, princess," he begged before sitting. She looked at him quizzically. "When you put your palm to your mouth, your bicep presses against your chest, and I'm doing my best not to stare at your tits—I mean, breasts—I mean, chest right now."

Gabi shoved her hand by her side. It was nice to be objectified rather than ignored. But that wasn't what she'd been taught to believe. It was difficult being a proud woman in her twenties who was also needy for attention, especially after years of people dismissing her.

I'm allowed to like being objectified.

Maybe she'd say it aloud one day with conviction.

She swallowed a gulp and pulled her shoulders back. Rose had said if she didn't feel confident, she should remind herself what drunk Gabi would do. Drunk Gabi would say something about pressing both hands to her mouth next time, but sober Gabi couldn't do it.

Instead, she smiled politely and stared at the tablecloth.

* * *

After an hour of near silence and giving each other fake smiles while eating small mouthfuls of food, Lucas offered her red wine from the bottle sitting between them.

She shook her head.

"Sorry, I should have asked if you wanted any before ordering. I guess I'm drinking the whole thing myself tonight." He gave a fake laugh as he topped up his glass.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I've got work to do when I get home and an early one tomorrow. And after the last time I drank in front of you, it's safe to say I shouldn't do that again."

She checked her watch for the sixth time. They had twenty minutes until they needed to meet the paparazzi outside the restaurant.

Gabi shifted in her chair. The movement sounded like a fart, and she dropped her head. A fancy dinner date and dressing up while sitting still all evening wasn't her. She could have worked out her

nerves by keeping her body busy climbing or biking on an active date.

"What's Charlie like when he visits yours? I love him, but he's a bit of a grumpy bugger when I'm with him. He's given me a lot of rules for tonight. Max said he's sweet with Rose, though," Lucas said, as if he was desperate to fill the silence.

"He's patient and caring. After everything that went on with Josh's dad...Never mind. It's not my secret to share." Even though Lucas was Josh's old housemate, she couldn't guarantee he knew about Rose's ex-husband.

"It's horrible to watch someone you love go through pain, whether that's from another person or from the shit life throws at them," he replied, suggesting he knew about Rose's ex.

"That sounds personal."

"We all have baggage, right? And I've also seen my family struggle with crappy situations, especially my niece. It changes the way you see things. Like—"

The waitress shoved Gabi's profiteroles and ice cream in front of her. The melting ice cream nearly tipped over the other side. The waitress flicked her hair and turned to Lucas. "You played a great game at the weekend."

"Thanks." Lucas nodded.

"If you ever fancy showing me your moves, here's my number. I can show you mine. My tongue gets many compliments." She handed him a piece of paper and delicately placed his tiramisu in front of him.

Gabi stared as the maître d' called the waitress away.

"I don't know whether to be impressed by her skills or insulted by her brazenness. Does that happen often?"

"Women giving me their number? Yeah," Lucas conceded.

"Even while you're on dates?" Gabi filled her spoon with her dessert and nibbled at one of the rolls. The cream melted on her tongue, but her anxiety added a bitter taste. She still needed to ask for the sex favour.

"I don't go on dates." Lucas tucked into his pudding with a gusto.

She rubbed her furrowed brow with the back of her hand.

"What?" he asked. "You're my first date in over three years. I usually do hookups, maybe the odd drink at a bar with someone

before we go back to hers. I wouldn't call those dates."

"But when we were in the lift—"

"And I said I'd take you on a date? I knew you were Evie's sister and off-limits." Lucas shrugged. "I wanted to say thank you for rescuing me."

"Thank you?" Gabi dropped her spoon. The metal smacked against the ceramic bowl. "This was a waste of time," she huffed. "I presumed you knew what you were talking about."

"I don't understand." He'd cleared his pudding in record time, yet she'd barely touched hers. He pointed to it. "Do you want that?"

She shook her head and pushed it over. She did want it, but not here and not in this uncomfortable outfit. She'd grab something from the supermarket on her way home and enjoy it in her baggy pyjamas while doing Pam's marking.

He pulled her bowl to him and spooned the first bite into his mouth.

"I'd hoped you'd help me with my challenge."

He paused his eating and stared back. Ice cream dribbled from his spoon to his plate, making little splashes where it fell. Lines appeared on his forehead, and for a moment, she remembered how soft his face was. That night was a horny chemistry fest compared to this.

"From the card. The other night," she qualified, reaching for her purse.

Gabi pulled out the card. His mouth dropped open as she slid it across the table to him.

"Gabi, you need to get fucked." She whispered the scrawl as if he couldn't read it for himself.

His eyebrows knotted as he looked from her to the card and back to her again. "I've never been propositioned by Wonder Woman before."

A laugh escaped from between her lips, and he smiled. Her shoulders relaxed, and she took a breath.

Just say it, Gabi. Get it out there.

"I guess you could call it a proposition."

"I don't understand. You said that night having sex with me would help you."

"You remember that?"

"I remember everything from that night," he replied with a wink.

She glared. She needed to get this out, but how he made her heart flutter wasn't helping. "The thing is, Lucas, I want to have sex, the good kind with lots of build-up, with foreplay." She fumbled with her words. She'd rehearsed this after chatting with her nurse and the therapist, but it was coming out wrong. "I want to be relaxed, too, so it's enjoyable. I'd probably need lots of lube, and I might struggle to fit anything too big," she stuttered. His jaw dropped. "And I'd need to take it slowly and carefully, but maybe more vigorous eventually. A whole evening should do it."

At Lucas's coughing, she blanched.

"You okay? Are you choking?" She filled his glass with water from the carafe. He downed it while staring at her over the top. His eyes never left hers.

Rose's words came back to her about how it might take a while for him to understand. She'd said too much too quickly. She'd talked to him like he was her sex worker.

"Fucking hell." His voice was gravelly. "You said...fuck, what did you say?"

Gabi squeezed her lips to one side as she stared back at him. "I want to have sex. I haven't had much." *Or any.* "And I thought you'd help me."

She squeezed her hands. Maybe she needed to talk to him like they spoke in porn. He might take her seriously then. "A whole night of fucking." She could feel her face twitching.

He filled his wine glass, emptying the bottle, and downed it. "I need something stronger."

It wasn't coming out right. She wriggled in her seat. There wasn't a Google search option for twenty-two-year-olds propositioning rugby players for sex after spending a year dilating. No one talked about her bloody syndrome.

She tapped the table with her trembling fingers. Lucas reached over and held them, stilling them in his warm hands.

At his care, she gulped a breath and closed her eyes.

"Were you serious when you said a whole night of fucking?" he asked slowly.

She opened her eyes and nodded.

Little droplets of perspiration dotted his forehead, and his palm was clammier than seconds earlier. She should explain what this related to, but she'd hidden so much for so long. This brief

conversation was like laying her heart on the table and cracking it with a hammer to reveal its contents.

"But I can't promise I'll be able to go through with it when the moment comes. I want to try, though," she added.

Gabi squeezed her lips together with her fingers to stop speaking. She should have sat with Rose and planned what she would say properly. This was meant to give her a future, not make her more of a freak. Nothing over the last year had prepared her for this conversation.

Lucas's phone buzzed.

He stared at Gabi for the longest ten seconds of her life as his phone vibrated.

"Aren't you going to get that?" she replied, pushing her fringe out of her face.

"It's Charlie. The paparazzi are ready for us outside."

Chapter Ten

GABI

Gabi stared at the ground as Lucas paid for the meals and requested her jacket. Even while desperately avoiding eye contact, she knew his gaze never left her.

Heat crawled up her neck, and her legs stuck together with sweat as Lucas helped her with her denim jacket. Her heart beat rapidly, and she gripped her bag to prevent herself from doing anything with her fringe.

Her eyes flicked to him, but he didn't speak or give her any hint of his thoughts.

His phone beeped, and he glanced at it. His face dropped.

"Is it Charlie again?" Gabi asked.

He shook his head. "No. Just an...old friend."

As they exited the restaurant, he unfurled one of her hands from her bag and slid it in his. She wobbled in her heels, but he kept her upright. He was Batman compared to her, with his strapping rugby body, yet he held her gently, as if he could protect her from anything.

Shit. I'm romanticising this bad boy.

She tripped under camera flashes, but he slipped his arm around her waist and pressed her against his warm, strong chest. He smelt of the bottle of wine he'd finished when she'd asked him about sex.

"Hey, Lucas, is this your girlfriend?" someone shouted. "Who is she?"

"She's a lovely local primary school teacher," he replied, and Charlie, who watched from the side, nodded.

"Charlie primed me to push that you're the opposite of me, so sweet and good," Lucas whispered, slurring slightly. "The guy asking questions is from the local newspaper. He's always insulting me in articles. Charlie says if we can convince him we're on a date, it will make me perfect. Or something like that. I don't normally drink wine. Am I making sense?"

Gabi cringed as she nodded. This was her first of three torturous dates. She had to get through the next five minutes of awkwardness, and then she'd be free—for now. Two more dinners in pretentious restaurants, hounded by the press.

Great for some, a nightmare for her.

Gabi gripped her bag tighter, like it was a talisman against evil. Her body wouldn't stop shaking, and her belly twisted. She didn't want this. Vomit crawled up her gullet.

She shouldn't have agreed to these dates. She'd never get through sex with him if she couldn't even manage dinner together. One of her heels nearly gave way, and she tipped forward. She barely moved her bag in front of her chest in time to stop from revealing her boobs.

More lights flashed, and little red dots swam in her vision.

"Are you heading to a club?" the man Lucas whispered about earlier asked.

She dropped her head, hoping her fringe would cover her face as she clutched her bag. She couldn't breathe.

Four minutes and she'd be away. Lucas's phone beeped again, and he stared at it, lines appearing on his forehead.

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Or are you going home for a Lucas special? We know your reputation," the journalist added.

Lucas pulled Gabi close. His phone beeped again, but he ignored it.

His laugh sounded hollow as he said, "Nah, but she's already propositioned me, so who knows how the night will end."

"Right, you've got your photos, and the press team have sent you what you can print," Charlie said.

Lucas walked her away from the group. He stumbled slightly and whispered, "Shit, I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't how I

meant it."

"You bastard," she hissed as she shoved him. The force of the push against his brick-like body left her flailing, and she held her hand to a nearby wall to stay upright. "How dare you say that."

"I'm sorry. But it will be okay. They won't print it."

She yanked her shoes off and hooked them on her finger before shoving him again.

"How are you this strong? You're over a foot shorter than me," he replied, though her shove barely wobbled him. Even tipsy, he was immovable. "I made a mistake, but it will be okay. He's got his brief from Charlie. I thought if I made you laugh like at the bar, you'd feel calmer. I was joking around, Gabi."

"What I said to you was a secret. It wasn't a joke. It was important to me." Tears brimmed in her eyes as she tongue-lashed him. "I thought from how you were at the bar and how you let me speak in the locker room when everyone ignored me that you weren't who people said you were. But you are. You're the bad boy who does what he wants and doesn't care about people. My secret was a joke to you."

His face fell.

She pushed him one last time as a flash blinded her. "We're done."

"You can't print that," Charlie bellowed as she approached the taxi rank.

"Gabi, I'm sorry."

"My sister was right about you," she said over her shoulder as tears spilt down her cheeks. Humiliation burnt a hole in her chest.

"Gabi," Lucas shouted again as she threw herself into the taxi.

She snivelled as she spoke her road name.

Her phone vibrated, but she ignored it. The taxi drove away from curb, and Gabi watched Charlie rant to a staring Lucas and a smug reporter.

She'd never trust anyone with her secret again.

Her goal was a joke.

Her life was a joke.

Chapter Eleven

LUCAS

Lucas kicked a stone into the grass.

One minute, he was joking with the reporter to get him on his side and relax Gabi, who was tense as hell, and then she shoved him. And damn, she was strong. It wasn't like the reporter would print everything he'd said. They had their brief, and the Bulls comms team had requested to check the story before the paper printed it.

"And she did proposition me," he muttered, although it was the weirdest proposition. But he'd made a mistake, and he couldn't blame the alcohol, really. He'd acted like a jerk. No wonder fans hated him when he did stuff like that. Gabi had made it clear her secret was important, but he'd wanted to make her laugh again.

You're a fucking idiot.

Maybe he was too childish, like Lexi suggested. She'd sent him three messages in quick succession at the end of his date with Gabi, asking when they could meet up. Why couldn't she get the hint that they'd never meet up? Lucas slumped on the swing, which rocked under his weight, and shoved his fists in his pockets.

Light shone from his brother's house, but Lucas remained on the swing. Amy, Lucas's niece, should be in bed. She was only nine and this was his brother's time to complete chores. He didn't want to burden him tonight.

He squeezed the cold metal of his brother's key, which never left his side.

Whether he needed someone to chat with or a place to be, this was it—his second home. His sanctuary. He stared at the gold-embossed back door, one of Ingrid's remaining touches. Ingrid, his brother's ex-wife, wanted to make her impression on the house, until she was too busy making an impression on a personal trainer.

Amy was the best thing to have come out of the dire marriage.

Lucas sighed loudly.

"More women trouble?" a voice asked from the hammock swinging between two oak trees.

Lucas jumped. "Amy, what are you doing up? You've got school tomorrow."

She flicked a switch, lighting a series of butterflies lining one edge of the garden. Henry's choice. He'd been obsessed with lights since their family Christmas in Blackpool as children.

Amy bounded off the hammock, a feat impossible for most, yet she made it effortless with her delicate bobbed hair and angelic features. If Lucas tried, he'd end up on his arse underneath the thing.

"I couldn't sleep." Amy sat on the swing next to him. She kicked her legs and started the brightly coloured plastic in motion.

Lucas kicked his legs to keep in time with her.

"The nightmares again?" he asked, referring to the snake nightmares that had plagued her since her mum left.

"Yeah, and Dad's acting weird. He spoke to Mum. He's hugging me extra tight these days."

"I'll have a word with him," Lucas replied as Amy's hair lifted in the breeze. With her bright blue eyes and black hair, she was the spitting image of her mum.

"So now you, Uncle Lucky," she said, referring to the nickname she'd used for him since she was little. "Why are you on the swings in the dark again? More problems with them troublesome women?"

"You're getting too sassy for your own good, missy. Who did you learn that from?"

She kicked harder and soared. "Dad. He always talks about your women trouble."

Lucas coughed in surprise.

"Enough of that, Amy. You should be in bed," Henry called out before trudging from the backdoor.

"Ten minutes. Please," she begged. "I'm helping Uncle Lucky with his problems."

Henry huffed as he stood with his hands on his hips and attempted to stare her down, but she was as stubborn as he was.

"Fine," he conceded. "What's going on with him now?"

"He was about to tell me. Come on, Uncle Lucky, what trouble are you in now?"

Lucas shook his head. She was too endearing. How could her mum not want to spend every second in her presence? "I upset my date tonight."

"Gabi?"

"The one you're fake dating?" Amy jumped in.

"Do you have to tell her everything?"

Henry winced. "Charlie picked up tips for an injury earlier. She overheard him. I reframed his language, though."

The glowing butterflies highlighted Amy's cheeky smile. Lucas slowed the swing so it hung limply. He rubbed the back of his neck, and his chin touched his chest.

"Gabi and I had a date, and she told me some private stuff," Lucas said. "I accidentally joked about it in front of a reporter."

"Are you serious?" Henry grunted.

"Oh, Uncle Lucky," Amy groaned. "How are you this bad with women?"

Lucas raised his eyes at a sheepish Henry.

"I have no idea where she picked that up," Henry stuttered.

"Whatever. Anyway, she ran away. I've texted her, but she's not replied. What do I do?"

"What did she tell you?" Henry asked.

"Don't tell us," Amy yelled before slowing down her swing and jumping off it while it was still in motion. Henry grumbled. "If she told you something private, you shouldn't tell anyone. Secrets are really important. Sian, my friend at school, told Ellie my secret, and I can't trust Sian again. Don't be a Sian, Uncle Lucky."

His chest tightened with guilt. He wouldn't want his secrets shared, and he'd hate for someone to laugh about them so publicly. He gritted his teeth. He'd panicked after the messages from Lexi and underestimated the seriousness of the moment. *Typical me.*

"I was a bit of a shi..." He stared at Amy, who snickered at his near swear word. "I wasn't very kind. I should have realised how serious her secret was."

"Showboating." Amy shook her head.

Lucas's eyes darted to his brother's face, who desperately avoided eye contact. "Can you stop talking about me in front of Amy? She'll get the wrong impression of me."

"Or the true one," Henry whispered. Lucas glared at him.

"You're right about secrets, Amy Boo. When did you get so wise?"

"A couple of years ago, when my mum ran off with her personal trainer and rejected me," she replied with a shrug. Henry pulled her in for a hug, but she wriggled out of it. "Don't be so soppy, Dad. I'm okay. She doesn't deserve either of us."

If his team's supporters got their way, he'd leave this town and join another club. But he didn't want to go. Leaving these two would be the biggest heartbreak. So that meant doing what Charlie said and acting more likeable.

But other issues were more important right now. He needed to make things right with Gabi.

He formed a plan to help her with her proposition, but it was imperative to win her trust first and prove he wasn't who people said he was. He wouldn't be her confidant, though.

This was just sex. He could do sex.

"Anyway, we need to fix Uncle Lucky," Amy said, standing before him. Her hands gripped his shoulders, and she dead-eyed him. "Dad said Gabi teaches at my school."

"She's Miss Draper," Henry confirmed.

"Then tomorrow at school, I'll do what I can to help you fix this."

"Okay." Lucas nodded.

He needed to make this better, and maybe it would make him feel like he did before Lexi, like he was more than just the guy who got into trouble. He helped people around town, but that was different. Gabi needed someone, and he was good at sex. It didn't need to involve emotions and then pain. But her proposition, her drunk excitement in the bar, the way she saw the good in him until tonight, and that kiss kept picking at him.

"Before I come up with a plan, I need to know, do you like her?"

Lucas's face warmed. "She's all right."

"He blushed!" Henry shouted.

"Uncle Lucky is red." She giggled. "He likes her. More than the woman from when you moved here? She made you sad. You came here loads of nights to sit on the swings."

Lucas's gaze flicked between Henry and Amy.

"Sometimes, we'd eat popcorn while watching you, but we didn't want to bother you because you looked really sad," Amy said softly. Her tiny hands grabbed his. "I don't like seeing you sad."

Lucas pulled her in for a hug, which she didn't wriggle out of. "I don't like seeing you sad, either."

"I'm okay." But her quiet voice suggested otherwise. "Anyway, I've got a plan to make Miss Draper like you again, but I'm not telling you it unless you promise you'll be nice to her. I've seen her around school, and she's lovely."

"Is she a good teacher?" Henry asked.

Lucas bit his tongue to stop asking questions. He couldn't let his feelings get involved. This was solely about sex and helping her achieve her challenge, which he'd ask the meaning of if he could get her to trust him again.

Not that he deserved her trust.

"She's good at everything. Her classroom decorations are the best. My teacher never decorates ours, but we love what Miss Draper does. And she's so kind. She helped Nancy, who was really sad after her grandad died. She's not even in Miss Draper's class."

"She's too lovely for you, bro," Henry said, causing Amy and Lucas to glare at him.

"Nancy told me that another teacher, Miss Fester, shouted at Miss Draper once. Miss Draper needs someone who makes her laugh." Amy fixed her stare on Lucas.

"Do you promise to be nice to her, Lucas?" Henry asked, his eyes raised.

Lucas swallowed slowly as he remembered Gabi's proposition. She wanted good sex, and he was more than willing to give her mind-blowing sex. "I'll be very nice."

"Lucas," Henry warned. "I know what that look means."

"What?" Lucas replied, forcing his eyes wide in an angelic image that got him out of trouble when they were younger.

"Is he being naughty again, Daddy?" Amy asked.

"Very," Henry said with a roll of his eyes.

"Then maybe I won't tell him the plan."

"Please, Amy Boo." Lucas held out his little finger in a hook. "I promise I'll be nice to her and keep her secrets."

Amy hooked her little finger in his and squeezed it. "Okay, but listen carefully, because I'm not repeating this. Some of us need to go to bed."

Chapter Twelve

GABI

Gabi yanked at her cuffs as Pam whispered snide comments behind her hand.

She balanced precariously on the sides of her feet as children came bustling through the gates with beaming smiles. They'd ditched their uniforms and were dressed in their own clothes and Easter bonnets for a parade on the last day of term. Some used fluffy craft chicks to decorate their bonnets, while others wore beautiful pastel ribbons.

One child's bonnet resembled a rabbit preparing to bounce out of their head. Gabi wanted to smile. She'd fought to introduce the parade, and the children were giddy as they said goodbye to their parents.

"Another thing," Pam criticised, "what about the children whose parents don't have the time to help them decorate their hats? You're shaming them with your silly ideas."

The deputy head walked past. She must have heard, but she strode away as if she hadn't. Maybe she was glad Pam wasn't treating her like this.

"I offered to help all the children after school earlier in the week," Gabi retorted.

"You wanted them to stay late at school. That's cruel. You don't understand children at all." Pam was five years older than Gabi, but she behaved as if she'd been teaching for decades.

"I do understand children."

A group of them stayed behind on Tuesday, including Nancy. While they crafted hats to children's party music, Nancy opened up about her grandad and asked questions about death and families.

Gabi bit her tongue. There was no way she'd share that with Pam, who'd twist it like she'd twisted everything Gabi had said since her first day.

"There's no need to get sensitive, Gabi. You can't take a joke." She could almost hear Lucas talking; he'd suggested she was too sensitive. "With your sensitivities, teaching and spending time with children might not be for you."

Gabi considered her fake date the night before. In hindsight, she should have approached what she'd told Lucas differently. Tearily shouting at him in the street wasn't her finest moment. His messages and apologies filled her phone. She'd deal with it tomorrow, once term was over for the fortnight Easter break and she'd spoken to her therapist.

She'd avoided Rose when she got home. The shame of her overreaction after sharing her struggles and then being laughed at sat in her heart all night. She hadn't told him everything, including her medical problems, so he didn't understand why the idea of sex was terrifying but a necessity to move on with her life or all the things she'd done to get to this point.

"It's Amy. I can't stand that kid," Pam said. "She's always telling tales about the others. One of the other children told me about her nightmares. Get over it, kid."

Amy had come to the bonnet decorating party earlier in the week. She'd shared her nightmares and sadness about her mum leaving the family a few years ago. "She'd benefit from support. I'll speak to her teacher."

Pam lifted her shoulders and smirked. "Her sexy uncle's dropping her off. He's just walked through the gate. I saw him first, so stay away. He's mine."

"But what about your boyfriend?" Gabi looked over the groups of children and parents but she couldn't see Amy or her uncle. Short girl problems.

"I'm window shopping. You're so serious," Pam replied as she stepped towards the group nearer the gates. "Besides, I've seen the gossip. Lucas screwed his former coach's wife."

Please don't let my Lucas be Amy's uncle. Not that he was *her* anything. The group in front of her parted.

Gabi's eyes locked with Lucas's. He sucked his lips into his mouth.

Shit.

Amy practically dragged Lucas across the rest of the playground. Grey joggers hung loose on his hips, and his backwards cap covered his blond hair. He was walking masturbation fodder. Gabi shook her head as Amy bypassed a smiling Pam, who attempted to pull Lucas into conversation, and made a beeline for Gabi. Pam turned, and her smirk dropped into a scowl.

Gabi attempted a brief smile at the pair before walking away, but Amy shoved Lucas towards her. "My Uncle Lucky needs to talk to you."

Pam hovered nearby.

"Lucky?" Gabi asked.

"Because of his rugby skills. Not because he's lucky with women," Amy explained. "He's unlucky with most of them. He sits on my swing in the dark when he's sad. He came last night because he was sad after your date, but he didn't tell me your secrets, don't worry."

Lucas stared at Amy. "This wasn't the plan," he hissed.

"What plan?" Gabi asked, looking between a grinning Amy and a cringing Lucas.

Amy shook her head. "There was never really a plan. Now apologise, Uncle Lucky."

Lucas stood in front of Amy. He shuffled his feet and pulled on the back of his neck. Gabi offered a softening smile as the awkward giant trembled before her.

"I'm genuinely sorry, Gabi," he said. Lucas's six-foot-three form towered over her. It appeared he might crouch. Amy must have thought the same, because she shook her head aggressively. "I shouldn't have shared your secret with the reporter. He's promised he won't print it. I shouldn't have shared what you said with anyone. It was rude and selfish and hurt you."

He looked at Amy, who nodded at him. "You remember what I said about my uncle at bonnet making?"

Gabi nodded as Lucas's brows dived together. Amy had explained he'd spent many nights sad due to a mistake, and she still

worried about him.

"He makes loads of mistakes, but he's the best uncle ever. He's always cheering me up or listening to me, and I love it when he visits," Amy whispered. He'd said in the restaurant that he'd seen his family struggle with painful situations. He'd meant Amy's mum leaving.

"What else did you say about me at bonnet making?" Lucas grunted.

Amy shrugged. "I'll tell you later. Focus on how mean you were to Miss Draper."

His face reddened. "You don't have to forgive me, Gabi—Miss Draper. But I promise I won't tell anyone your secrets. If you let me, I'd like to help you with your..." He looked around before lowering his voice. "... your thing you told me about."

He was a big, burly rugby player in a hoodie that gripped his biceps and grey joggers that drew attention to an appendage she refused to glance at. But right now, he was pouting like a reprimanded puppy. She shuffled closer.

Lucas wrung his hands as he stared at her.

Trusting him again might help her overcome her challenge, but she could get hurt.

Her throat was tight with indecision.

Pam coughed over his shoulder. Gabi took a deep breath and ignored her while debating the consequences of such a decision.

"Okay," Gabi replied quietly.

Lucas beamed.

"Don't forget the other thing," Amy whispered loudly. Gabi frowned. As a look passed between Lucas and his niece, he fumbled through his pockets.

"Oh, yeah." He grabbed a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it out for Gabi. The intensity in his blue eyes made it impossible to look away. "If you're happy to go on dates, which reporters will no longer be invited to—"

"But your plan to win over the town?"

"Screw the town," he said with a chuckle.

"Uncle Lucky, those are the sorts of jokes that got you in trouble with the fans," Amy said with a roll of her eyes.

"What I mean is, these evenings out—we don't need to call them dates—are to help you with, well, you know, helping you relax with

me. Amy, cover your ears." That earned him another eye roll, but she did it anyway.

Lucas leaned in close. His scent of sea air and wood gave her flashbacks to the bar, and she pursed her lips to stop smiling.

His voice dropped. "If we're going to do the thing you want, we need to build up to it, and you need to explain what your request meant. I want to help you and make it good for you, too. If I want to really..." He glanced at Amy and huffed. "We'll discuss it on our first meet-up. This isn't for wise and sassy children to overhear."

"I heard that," Amy replied.

"Nosey Amy Boo," he said with a cheeky smile. "Anyway, Gabi, I challenge you to pick four locations for dates. Four activities or locations where you can relax. I'm going to pick four, too, and each time we meet up over the next couple of months, we'll do one of yours and follow it with one of mine. You write yours. And in two days, on Sunday afternoon, we'll meet at the local farm for date one and discuss what we've written for dates two to five. How does that sound?"

The first school bell rang, which meant the children needed to line up. Pam's red-faced glare attempted to distract her.

Gabi pushed her fringe from her eyes and yanked on the cuffs of her blouse. This wasn't just trusting him again. This was months of dating and letting someone in. But she could still do that without getting emotionally attached.

Her stomach flushed with hope. These moments with Lucas might change her life.

Or destroy all the hope you have for the future.

Her shoulders caved. Damn that inner voice.

"Will you?" Amy asked, her eyes wide.

"Will you?" Lucas asked softly, the paper fluttering in the breeze between them. *Lucas and Gabi's Challenge Dates* was written across the top.

"Miss Draper, when you've finished gossiping with local celebrities, we need to do our jobs," Pam called.

"Gabi?" Lucas asked.

Gabi's heartbeat thudded in her chest, and she scratched at her cuffs as children lined up.

Chapter Thirteen

GABI

Gabi twirled at Rose's request. She loved this time of year: warmer days, outdoor exercise, and two weeks of school holidays.

"It's cute," Rose said, staring at Gabi's jean dungaree dress and strappy white top. "Sunday afternoon on the farm. Lucas chose the sweetest date venue. What do you think will happen tonight? I heard you shouting at your electric razor."

Gabi giggled. "I've never been so hair-free. I nearly put on fake tan, but do you remember the last time I did that?"

"I thought a tiger had got in the house," Rose teased. "So tonight is the night?"

She shrugged. "He said when he came to the school a couple of days ago that we needed a few dates first, but he's Lucas Knight. He got his rep for a reason."

Rose tapped her lips with her finger, pausing her phone scrolling. Flowers in pinks and purples caught Gabi's eye. With less than two months to the wedding, every day included extreme wedding planning, and Rose consulted Gabi frequently on her decisions. With Gabi's fractured relationship with Evie, she couldn't imagine it being the same with her. Not that Evie had set a date yet.

Gabi searched her wardrobe for her boots.

Rose sat on her bed. "You know, if you're going to go through with things, it might be helpful to tell him about some of your

medical background."

Gabi sat on her haunches and stared into the wardrobe. "But what if he laughs at me or tells people? I can't have people know about my syndrome." She looked over her shoulder at Rose, whose face softened. "It's hard enough living with it, especially with everything I've been through. He might think I'm a freak."

"You're not a freak. Gabi, you've dealt with so much, and maybe Lucas will recognise that. But if you're going to make this step, then it's helpful for him to have background. You don't have to mention the long term impact." Sooner or later, Gabi must consider her infertility, but she needed to get through her sex issue first. "Having sex with him is to help you move on, but having sex for the first time without trust and safety can cause problems that are difficult to move on from. Trust me, you don't need that baggage."

Rose squeezed her eyes tightly, and Gabi rushed over, holding her close. "I'm sorry for the way your ex treated you. If he was still here, I'd fuck him up."

"You and a whole army of people. But he's gone. The last I heard, he's in a shitty bedsit, drunk all the time and friendless. He's a shadow of the man he was, and that's the best punishment. Without his charm and control of others, he's nothing." Rose swallowed loudly. "But I don't think Lucas is like him."

"Based on what?"

"I heard something nice about him from the woman who owns the shop where I bought my dress, but also based on the apology you told me about at the school and how he wants to go on dates and not just jump into bed. He recognises that there's something behind your request. I could be wrong, I have been in the past, but being a player and a bit of a 'showboater' doesn't make someone a bad person. When you're with him, you need to decide if you still want him to be the one. And if you do, you should tell him."

Gabi sighed. "My therapist said the same. It's just..."

"You know you can tell me anything."

"When I was drunk, I really wanted to do it, but now that I'm sober, I'm not sure I can go ahead with everything. When I propositioned him, a part of me felt like if I made it clinical and like a goals list, I could just tick things off and do it. But what if I'm not comfortable enough around anyone to actually have sex? What if these dates are a waste of his time?"

"And a waste of yours?"

Gabi nodded. Her head dropped to her chest. "And it could cause me more problems."

"Trauma." Gabi nodded. "You're only going to know if you're comfortable enough by being around him and giving it time. Take things slowly. If he acts like he did in the restaurant, then walk out of that farm with your head held high. Then come back here, and we'll order pudding and regroup."

"Okay. Thank you." Gabi fiddled with the hem of her dress. "I'm going to miss you when you move in with Charlie and I have no one to talk to."

Rose hugged her hard. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

Gabi smiled, but as much as the sentiment was there, a part of her felt like she'd be losing her only friend and the only person other than her boss who knew about her medical problems. Maybe it was time to be brave and tell someone.

If she didn't, there was a possibility she'd never let anyone close and be alone forever.

* * *

Gabi accidentally snorted in time with the pig.

The whiff of farmyard poo was most potent in this barn. Hens clucked around her as a mischievous goat caught her eye. It jumped off hay bales before climbing back up and jumping again.

"And this is Bob," Henry announced, pointing at a sheep that watched them warily. "Don't trust him. He will eat the food out of your pocket. Right, we've got to get on. Amy and I have volunteered to clean out the pigs tonight."

"It's the stinkiest job," Amy roared. She resembled the perfect farm worker in her black dungarees and flowery wellies.

Lucas chucked her under the chin, but she swiped him off. "Stop your moaning, Amy Boo, or I'll get your dad to push you in the poo."

"Not if I push you in it first."

Gabi nearly choked at the idea of a flailing Lucas falling in poo. He was in awe of his niece. Lucas's reputation as a lothario and a bad boy was at odds with the man she saw now and at school.

Gabi inspected him as he and Amy teased each other and Henry laughed at them. Lucas's Batman T-shirt gripped his biceps, and his jeans hung low on his hips. Dark blond stubble emphasised his chiselled jaw. With his high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes, he really did resemble Chris Hemsworth when he first played Thor. Rugby players were not the squished-nosed, cauliflower-eared men she was led to believe.

Lucas lifted Amy, and she squealed in delight. His T-shirt rose enough to reveal his tight stomach, which flexed and rippled under her gaze. Electricity zipped through her as she recalled his willingness to help her with her proposition.

Lucas caught her eye and winked. Heat filled her cheeks as she pretended to read a sign about how to care for pigs. She shoved her hair from her face and balanced on the outer edges of the sandy boots she'd spent half an hour picking out. She'd overthought every aspect of this afternoon, including the challenge dates she needed to share later.

"It's poo time! Equipment shed first," Amy said, grabbing her dad's hand and heading off. She called out behind her, "Catch you later, Miss Draper. And if you behave, Uncle Lucky, we might let you hold a rabbit."

Gabi giggled. "Hear that? You've got to behave if you want to hold a rabbit."

"That's an interesting idea, princess, but I've no intention of behaving, and I'd much rather hold something else," he said with a voice so low it made her stomach throb. His gaze danced between her boobs and her eyes. "I won't tell anyone how naughty I am if you don't."

Gabi sucked in a breath and grabbed at the pockets of her dress. Her lips threatened to lift in a smile. "How do you do that?"

"What?"

"Act sexy and seductive while chatting normally?" Gabi asked, staring at the sheep to avoid eye contact.

"It comes naturally, but I also do it because I like making you blush and smile."

Gabi turned. She attempted to rub the tightness out of her forehead with her fingers.

"So, Bob the sheep," Lucas said, giving her space to breathe. "Henry and I sometimes call him Coach."

"Why?"

"His sour mouth and dark eyes suggest he's glaring. And he's always bleating at the other animals like Coach does at the team." Lucas chuckled.

Lucas stroked one of the quieter sheep.

"Maggie came to us because she couldn't have lambs and tried to adopt others. It caused problems at the farm, so we got her. She's amazing. She adopts all the baby animals we've taken on, including Danger the Goat."

"Is there a sheep that bullies the others? You should call her Pam," Gabi said.

Lucas pointed out another sheep. "I wouldn't call Charlie a bully, but he's a bit of an arse."

Gabi leaned closer to Maggie and stared at her.

Lucas gave Gabi a gentle shoulder barge, pulling her out of her sadness. "Tell me about Pam. I saw how she talked to you at the playground and what it did to you."

"Did to me?" Gabi reached out to stroke Maggie. Her wool was tight and oily, but it was a good distraction from the conversation and meant she didn't have to look at Lucas.

"Some of your tics, like moving hair out of your face and pulling at your cuffs. You did them a lot around Pam."

Gabi sunk her fingers into Maggie's woolly coat as her face burned.

"Does she bully you a lot?"

"I wouldn't call it bullying," she replied dismissively.

"And yet you suggested it was a minute ago. Does the head know how she treats you?"

"Probably. Pam's her niece. It's nothing." Gabi shrugged, walking towards another pen before turning. "Promise me you won't tell anyone."

Lucas sighed, but he nodded. "It's our secret. And I mean that."

"Thank you." Gabi turned to a new pen. It contained a black, short-legged cow with big eyes. Its fluttering eyelashes made her smile.

As she tapped her hands against her thighs, she thought back to her conversation with Rose about being comfortable enough to have sex. Lucas made her feel physical things she hadn't felt since the guy

she'd tried to sleep with at eighteen, the guy she believed she'd loved. But was that enough?

Her mood sank, and her vision blurred.

The idea of moving past this part of her rehabilitation was terrifying.

"How often do your brother and Amy volunteer here?" she asked, looking for an exit.

"Once a fortnight," Lucas replied. "It's a father-daughter bonding thing and helps Amy since her mum left. She rides horses, too. The farm and the horse riding help her anxiety. That cow's called Dexter." Lucas pointed to the smaller cow. "And he's the grumpiest cow you will ever meet, but the most loving too."

Dexter walked over to Lucas, who stroked him.

"You know a lot about this farm. Do you volunteer?"

Lucas smiled. "You're more observant than I'm happy with," he said, adding a wink. If that was his signature move, she understood why. Every time he did it, her temperature increased. "Yeah, a couple of times a month when it's closed and quiet. I stay in the background."

"Like Batman?"

He laughed hard, causing Dexter to slope off. "Yeah, like Batman."

"Why do you hide that you do it?"

"I don't want to cause trouble for the farm or their work. Our rugby fans hate me. The only ones who love me are the ones trying to sleep with me, and neither they nor the angry ones would help this place. Besides, I do it because I love the animals and they love me for who I am. Will you keep my secret?"

Gabi smiled genuinely. "Of course."

His comment about the animals loving him for who he was niggled her as they walked to the rabbits. Lucas explained how Gabi should hold them before reaching down and offering her one.

"You need to sit on that crate."

She pursed her lips as she stared at the rabbit. It had the cheeky face of a cartoon character. "But what if I hurt it?"

"Trust me, Gabs." No one called her that, and she liked it.

She nodded and sat. She'd not spent much time around animals because her dad disliked the mess they made. One summer, Evie

attempted to convince him they should be allowed a dog. He'd given them an ant farm instead.

Lucas knelt and placed the velvet-soft rabbit in her arms. It was as nervous as she was, but after her gentle strokes, it settled.

"Now that your hands are full and you can't get away, will you tell me about your proposition?"

Her shoulders tensed, and the rabbit froze.

"Sorry. That was a dick move. I'm good at those, but I thought it would help."

"It was clever."

The rabbit wriggled.

Lucas remained on his knees in front of her. "You can give the rabbit back to me, or we can count to ten together to slow your breathing," he said gently.

"Count with me," she replied. By four, both she and the rabbit calmed.

"You're good at distracting me and helping me to chill," she confessed.

Lucas puffed out his chest. "That bodes well, which brings us nicely to your proposition," he continued, not allowing her to avoid the topic. "Help me understand where you're coming from."

"I won't give you too much detail. I need more time," she explained, and Lucas nodded. "But I have a syndrome called MRKH, and it means sex is tricky. I've never told anyone but Rose about this, and she doesn't know all the details." The rabbit shifted, flustering Gabi.

"Gabi, look at me." She met his soft gaze. His tentative smile hurt her heart, but it calmed her, too. "You only have to tell me a couple of things. I want to know how best to help you."

Gabi took a deep breath, and her pulse slowed again. The rabbit settled once more.

"I've never had penetrative sex." Heat filled her cheeks, but she wasn't sure if it was from shame or Lucas's intense stare. "I learnt something wasn't right with my body when I tried having sex with my boyfriend at eighteen."

She paused and took a breath. Lucas's hand touched hers. The skin contact grounded her.

"It was awful, and I shied away from everyone, but eventually, when I'd built up confidence, I went to our family doctor. She didn't

examine me. She told me many females struggle with having sex the first time and there was nothing wrong with me. I should've explained the other things I was experiencing, but instead, I left, ashamed, thinking I was a neurotic drama queen."

Tears pricked her eyes, but she focused on the sensation of the rabbit fur between her fingers and Lucas's massive hand against hers.

"You don't have to say any more," he whispered.

She shook her head. "I should, because then I don't have to talk about it again." She squeezed her eyes tightly, and a tear slipped down her cheek. But that was it. She wasn't going to cry again in front of Lucas.

He wiped the tear from her cheek with his thumb.

"When you're ready, princess."

She swallowed loudly. "Why do you call me princess?"

"Because you're Wonder Woman. She was a princess."

Her face heated. "You remember my knickers from the lift when we first met?"

"Yeah, but I also think you're pretty fucking strong, like every time you shove me, I feel that."

She harnessed all her superhero energy to explain her past. "After that awful experience, I didn't try having sex again. But a couple of years later, when I moved here, I tried a new GP. She listened, examined me, and helped me through my anxieties. She referred me to the right people at a hospital in Birmingham."

"I'm glad someone listened to you."

Relief softened her shoulders. "Me too. Over the last year, I've done this thing, these 'exercises' that should make penetrative sex less painful. My nurse, specialist, and therapist all say I can have sex now, but there isn't anyone I want to have sex with. I'm scared to get a boyfriend in case I can't have sex and he dumps me. I don't want heartbreak."

"A proper boyfriend wouldn't do that."

But her boyfriend at eighteen had, and he'd told everyone she was a freak. She couldn't trust it would be different if she tried again.

"I want to get past this hurdle before I try dating. Maybe you could help build up my confidence," she said, "and I can help you with your thing—the fake dating to make the town like you."

"We'll come onto that."

She scraped her teeth across her lip. She couldn't blame him if he wanted to walk away. What she needed to do for the deal was pretty insignificant compared to what he'd promised to do, and her challenges were a lot to put on another person. He didn't owe her anything.

"Did your therapist discuss any potential emotional and physical impact that may come from when you try to have sex again?"

Gabi nodded.

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

She held her breath as she stroked the sleeping rabbit. "I haven't done much foreplay, and I haven't tried having sex since my boyfriend four years ago. I'm unsure if I can do any of this."

"And why did you pick me? I'm curious."

"Our kiss in the bar was the hottest moment of my life. I enjoyed watching you play rugby, especially when you stretched and winked at me. Your showboating clinched it. You're incredibly sexy." Her voice pitched. "I haven't found many men sexy. In those years between my ex and my treatment, there wasn't anyone, but that was partly because I avoided people. My...treatment helped improve my libido." Her babbling sounded clinical, but there was much to understand and communicate. "I've found a few guys hot, but I've not spoken to any of them. You're the sexiest person I've ever seen and..."

He grinned at that, and if she weren't holding a sleeping rabbit, she'd have nudged him.

"...And you're pretty chill yet enthusiastic and funny. You're a bit...silly sometimes, which will help reduce the pressure of how this thing makes me feel. I need that. And you ticked all the things on my list. I added extra things to it after I met you."

Lucas's lips twisted as he stared into space. "That's what you were doing in the bar."

Gabi nodded. "One of the key things about my proposition is that I don't want a relationship, and I suspect you don't, either. It doesn't seem like your thing."

He nodded slowly.

"I want sex." She faltered. Now her secrets were out. It was too much to take the next step. "So do you want to go somewhere tonight?"

“Not tonight.”
The barn’s open doorway called her.
“Okay. Thank you for listening. It’s more than some would have,” she stuttered.

Chapter Fourteen

LUCAS

Lucas fisted his hands.

L He'd said the wrong thing again. Was he mature enough for this?

He reached for the bunny and placed it back in the pen, keeping one eye on Gabi to ensure she didn't bolt before explaining himself. She wrung her hands and stared down.

She'd been through so much. He couldn't imagine experiencing everything she had and doing it alone. She had nothing to be ashamed of, yet shame came off her in waves.

But he had this need to help her. She reminded him a little of his teenage girlfriend. She'd had endometriosis, a condition affecting the uterus. For his girlfriend, it made sex difficult and painful. Their relationship was the brief fling of teenagers before she moved on to a guy at university she could be "serious with," but it taught him about supporting others. He'd still visited her at university. She'd told one of her friends who also struggled with sex about his skills, and for a while, he became the go-to guy for women who needed help but didn't want a relationship.

With his humour, he made them feel relaxed, and with his care for others, he'd given them a chance to move on with their lives. He'd lived a charmed and mostly happy life until Lexi.

After helping Henry when Amy was a sickly baby and then a toddler whose mum kept taking holidays to get away, he'd

developed a need to help and support others who called out to him. He did it as long as it didn't get him hurt and as long as they could cope with how he messed up sometimes.

And Gabi needed someone. He'd met too many men who would use her request as a chance to take what they wanted and not care for this woman who played with her hem and avoided eye contact. He couldn't let her experience that. His teenage girlfriend was hurt before they got together, and it made things more difficult for her, but during their brief time together, she brought something to his life, and he'd vowed to not let anyone experience what she did. He didn't have many skills in life, but he could do this.

Lucas returned to kneeling in front of her. He placed his hands on her knees.

Gabi didn't see him as relationship material, or she wouldn't have asked *him* for this. This time, he knew where they stood at the start, so his heart was safe.

"Gabs," he said gently, "please look at me."

Her green eyes made his chest hurt. They flitted in his direction, but she didn't hold his gaze.

"I'm not saying no, but I'm not taking you home to check if your body does what you want it to do." Her brow furrowed, and he smoothed his thumb over the lines it created. She closed her eyes as he touched her. More lines formed as if she fought with herself. He was the audience to her torment. He eased his thumb away, and she opened her eyes. "You said there was an emotional impact to this, too. You're uncomfortable with my touch."

"But—"

"And it's okay that you are. We can be honest about that."

"I am."

"So getting naked and straight into sex would set us up for more problems. Did your medical team say anything about this?"

"They said I need a lot of foreplay to relax me. If I get tense during sex, it will make the penetrative bit more difficult and hurt more."

She squeezed her eyes tightly closed as if desperately holding her humiliation at bay. Lucas wanted to take her worries away, but that wasn't his role in this situation. She was clear she didn't want an emotional attachment to him, and that was okay.

He rocked on his haunches. "This is where the challenge bit comes in."

She opened her eyes. They'd lost some of their cloudiness and shone a little brighter. Maybe one day, he'd make them sparkle.

"Gabs, I'm hoping if we do activities together, things you enjoy, it will help us relax around each other. Also, the more I know about you, the better I can make the experience for you. I can learn about your body and your mind. Surprisingly, this isn't the first time I've been in this position. Understanding the person and spending time with them really helped. I want to learn about your fantasies and the things you like. Does that make sense?"

Gabi nodded.

Lucas leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "And I already know from the lift, it turns you on when I whisper the things I want to do." She shivered against him. "If there's anything I do you like or anything you don't like or want to do, tell me or, if it's easier, text me."

"Text you?"

"Confrontation is a lot for you."

A smile tugged at her lips, and his pulse eased slightly.

"What of the many awkward things I've done so far gave it away?" she said with a chuckle so cute he wanted to tie a bow around it and hang it in his rugby locker.

"It was a feeling," he replied with a laugh. "There might be times when you've processed the moment and want to share your worries hours later. Text works for me. If you want to stop these challenges or change your mind about sex or anything, absolutely anything, say so, and we'll stop. I won't be a dick. Consent can be given and taken away with a word. How about the next time we meet, we come up with rules for our fake dating sex pact thing?"

Gabi nodded. The relief on her face warmed him from his toes to his scalp.

"I'm here for you as a... What should I call it?"

She winced. "Challenge participant?"

"We can do better than that. As your Sex Commander."

She laughed and pushed him away before pulling him back so his hands were on her thighs.

"We can work on a name." He stared at where his hands brushed her thighs.

"Maybe something like Hornhead. Like the nickname Stan Lee gave Daredevil."

He laughed loudly. "A superhero nickname is perfect. Call me Captain Horndog."

"Cap for short," she teased.

Superhero chat with a beautiful woman who believed he was the answer to her sex problems? This moment was like a beam of sunshine on a drizzly day.

Her fruity shampoo made his body tingle, and a warmth hit his thighs.

"Can I try something?" he asked.

Her eyebrows dived together, but she nodded.

"Words, princess. I want your consent."

She licked her lips. "Yes, cap."

He leaned forward, and his lips brushed her neck. She moaned softly, causing a pulsing in his cock. The next couple of months were going to be the best fucking adventure.

He pulled back to find her blushing. "You liked that?"

Gabi nodded and grinned like she'd conquered a battle. "So all hope isn't lost?"

"Not at all." Her pupils were a little dilated, and for a second, he allowed himself to imagine them fully dilated as he kissed between her thighs. He gripped her hands. "I'm excited about this and excited for you because there's so much you'll experience and enjoy. I'm going to challenge you but keep you safe. And maybe make you laugh. Are you ready for that?"

"Yes," she gasped. A grin eclipsed her face as she tapped her feet against the hay.

"Good, because I want to kiss you when you're sober." Amber flashed in her green eyes.

Baby steps.

"But," he continued, running his fingertips up and down her thighs, "sometimes sex and foreplay are about anticipation. The whole time I'm talking, you're wondering when and how I'll kiss you. Will it be brief or the sort of kiss that makes you ache? Will it be intense or a slow build-up where I lick your lower lip and kiss the corners of your mouth before going further? And where will my hands go? Will they slide under your dress and up your bare legs? One of my hands might travel between your thighs."

Gabi swallowed loudly as she stared, wide-eyed, at him.

Her chest rose with panting breaths, and although every part of his body told him to press his lips hard against hers and taste her moans, he sat back. He missed the feel of her tight, strong thighs instantly.

"Let's check out the challenges first," Lucas said, clearing his throat repeatedly and trying to dampen the heat raging beneath his boxers. "What's on your list?"

Gabi fumbled in her pocket, her fingers trembling. She pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper and handed it to him. He gave her a scrap of screwed-up paper from his pocket. He tried not to focus on her grumbles as they scanned each other's challenges.

"Skydive?" he shouted before quieting his voice. Dexter mooed, causing Maggie to *baa*. Somewhere in the distance, Amy told them to be quiet and that she was on her way with dinner. "You want to skydive on our last date?"

Gabi smiled gingerly. "I've led a sheltered life and not experienced much, not just sex but all sorts of things, and I like sports."

"Hence the paddleboarding, bouldering, and running a race, but skydiving?"

Gabi shrugged. "If I'm going to do things out of my comfort zone, I might as well go for it."

Lucas shook his head. He was meant to her Batman, and yet the thought of skydiving made his dick jump back into his body. He couldn't do heights.

"We're going to be too exhausted for sex with all of these. What do you think of my sexy challenges?"

Gabi glanced at the list again. "A painting class, cookery, and dancing don't sound sexy, but sex is the fifth date challenge."

"Which you can say no to at any time, remember?" Gabi nodded. "Besides, all those things can be sexy. Are you willing to try them?"

"I'm all in." She grabbed his hand. "But we can't tell Evie why we're doing it. She doesn't know about my syndrome."

"It's our secret." He refused to let her shame of her syndrome include being ashamed of him. He was enough for this, even if he wasn't long-term boyfriend material. Not that he wanted to be. Lexi's return into his life had fucked with his head.

"And we need to make sure you're getting something out of it," she said, pulling him from his thoughts. "Let's take a selfie to post online."

"But you wanted to keep it a secret." He couldn't stop staring into her emerald eyes.

"There's got to be something in it for you."

"Other than getting to kiss a beautiful woman and maybe more?"

"You're so cheesy." She winked.

But he meant it. Kissing her at the bar was still the highlight of his fortnight, and having her at the rugby game had boosted his play. And she'd distracted him from Lexi memories and given him genuine confidence that he wasn't really a childish arsehole. His swagger had carried something other than his usual bullshit bravado since he'd seen her at Amy's school. He couldn't share that with Gabi, but it meant something to him.

"You need to make the town and the fans like you," she continued. "If they see you at the local farm, they'll learn even the worst shitbag, aka you, must be okay, because you like animals. We won't say you volunteer here because of what you said."

Lucas laughed. "The worst shitbag, eh?"

Gabi gave him a dramatic wink and giggled.

Lucas held his phone out, ready to take the photo. Gabi was photogenic, and with her grin, they made a beautiful couple. As he clicked the button, she planted a kiss on his cheek.

He turned in confusion.

At this closeness, their lips nearly touched.

She swallowed loudly as he whispered, "Feeling brave, princess?"

"It felt right," she murmured and licked her lower lip. Lucas threaded his fingers through her hair while stowing his phone in his back pocket.

His lips brushed her neck, and the moan she gifted him spurred on another kiss to her warm skin.

"You're beautiful, Gabs, and I can't wait to enjoy more of you."

She moaned again and ran her fingers up and down his thick, flexing thighs as he continued to feather kisses against her skin.

The anticipation was like a ball in his chest. His soft kisses fluttered against Gabi's jaw, and her hands gripped his upper thighs.

His voice lowered to a rough murmur. "And you're sexy, too. You make these gorgeous noises that turn me on, but part of the fun is the battle with control."

"Yes," she gasped.

He fisted her hair as every nerve ending told him to speed up. He kissed the corner of her mouth as she leaned into him. She accidentally grazed his cock, making it judder. She gasped louder, and suddenly, her lips crashed against his.

She cupped his head and held it still. There was nowhere he'd rather be. He sucked on her plump lower lip. She shifted closer and opened her thighs. Lucas leaned in. She tilted her head before pressing her bee-sting lips harder against his, searching for satisfaction. The heat inside him ramped up, flooding his body.

He didn't want to push her too far, but when she licked between the seam of his lips, he opened them to her. She whimpered. Gabi was needy for him. His cock was thicker and harder to hide. He kept his pelvis back, but she pulled him closer by his neck. He growled against her lips.

The intimacy wasn't about adding a little tease before sex; it was the learning and experiencing.

She moaned as his tongue slid into her mouth. She tasted of cherry.

Fuck, that was hot.

The fear of making mistakes upped the tension.

Need pulsated his dick, and he slowly eased away. She nearly fell against him. At her flushed face and panting breath, he was tempted to pick her up and ease her onto his lap.

He sucked air into his lungs. She smelt of flowers and fruit. Cherry lingered on his lips.

"That was..." Her eyes sparkled. "...nice?"

"Nice?" He grinned as much at her words as her blushes. The redness went down her chest and beneath her vest.

She licked her lips, and he nearly swooped back in, but giving her time to reflect was key, and he wanted her to anticipate what would happen the next time they were together.

"It was the best kiss I've ever had, better than the bar. Are you sure you don't want to fuck right now?" she asked breathlessly, pressing her fingers to her mouth.

Lucas's cock jumped, and they both watched it.

"This will be a long couple of months," he replied, and joy zipped through him again when she smirked.

"I promise I'll wear Supergirl knickers and let you see them as a reward."

Lucas cupped her face and pressed his lips to her smiling ones briefly.

"Is it safe? Have you two finished playing tonsil tennis?" Amy asked as she and Henry returned. "Daddy told me to say it."

Lucas rolled his eyes at Henry as Gabi stood, forcing distance between them.

"Yes, we have. What Miss Draper and I did is a secret."

Amy nodded. "Secrets are my thing."

"Thank you, Amy. That means so much to me. I've got to go," Gabi said, checking her watch. "I've got a bus to catch. But I might see you at the rugby match on Saturday."

Lucas felt a pull to protect her but also to make her laugh to ease her tension. Henry side-eyed him as he let her go. Lucas suspected she needed to be alone to process their afternoon.

"And don't forget to post the photo," she called out as she ran out the farm gates. He hoped her lips still wore a smile and a plumpness from their kiss.

"Be careful," Henry warned him quietly.

But Gabi was under his skin, and so was the need to fight her battles. He knew what it was to feel less because of the people around you. For him, it was Lexi and the fans. He didn't want this sweet yet cheeky woman, who was lovely to Amy and kind enough to help him win over the fans, to deal with the crap life threw at her.

He'd ensure he didn't fall for her and repeat his past mistakes. He'd only give her what she wanted, and as much as dating a woman who brought out his saviour complex made his stomach twist, he wasn't going to get into a relationship. Besides, she didn't see him as an option for that anyway, and he'd heard that enough before.

He wasn't getting his heart broken again, because it was just sex. Everything would be fine.

Chapter Fifteen

LUCAS

Lucas ambled towards the locker room with a sigh.

He could be on the pitch with the other players, signing autographs and posing for photos with fans, but there was no place for him there. It took too many weeks of waiting like a fool on the sidelines after a game to learn that, even with his dedication to the team, all he'd earned was insults from fans. No one asked him for a photo or wanted to discuss how well he'd played like they did with the others. And he'd learned to be okay with that. He didn't need the fans to love him, but he needed them to stop ousting him from the club he loved.

Maybe Gabi's social media plan would help. He'd shared their farm date photo on Instagram. The comments were a mixture of kind and cruel. No one insulted her, which was good, because he didn't want to go Incredible Hulk on them. But he would if they did.

A tickle of a smile played on his lips at the idea of Gabi waiting for him to sign an autograph or accompanying him in a photo at a game.

He hadn't heard from her except to organise next week's date, when they'd discuss the rules of their fake dating sex pact.

He ran his fingers across his smiling lips. Maybe he'd get another kiss, too.

"What's got you smiling?" a carefree voice asked as he stepped into the locker room. "Did you see me in the stands? You were

looking."

"Lexi," Lucas replied flatly as his face fell.

The woman he once loved sat on the bench next to his stuff, blocking his only path to his clothes.

"That's not the welcome I'm used to. What's got your knickers in a twist?"

Lucas sucked in a deep breath, regretting it instantly when the scent of her jasmine and cocoa perfume clogged the back of his throat. "Why are you here? We weren't playing the Giants, so neither you nor your husband have any reason to visit."

"Hey." She pouted as she stood up. "The Giants are playing in Newcastle, as you know. Claude is busy up there, so I'm visiting my favourite rugby player."

"And you waited here, where anyone could find you? You don't care that it could cause rumours and damage my reputation further?" Lucas said. "I like this team."

"Shame the fans don't like you." He bristled, and her mouth tilted into a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry no one wants your autograph. You know, I still think you're amazing. This town doesn't deserve you. Claude suggested the Giants might have an opening soon. You should return. I miss you." She stepped closer. Her hand brushed his arm.

Lucas flinched away, grabbing things from his bag so he could change back into his suit and escape. "Your husband wouldn't allow me to return, especially if he knew you were trying to engineer it," he mumbled. Not that he wanted to. He rubbed the ridges on his forehead with a finger. Staying in a town where everyone hated him was becoming less attractive, too, but his family and friends were here. If only fake dating Gabi could make a difference.

But as much as she was a fighter with a heart, the closest thing he'd met to Wonder Woman in real life, she couldn't make the town love him. It didn't stop him from wanting to help her, though, especially now he understood her struggles more.

"You're one of the best players in the premiership, and the Giants need help," Lexi said, cutting into his thoughts. "Pride won't stop Claude when he has fans to answer to and shareholders threatening him with redundancy."

Lucas turned and eyeballed her. "I didn't know it was going so wrong."

"It's been a bad season. Claude's card is marked, which means mine is, too. I don't want to go with him to some city away from my friends so he can coach some shitty team. He's already pulling away from me. It's like my dad all over again." She slumped on the bench.

"Claude isn't your dad. He loves you." Lucas had loved her and never pulled away, but he hadn't been enough for her. He gritted his teeth.

She cocked her head in his direction. With her perfect pouting lips and high cheekbones, it was obvious why she was popular on Instagram. She'd started posting pictures of her in bikinis while dating Claude to show him how much she was desired. But while Lucas recognised her beauty, he felt nothing for her. Yet the chasm in his heart that had formed after she'd rejected him still existed, and nothing had helped him heal it.

"He doesn't love me like you did. You were attentive and made me laugh. Claude goes out drinking all the time. At least, that's what he says. He's always on the phone. Maybe he's cheating." Lexi locked eyes with him. "Do you remember that summer where we went to the beach nearly every day? We had a lot of fun. You were always good for fun, Lucas."

"I remember," he replied, refusing to let emotion or pain creep into his tone.

Lexi shook her head slightly, sending a fresh wave of jasmine and cocoa through the changing room. The scent of that summer had replayed in his head so many times. But now the memory was like being caught in barbed wire, and every time he tried to get away, metal sliced his body, so all he could do was wait it out.

"I often think about that summer and how happy we were," she whispered as she inched closer. "We could have that for just one night and remember how much we loved each other. We'd have lots of fun one last time."

He needed to get rid of her without making a scene, because that would only further ruin his reputation. She'd grab for attention if he kicked her out. She might have press waiting. He could return to the pitch and be ignored, but there was something he still needed to know.

"Why did you dump me?"

She stared at him. "What? Why are you only asking me that now? We broke up three years ago."

"Because I'm over you."

"Really? You haven't kicked me out of your changing room or walked out yet. You're staying for a reason."

Lucas sucked in air. "Just tell me. Why did you leave me and date Claude? What was wrong with me?"

Her laugh echoed through his heart. "The fact you're asking that question is reason enough. You're not relationship material. You're the guy a woman has fun with before she gets into a proper relationship. I needed someone ambitious, commanding, and arrogant, but in a good way, someone worth striving for. I needed someone serious. A man with depth. Don't pretend that's you. You weren't long-term, you were fun." Lucas swallowed repeatedly, but the sour taste wouldn't leave his mouth. "But Claude has never made me moan like you did."

Lucas paced the locker room. Like a masochist, he needed her to confirm one last thing, and then he'd delete her from his life forever. "So I'm not enough for a relationship, but you want one night with me?"

"Exactly. So what do you say?"

He strode to the doorway and headfirst into a wide-eyed Gabi.

Chapter Sixteen

GABI

Gabi tried to turn on her heel and flee, but her feet stuck to the floor.

She stared at the woman smirking on the locker room bench. "Do you mind? I was talking to Lucas," the stranger said.

"Leave, Lexi," Lucas snapped.

"But you haven't given me a date for our special evening together."

This must be why he'd headed for the tunnel straight after the game. Gabi waited for him to work the crowd after the match and to get his autograph. Maybe if she did it, others would, but he'd gone before she reached the pitch.

Gabi's limbs loosened, and she turned to the door just as Lucas reached her.

"Gabi."

He smelt of sweat and sea air. His shirt was damp from his relentless performance. She'd watched in awe as he'd powered up and down the pitch, taking down the opposition with the force of a felled tree. She'd seen him staring into the crowd and hoped he was searching for her so he could gift her one of his panty-wetting winks.

"Sorry to barge in," she whispered. His hands cupped her shoulders. Those damn rugby players and their quick reactions. She should have scarpered when she found him with the beautiful Lexi. "It's not what it looks like. I just wanted to...to..."

His hands slid from her shoulders down to her hands. Although she wore a hoodie, her arms still tingled. The memory of his lips against hers, the way she whimpered as he kissed her at the farm, kept her in place.

Lucas's smile as he locked her stare eased her nerves briefly. He rubbed his thumbs across her hands.

"I wanted to check if we're still on for our date next week," she said quietly, attempting to conceal the conversation from his visitor.

Lucas's hulking body hid Lexi. Gabi was pale and dull compared to her. In her tailored jeans and fitted cashmere jumper, she'd probably left a catwalk to attend the game.

Gabi took in Lucas's hunched shoulders and bitten lips. Lucas said he didn't date. Was this woman the reason why?

"Is this your new hookup, Lucas? You should introduce me." The woman shoved Lucas's hands out of the way, breaking his contact with Gabi, before holding out her own. "I'm Lexi. And you are?"

She carried the same assertive presence that poured off Evie.

"All right, Lucas." Speak of the devil. Gabi turned to find her sister, who was holding hands with Josh. In her leather trousers and rugby shirt, she was a true WAG. Gabi smiled despite everything. Josh gave Evie something many hadn't: acceptance and love. Gabi wanted that one day, but first, she must get through her medical crap. "Lexi, what are you doing here? We're a long way from Newcastle and your *husband*."

Gabi tilted her head as she stared at Lexi. So she probably wasn't Lucas's secret girlfriend. But the way he furrowed his brow and winced as he looked between Gabi, Evie, and Lexi screamed anxiety.

"You're still with Josh?" Lexi nodded at their hands entwined. "At the Giants, we have bets on which player you're going to date next. Or have you run out of available men?"

"You've got a lot of audacity for someone with your reputation," Evie snapped.

More players filled the locker room, and at her height, Gabi struggled to see beyond the hulking bodies. Lucas gripped her hand and walked her to the side of the room, but they couldn't get far enough from the hustle or the escalating aggro between Lexi and Evie.

"Are you okay?" Lucas said, leaning down to murmur in her ear. Her pulse quickened as his breath tickled her neck.

"Are you?" she asked as she stroked the lines on Lucas's forehead away. She wanted to save him. It was like she was trying to calm a lion. His muscles were tight, and she couldn't decipher if it was adrenaline or anxiety.

Lexi eyeballed them. Gabi shook her head as if she could shake off her wariness from Lexi's presence.

"It wasn't what it looked like. She's an ex," Lucas said, leaning into her touch. "I'll explain."

"Lucas, it's okay. You're my sex commander, remember?" she whispered, and he chuckled. Some of the tension in his body eased. "You don't owe me any explanation. I was going to ask if you could not sleep with anyone else while we're going on dates as part of our sex pact rules. I should have said something sooner, but I wasn't sure I could request this."

"You can request whatever makes you comfortable. I'm not sleeping with her or anyone, and I won't have sex with anyone else while we do this thing." When he said anyone else, the corners of Gabi's lips rose. "I promise, princess. And I'll share more about my past with you one day if you want to hear."

"I'd—"

"There are too many women in here! And I'm meant to be doing a team talk." Charlie's voice reverberated off the walls. "But we've got to do our traditional team celebration after today's win. Although, I swear, it's more for social media bullshit than actual team morale."

Charlie glared at the social media manager, who stared at the ceiling.

"If you're not paid staff, fuck off out of the room—"

Evie stared at him as she cleared her throat.

"Fine, you can stay, and so can Gabi, but only because of how kind Gabi has been to Lucas," Coach whispered with a nod, presumably referring to their fake dating agreement. His stare landed on Lexi. "You can definitely get out. You're not welcome in my changing room. Not now. Not ever. Get out, Lexi."

Lexi shrugged, giving one last longing look at Lucas before sashaying out of the room.

"Once we've filmed this, you ladies are going, unless you want to be part of the after-game team shower."

Gabi smiled at the fantasies filling her head. Lucas raised his brows. Her cheeks reddened.

"I wouldn't mind," Evie quipped, making everyone laugh. "But my heart belongs to Josh."

Gabi wished she'd been confident enough to make the same joke.

Charlie shoved the social media manager forward as Josh ripped off his shirt and threw it in a metal barrel in the centre of the room.

"Oh my," Evie said, staring at Josh, who beamed at her.

Several other players removed their shirts and threw them into the barrel. Gabi pushed her fringe out of her face while pretending not to look at Lucas. He kept his shirt on. She wanted to study him in a place where it wasn't about sex and where she wasn't anxious about his expectations of her.

Evie manoeuvred Gabi to the doorway so they could see the entire room.

"What's going on?" Gabi enquired.

"Just watch. If you think you're blushing now, you're going to be as red as a postbox in a minute," Evie replied, confirming Gabi was as flushed as she felt. "Few people see this in the flesh, so make the most of it."

Gabi balanced on the edges of her feet as she stared.

The social media manager pointed the phone at Josh as he banged his hand against the barrel. All the men sang about the Bulls, chanting to a tune she'd never heard before. Their booming voices echoed as they sang how much they loved their team.

She needed to watch all the Bulls reels. It was hotter than porn.

The phone panned the group. As it reached Lucas, he ripped his shirt off and swung it around his head. His biceps pulsed, and his chest rippled. The social media manager filmed the rest of the team, but Gabi focused on the man who'd promised to instruct her in sex. She licked her lips as she remembered his body against hers when they kissed.

Lucas met her stare. As he winked, heat bloomed between her thighs. It was becoming a familiar sensation around him.

Anticipation for their next date set her body ablaze.

But as she smiled, she couldn't push away the lingering memory of Lexi. No matter what happened over the next two months, Gabi wouldn't ever be as confident or as enticing as Lexi.

Chapter Seventeen

LUCAS

Shivering in a wetsuit tight enough to make his eyes pop out and his balls jump inside him wasn't Lucas's ideal Wednesday evening.

But here he was.

The paddleboard wobbled beneath his knees. With the force of his stare, he willed it to stop rocking.

Fucking paddleboarding. He hated the water almost as much as he hated heights.

He glanced at Gabi, who beamed attentively at Jools, the instructor, who, with his long blond hair and golden tan, was better suited to a Californian surf competition than a cold April evening in the Cotswolds.

Lucas tried to catch her eye, but he might as well have sat on the shore, ignoring the ten messages he'd gotten from Lexi since Saturday. Gabi had barely glanced at him since he'd arrived. He'd commented on how the sun hit the water and then offered to help her onto it with her board, but she'd mumbled something he still couldn't decipher. It wasn't a "please help me," though, so he'd left her to it, ready to pick up the back of her board if she struggled. But even at her five-foot height, she'd wrestled the beast into the water.

In the build-up to this date, his texts to her were full of emojis and bad jokes, but her replies were polite and short. It must be the Lexi effect.

This wasn't a real date or relationship, but the necessity to explain Lexi blistered his skin. He needed Gabi to know he was a good guy. Too many voices shouted he wasn't, including fans and probably Evie, but the desperation for her not to think negatively about him wouldn't quit. And Gabi should learn more about him. She'd explained so much about herself.

"Now you know the basic techniques, are you ready to stand?" Jools asked, although the way he stared at Gabi suggested he was only interested in instructing one of them.

Not that Lucas cared. The pressure clutching his stomach wasn't jealousy. It was the prospect of standing on a wobbling paddleboarding.

Gabi nodded enthusiastically.

The Lexi effect had also caused his dropping confidence. He shouldn't have asked if she thought he was enough. The memory of her retort made it impossible to believe in himself.

"Yeah, we're good, Jools. We got this, but thanks anyway, mate," Lucas announced. He stretched his thighs a bit wider as if he was competing in a contest for who had the biggest dick. The paddleboard rocked and he glared at it.

Gabi raised her eyebrow at him and gave him a sour look. Lucas's shoulders slumped. Note to self: Gabi wasn't impressed by arrogance.

"Cool, bro. And stay chill, yeah? People rarely fall in," Jools replied.

Lucas winced as he spied the water's inky depths.

"I'm going to do a bit more on my knees. Bye." He thrust his paddle into the water and quickly dragged it through the ripples, trying to escape. The strength in his biceps from training was useful, although he was fighting against the rest of his weight. Rugby players weren't natural paddleboarders. Or maybe it was just him.

Within minutes, he was at the other end of the lake. Birds sang, and a heron perched on a log at the water's edge.

He took a deep breath and let the fresh air fill his lungs.

"What was that about?" Gabi called behind him.

Manoeuvring his paddle through the water, he turned to find her wide eyes staring at him in accusation. She was a little out of breath.

His gaze travelled down her body, lingering on how her wetsuit stuck to every curve. Even with the cold, his cock flushed with heat.

She was hot as fuck in her denim dress on the farm, but in a wetsuit, it was like silicon had dripped all over her body.

He swallowed and stared at the end of the lake, where the instructor chatted with others. He couldn't let Gabi catch him gawking at how the wetsuit clung to her chest.

"What was what about?" he replied half-heartedly.

Gabi bristled. "You didn't have to be rude to Jools. He was trying to teach us."

Lucas stared again at Jools, who performed handstands for two ladies, who giggled at his antics. Heat crept into Lucas's cheeks as he had flashbacks to how Claude would humiliate him during practices with the Giants, laughing at him when his tackles didn't land or his sprints weren't as fast as his teammates'. Lucas was good at sports, but when he struggled, his previous shame returned.

The women in the distance shouted with laughter as Jools splashed them.

"Jools was trying to teach *you*. I was barely a dot in his lesson," Lucas said with a shrug.

Gabi's brow furrowed. "You're wrong. After you paddled off, he said you were doing well and your form was great, but you need to focus more on your left side."

"Oh." Lucas slumped, the wind pulled out of his sails. "I shall try harder."

With the uncomfortableness after the game and the awkward texts, he struggled to understand why Gabi wanted him close, even as a fake date. A couple of minutes with Lexi, and he was the insecure guy he'd become after their break-up.

"I was surprised you went to the locker room immediately after the game on Saturday. I wanted to get a photo with you on the pitch," she said, betraying that the weekend was on her mind, too. "Had you already agreed to meet with Lexi in the locker room?"

Lucas shook his head, causing the paddleboard to rock. He stilled and held it tight as Gabi paddled closer and helped control it.

"I don't stay after games because that's normally when the fans heckle me, and no one wants a photo," he confessed quietly. "I was surprised to see Lexi. Since I moved, I've only seen her from afar when her husband's team play ours."

"Okay." Gabi let out a breath, and her shoulders appeared to relax. "And so you know, I would have shouted back at those

hecklers."

"Really?" he asked, a smile teasing his lips as he struggled to imagine her shouting at an angry six-foot fan.

"No one shouts at my fake boyfriend." She returned his smile. "Can I ask what happened with you and her? Evie said you were screwing behind her husband's back."

Lucas chewed the inside of his mouth. He'd tried to deny the gossip initially, but no one accepted the truth, so he'd avoided talking about it. When he moved to the Bulls, he'd let the rumours continue, knowing that no one would believe him, anyway. Initially, he'd enjoyed the bad boy reputation, and it sounded better than the truth. He'd liked people thinking he was a player rather than someone who was easily manipulated. But now, he wished the rumours weren't one of the things Gabi believed about him.

"Lexi and I dated before she got together with Claude. I didn't sleep with her or anything after that, no matter what photos suggest. They were rumours that, in hindsight, I should've shut down. I didn't anticipate how much people would hate me because of them. The photo of her leaving mine the week before her wedding was me talking with her about pre-wedding jitters. I was briefly there for her as a friend, no more."

Gabi's knuckles were white where she gripped her paddle. That was a bad sign. Lucas stared at the woman who'd shared so much of her life with him. He didn't want to be ashamed of his past. "While we were together, I fell in love with her. It took a long time for that love to go."

"Oh, I didn't realise," Gabi stuttered. "I mean, I saw something between you two, but I wasn't sure what it was. So you didn't have an affair with her?"

"Definitely not. I wouldn't have had an affair with her, physically or emotionally. I'm not that guy. I wanted her to be happy, but now I realise she used me. Max has helped me realise how toxic she was. I can't have a friendship like that again."

"Like what?"

"Where I get emotionally invested with someone who has the capability to hurt me."

"Okay." Lines appeared on Gabi's forehead.

Jools shouted something at them, and Gabi waved.

"We should probably pretend to paddleboard, or Jools will head over. Do you want to try standing on your board?"

"Not really," he said honestly. He tilted his head and studied Gabi.

"I'm going to try, just so we can keep hanging out alone. If that's okay with you?"

Lucas smiled. "Sounds good."

Her smile gave him a warmth he tried to ignore. He meant what he said about not getting into a Lexi-style friendship again.

Gabi fixed the paddle to the board with her hands and leaned forward. Slowly, she slid on her knees so her right foot was flat on the paddleboard. Lucas held his breath as the board wobbled, but it didn't deter her. This woman, who at times appeared terrified of so much, especially when around the other rugby players, was doing something that made him want to puke. She lifted her other knee to squat. Then, as if it was the simplest thing in the world, she rose high. Her feet moved nearly imperceptibly as she found her position.

"It wasn't that hard after all. Your turn," she announced, placing her paddle in the lake and gently pushing it in the water. She paddled rings around him.

"I didn't agree to stand," he grunted, shame stifling him. "I'm fine on my knees."

"I'd be fine with you on your knees, too, if we were in my bedroom," she mumbled, surprising him. "You know...oral?"

Her smile was beguiling, and he chuckled. "Yes, I know, oral." Maybe she was trying to distract him or make him smile, but he didn't care because, from her, just the word oral was enough to ease some of his anxiety.

There was a shyness to her stare, but with her hands on her paddle, she couldn't push her fringe or stand on the edges of her feet, either.

"Have you thought about being on your knees in front of me a lot, princess?" he asked, grabbing at the one thing he could do: turn women on.

She nodded as she pulled her lips into her mouth and avoided eye contact.

Lucas hid his groan at the image of her beautiful mouth wrapped around his dick.

"Good," he growled. "And so you know, I can't wait to be on my knees in front of you. I want to hear the noises you make when my head is between your thighs."

Her face turned a bright crimson, and if he weren't on a board and terrified of falling into the cold water, he'd have cupped her face to feel her heat.

"You want to do that with me?" She stared at him, and her green eyes sparkled beneath the spring sunshine.

"Yes, Gabs, I've imagined it a couple of times since we met," he admitted, licking his lips and grinning. "I've fantasised about you riding my face, your hands tight on the headboard. Every time I kiss you, I want more, and my fantasies get filthier."

"Oh." A shy grin toyed with her lips. "I had no idea."

He sighed at the challenge this fascinating beauty offered him—and at his need to impress her. "Which reminds me: we haven't discussed our fake dating sex pact rules and how the next couple of months might go."

"I know, but every conversation we have about sex scares me." She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. "And thrills me."

"That's okay. I'm the same about standing on this flimsy thing."

"I'm sorry I brought you to something that scares you."

"Maybe our fear is bonding us."

"That's a fucked up way to bond," Gabi replied.

Lucas laughed. "True. If I try to stand, will you try to discuss the rules? It's better to know them than hurt each other accidentally."

"Okay. You go first with a rule."

"So, confirming the one from the weekend, rule one: Neither of us will kiss or do anything intimate with someone else while we're doing this fake dating sex pact."

"Agreed. It's not like it's an option for me, but I appreciate you not doing anything with anyone because you have all the options. It's quite limiting for you."

"Focusing on you and your needs isn't limiting at all. It's a turn-on." Her blush made him smile. "What's number two?"

Gabi took a deep breath. "Rule two: If someone doesn't want to do something, they can say so, and we can stop, including standing on a paddleboard. You don't have to stand, you know."

He chuckled. "Rule three: We only do this thing for two months. Then we go our separate ways."

She pressed a fist to her mouth before quickly returning her hand to her paddle. "No friendship?"

He shook his head. He couldn't risk falling for another woman who only wanted him for sex. "No friendship. We might see each other at things, but only as acquaintances and nothing more."

She did a cute little pout that he wanted to kiss off her face. Avoiding a friendship would keep them both safe.

Gabi's tongue pressed against the corner of her lips before she added, "Rule four: Amending the rules is allowed, but with discussion and agreement of both parties."

"Sure." He couldn't believe she wanted to be his friend this much, especially with his bad rep. It wasn't all rumours. She was a sweet primary school teacher, and he was a dick, but he wouldn't be changing rule three, especially after seeing Lexi again.

"Rule five: We can talk about anything," he said, fumbling with his words and wishing the prospect of Jools hadn't interrupted their Lexi chat. But maybe it was giving Gabi time to process. "We can't be too scared to ask questions. The other person can say no to discussing it, but if we're going to feel comfortable with each other, it's okay to ask."

"I like that one. Rule six, although this is more of a request: lots of dirty talk, even if it's out of nowhere. I love it."

"You like it when I talk about your filthy fantasies, baby?"

She nodded. "Yeah. A lot," she said breathlessly.

"Good girl," he said with a wink, and she blushed. Damn, this beautiful woman.

"And I like it when you call me that, so more of that."

"I'll make sure I call you that during sex, too."

Her teeth pulled at her lip. His heart rate climbed at what might come next.

"When we were on the farm date," she broached tentatively, "we said that date five would be the sex date." Lucas nodded. "How are we going to get there from this?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just..." She took a breath, avoiding eye contact. "Actually touching, being naked with each other, and being intimate terrifies me."

"I think that's why it surprises me how much you like dirty talk. When it comes to real life steps rather than teasing, you're really

anxious."

"It's that obvious, eh?" She gripped her paddle tighter. "I think some of that comes from the books I read. I also watch porn. I watched it a lot while doing the hospital exercises to help penetration. Do you remember the ones I told you about at the farm?"

"Briefly."

"Yeah, well, I can kind of remove myself mentally from a situation because of that. But when it comes to letting someone close enough to..." Her pause piqued his curiosity. ".. just close enough, it terrifies me. I want to be brave, but what if I can't be?"

"Gabs, if it doesn't happen by date five, then we go to date ten or whatever. Nothing is set, and I have a couple of months before the end of season. We'll take things at your pace. We'll try out different ideas, and I'll learn what you like. I stand by what I said at the farm about consent, but over the next couple of months, we'll increase touch and then try touching without clothes, and whenever you're okay with something, then we try a bit more, unless you don't want to continue. We stop whenever you want us to."

"Even during?"

Lucas nodded, wanting to hold her close, but it was impossible on the paddleboard. "Even during. And if you want to try anything, then you say in a message or to my face. Maybe something will happen in a month or two or not at all, but you control the pace, and I'm here to challenge you but only when you're comfortable with me doing so."

"Okay." She met his gaze. Her brow wrinkled. "That brings me to the last rule then, unless you have any others." He shook his head. "Rule seven, as per your words earlier: We do things that scare us."

"Is that rule about making me do horrible activities?" he replied.
"Or about challenging yourself?"

His pulse slowed when she smirked. *I did that.*

"Maybe both. We can still say no. Remember, rule two was if someone doesn't want to do something, they can say stop. But as you said, it's good to challenge ourselves. Maybe rule seven will help me embrace the fear of intimacy. Wonder Woman would challenge herself, and Batman did all the time." She chuckled, referencing what was quickly becoming an inside joke between the two of them after he'd showed her his Batman tattoo in the bar and

she did her drunk impression of Batman in front of him and Rose. "And Batman probably said something like, 'Our fear bonds us,' too."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "I like it when you're cheeky."

Gabi giggled, and again, he got that pull, like a rope yanking at his waist, to impress her. He had to believe she wouldn't use him beyond the boundaries they'd set.

"We should shake on this, but let's wait until we're on dry land."

"No, let's do it now," he announced with a burst of confidence.

"But—"

"I told you I'm standing, princess."

"But—" She pressed her lips tightly when he glared at her. "Okay, but only if you want to. I wasn't trying to reverse psychology you."

"I want to." And he did. He wanted to be Batman to her.

She softened her voice. "You know what to do? Lift one leg at a time, keep the board still, and you want to eventually end up with your feet where your knees are and your paddle in your hands. Do what I did."

"I'll try to," he grumbled, moving his knees wider. "Now give me that green-eyed stare, princess, and tell me how impressive I am."

She blushed as she locked his stare. "I love how you're battling something that scares you. You'll conquer it because you're fucking awesome."

His heart thudded. They were just words to help him, but he'd take on the world with her as his cheerleader.

Slowly, he moved, sliding his knees, and then his feet, into place like she did. The board wobbled as he placed his right foot down.

"Lucas, you're doing it. You're Batman."

His arms shook as he squatted, and he glanced at her briefly. Her wide eyes and cute smile forced his own. The board shook a little, but it settled quickly.

"You've got this," she whispered.

He gulped air as he slowly stood.

"You did it!" she squealed.

He gave a tiny nod, too scared to do anything that would make the board move.

His legs trembled.

"Move your feet hip-width apart and bend your knees slightly. It's all about centre of gravity." She beamed, making his heart swell. "Like I am."

He did as she suggested.

"You understood the instructions really well."

He shrugged. "I had a great teacher." She seemed proud of him. That, and his adrenaline from doing something that scared him made him want to tease her. It was like showboating after a rugby try, but this time, he had a cheerleader rather than a heckler. "You know, I take instruction well in other places, too."

Her brow furrowed.

"Rule six," he said, reminding her she'd requested lots of dirty talk even if it was out of nowhere. He fixed her with his gaze. Even as his legs wobbled, his stare didn't leave hers. "I can't wait to learn what you like. I want you to tell me how you play, and if you grip the sheets as you fuck your toy."

"Oh." Her gasp delighted him.

"You do fuck your toy, don't you, princess?"

She nodded.

"Good girl."

She licked her lips. Her pupils dilated, and he longed to have her in his arms, but the way her chest rose and fell in her skin-tight wetsuit would be enough for now.

"I'm going to learn everything so that you're begging for me to make you come." The possibility of seeing her orgasm as she rode his dick made his lips twist with a smirk.

"We're going to have a lot of fun in the bedroom," she stuttered.

He raised his brows. "Who says we'll be doing it in the bedroom, Gabs? I want you everywhere, from the kitchen counter to the bonnet of your car."

She giggled in surprise. His confidence surged. Knowing she imagined the fantasies he shared made his body hum. Unfortunately, it made his dick hard, too, which wasn't ideal in a wetsuit when Jools could join them any second.

"Let's try paddling," he grunted.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep, sure. You go first." Hopefully, his growing erection would go down by the time they got to Jools.

Soon, he skimmed through the water, and she shouted instructions behind her.

With Gabi slightly in front, his gaze focused on her curvy bum. Her glutes flexed as she moved the paddle while keeping her balance. They were mesmerising. The lowering sun framed her body just for him.

His dick juddered. "Shit."

"You okay?" she shouted, turning.

He attempted to shift his wetsuit, fumbling with the paddle. The board rocked to the left, and he pushed to the right, but it made it rock further.

"I don't—"

His heart thundered as the paddleboard lifted to one side, and he flew into the icy water.

He went down but came up quickly with his life jacket on and his foot attached to the board.

Water streamed off his face as he spied a panicking Gabi yanking off her ankle leash and jumping into the water near him. She swam quickly, her arms cutting into the water as she neared where he bobbed in the lake. She panted as she leaned her hands on his board.

"What did you do that for?" he asked between gasps. He shivered as he stared into her bright green eyes.

"I wanted to rescue you," she replied as water dripped down her trembling lips.

"And you thought this was the best way?"

She smiled sheepishly. Her fringe was plastered against her forehead, and her cheeks were flush. She was fucking gorgeous.

"You really are my Wonder Woman."

Although the water ensured his erection was no longer an issue, her big green eyes turned his earlier fear into excitement. With one hand flat on the board, he reached for her face and kissed her hard on the lips. She shivered against his mouth as she kissed him back.

Even with the awkwardness of their bobbing bodies and the freezing water surrounding them, the heat of the moment and anticipation of what the night might bring at the sensual painting class left him in no doubt he wanted to discover more of her. And each moment he spent in her company was more fun than the last.

Chapter Eighteen

GABI

“Show me the photo for Instagram,” Gabi requested as they walked into the art gallery. “We must look hilarious with soaking wet hair and shivering in our wetsuits.”

Paintings and sculptures surrounded them. Some of the faces in the images were familiar. Lucas explained that Aidan, a former Bulls player, owned the gallery with his wife, Sophia. Over the years, Aidan painted most of the Bulls’ players, and his artwork now hung in the gallery.

Lucas took his phone out of his pocket and showed Gabi the image of them after they’d dragged themselves onto their boards and paddled back to shore. Although shaking and, in her own words, “gross as hell,” their beaming smiles betrayed their happiness.

“What’s that, Lucas?” a lady with art brushes fixing her auburn bun in place asked.

She resembled a cool older sister in her baggy jeans and paint shirt. Gabi was a mess in comparison, wearing a hoodie with scruffy cuffs from the numerous times she scratched them with her nails. She pulled up the neckband to decipher if it was her or Lucas that still smelt of lake water. Yep, definitely her, and it was mixing with the sour perfume from the miniature she’d found at the bottom of her rucksack.

"Gabi and I are doing local activities, and she's making me post photos of us online," Lucas said.

"I'm not making you," she replied, giving him a soft punch to his bicep. She fought the temptation to grab it. He was so strong. He'd lifted her effortlessly out of the water after their kiss and squeezed her bum as he pushed her onto the board.

She'd planned the paddleboarding to break the awkwardness lingering after the match. Their conversations eased her anxiety, and then he gave her one of those kisses that made her want to climb him and never come back down. Maybe she should add requesting touches to their rules.

He squeezed her hand and tapped her bum with his other palm. Fuck, he was good. She didn't even need to ask.

"You two are going to enjoy our class tonight," the lady said with a wink.

"This is Sophia," Lucas said. "She's leading the class tonight with Aidan."

Gabi took in the paintings around the room. One of a woman draped in scarlet material caught her eye. She glanced at Sophia, whose eyes twinkled. "Is that you?"

"Yes. Aidan, my husband, painted it one special night. As you'll learn this evening, making art with your partner can be sexy and fun foreplay."

"Huh?" Gabi asked, tensing.

"This is a sensual painting class for couples. Didn't Lucas tell you?"

Gabi glared at Lucas, who winced under her gaze. "But it doesn't mean we have to—"

At a commotion at the door, Lucas stared over her shoulder. Gavin "The Destroyer" walked in with a cackling blonde lady. "Fuck me. Tasha and Gavin are together?"

"Yes." Sophia chuckled. "But don't tell anyone. They're keeping it secret."

"What?" Gabi asked.

"Tasha is Sophia's boss, and she went on a charity date with your future brother-in-law, Josh, once and—"

"You're not telling it right," Sophia said. "I work at a charity that helps children after a family member has died. We chat with families and run clubs and events with activities like arts and games.

Anyway, Tasha won a date to go out with Josh. When they were out, Evie—”

“Evie bumped into him, and then Josh and Evie sneaked out of the cinema and made out outside even though she used to date his best friend, Aidan, aka Sophia’s husband!” Lucas pointed at Aidan, who was setting up easels around the room. He gave an uncomfortable wave, probably unsure of what was said about him.

“You’re rubbish at keeping secrets, Lucas,” Sophia said with an eye roll.

Lucas reddened. “I’m really good with some secrets.”

Gabi glanced at him warily. She tried to shift her worry about Lucas and the things she’d shared privately with him from her hunched shoulders.

“It ended okay. And Evie and Josh were in love with each other but couldn’t deal with it.”

“You guys are confusing and incestuous,” Gabi said, scratching at her cuffs while staring at the easels. She’d never attended a sensual painting class before. Did she have to get naked?

“You’re part of that now,” Sophia added. “You’re dating Lucas.”

Gabi shook her head. “We’re not dating.”

Sophia’s eyebrow quirked. “Aidan and I were like that once.”

“It’s just to make the fans like me again,” Lucas stuttered. “And Gabi doesn’t know many people and hasn’t lived here long, so it’s a nice way to show her more of the area.”

Tasha giggled as Gavin pinned her against a wall and made out with her.

Lucas coughed awkwardly. “Any easel ours?”

“That one’s yours,” Sophia said, pointing to the one in the far corner, which was nearly hidden.

As Lucas walked towards it, Sophia said, “Gabi, if you ever want to meet for coffee, get in touch. My contact details and Aidan’s are on the flyers on your easel. ‘Not dating’ a rugby guy can be tricky.”

Gabi looked at Lucas’s back and smiled. *Especially one who doesn’t want to be friends once this ends.* “Thank you.” Sophia was so polite. Gabi couldn’t imagine contacting her, even though once Rose was married and living with Charlie, Gabi would be nearly friendless. She wouldn’t even have Lucas in common with Sophia then. What would they chat about?

Gabi threaded her way around six easels. Ideas of what the night might involve made her tremble, and she pushed her fringe from her face. Shivering on a wobbly paddleboard was better than this. Her throat was dry as she reached their easel.

Lucas nodded at the seat next to him. Gabi tripped over one of the easel legs, making the canvas wobble, but Lucas grabbed her around the waist to prevent her from falling while holding the board with his other hand.

"Everything okay?" Lucas asked as she sat. He reached for her hands and held them as they shook against his. "What's wrong, Gabs?"

"I can't get naked in front of all these people. I'm not ready for that. There's so much I haven't experienced, and I don't want to do that." She should run. It was too much.

Most of the others were getting a coffee before sitting. Chatter and awkward laughter filled the amply sized section of the studio.

Lucas smiled softly at her. "You don't need to get naked. That's not what this class is. One of us draws the other, fully clothed, in a way that involves light touching. It's to gently help us with our touching barrier in a safe space." His blue eyes dulled as he implored her for understanding. "We don't have to stay. I should have told you about it before rather than making you anxious. I'm not good at this fake dating sex pact thing. I'm an idiot. Coach often tells me I don't think before I act. Do you want to go?"

Gabi's shoulders relaxed, and she cupped Lucas's face with a trembling hand. "You're not an idiot. Neither of us has done this pact thing before, so we'll make mistakes. It's okay."

"But you're shaking." His hand was against hers. His warmth travelled through her body. "When we were paddleboarding, you were the most confident person on the water—"

"Apart from Jools," she teased.

"Jools is probably the most confident person wherever he goes." Lucas chuckled. "I want you to always feel comfortable around me and be able to tell me what's going on with you. Is that a deal?"

Gabi nodded. "We should make it rule eight."

"We should. I'll always tell you when I'm anxious, too," Lucas said, his hand still against hers. His thumb stroked her little finger.

"Like while paddleboarding?" Lucas laughed again and nodded. "I'm more confident doing activities when I have some control and

I've done it before. Everything I'm doing with you is new. Thank you for not laughing at me when I got anxious, especially when I thought I'd have to get naked."

"I'll never laugh at your anxiety. I'm sorry if people have laughed at you before." He kissed her palm that still cupped his face, and she shivered, refusing to let memories of her teenage boyfriend cloud the moment.

She stared into his eyes and sucked in a breath. "Will you always tell me something else when you feel it?"

Lucas's eyebrows knitted together. He was adorable when he did that. He nodded slowly.

Gabi swallowed, and she shifted in her seat. "Will you tell me when I turn you on or if there's something about me you find attractive?"

He squeezed her hand. A smile replaced his quizzical gaze. "That would be all the time." She rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Gabi. I've been hot for you since the lift. You're intelligent, beautiful, and kind. And your body is so fucking sexy."

She met his stare.

"Seriously, you're strong in a way I can't get enough of. I love you in this oversized hoodie, but I remember how your thighs quivered and clenched that night in the bar as you wriggled in your chair. And then there's your bum. Oh, god, your bum is so tight and—"

"Okay, okay. I believe you."

She pushed his shoulder, and he grinned. "So fucking strong," he said, his voice deep and raspy.

She licked her lips, and he followed her tongue. "Have you, you know, thought about me when you..." His head tilted as she squeezed her lips together. "You know, when you—"

"When I wank?" His eyes were wide, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he stared back.

Gabi nodded. "I was going to say play with yourself."

Her hand trembled, and he pulled it away from his face and held it close to his chest. As they faced each other on their stools, their legs brushed. Lucas shifted in his seat, and her eyes dipped temporarily to where his dick pressed against his fly.

"If you keep looking there, it's going to get really fucking hard," he teased. "I've fantasised a lot about you while stroking my cock.

That's okay to say, right?"

Gabi nodded exuberantly. "It's more than okay. It turns me on to know you think of me like that and not as some innocent untouchable thing." Before he queried what she meant, she stuttered, "When you imagine me, what am I doing, or what are we doing?"

His smile twisted to the side of his face, and his chest rose and fell with each breath. His teeth pulled at his lower lip.

"Hello, class. I'm Aidan, and this is my wife, Sophia," a tall, chiselled man called out from the front. Gabi wanted to scream no.

"I'll tell you later," Lucas whispered, ramping up her anticipation, "but only if you're a good girl."

"Thank you for coming tonight. I'm sure some of you are nervous, but I promise this is painting in a way that focuses on the senses," Aidan continued.

Some of the group murmured with interest, but a trembling Gabi side-eyed Lucas, who whispered in her ear, "We're going to have a lot of fun tonight, princess."

Chapter Nineteen

LUCAS

“It sounds like she says she’s farting carrots,” Lucas mumbled as Selena Gomez’s song “Good For You,” with a line about fourteen carats, played in the background.

“Shush, I’m trying to focus,” Gabi replied.

With his eyes covered by a blindfold, he couldn’t witness her grin, but he’d bet money on her smiling right now.

“Having your partner run their fingertips against your features, brushing against your skin, as they paint you can be an intimate experience. But the added blindfold as they feel your face, hands, or whatever other part of you they paint adds a more sensual aspect. For those blindfolded and painted, you need to trust your partner, but the anticipation of where they’ll touch you next adds to the experience,” Sophia explained to the group.

“I love how sex-positive Sophia and Aidan are. I’m not used to that. Did you learn about anticipation from their classes?” Gabi asked as Lucas entwined his fingers with hers.

His need to touch her was as much about the blindfold and wanting safety as it was about wanting her close. She’d supported him and helped him with paddleboarding once she’d realised how nervous he was. He wanted to ensure he supported her in something that scared her. Her dainty fingers made his stomach ache as he imagined her playing with herself. Did she slide her fingers inside herself or rub her clit as she pressed a toy inside her?

"Lucas?"

"Sorry, I was...enjoying the moment." He fumbled his excuse as her fingers continued to stroke him. "This is my first time at their sensual painting class. I learned about anticipation over time through experience. Reading a lot of spicy romance books helped, too."

She gasped, and he smiled wider.

"Didn't I seem the type?" he asked with a chuckle. "I love a bit of hockey romance, although rugby romance is my favourite."

He imagined her quizzical brow as she stared at him. He wished he could see her reaction. "I read one where they wore blindfolds," he added, cutting through the silence.

"Have you worn a blindfold in...other places before?" Gabi asked.

He wanted to cover her curiosity and blossoming confidence with kisses. It was nice to be the guy this beautiful woman trusted rather than someone people heckled or laughed at.

"I have. Is it something you've thought about doing?"

"Not until now. I'd like to wear a blindfold with you in bed," Gabi replied. Her fingers slid apart from his and danced across his cheeks. "Not knowing where you might touch me or how would make me so needy. And having you whisper things in my ear as your hands and tongue touched me would—"

Lucas swallowed loudly.

"Sorry, I got carried away with the fantasy." His lack of senses heightened every noise she made. She sounded breathless.

"Never apologise for that, Gabs. Never," he growled.

He leaned forward as her thumb brushed his jaw. She didn't smell of her typical tropical fruit fragrance. He breathed in notes of strawberries and lilies. It suited her, sweet and delicate, although it was missing something to represent her growing cheekiness.

Her hum as she touched him dived under his skin and made his entire body vibrate. The softness of her skin had him widening his thighs. He held his breath for fear he'd pant so loudly he wouldn't hear her, and he needed to hear her. Sporadically, he caught sounds of her paintbrush on paper or her feet tapping against the stool. He'd never listened so hard for what someone might do next. There were other noises in the room, chatter and the occasional laughter, yet he only cared about what sounds Gabi made.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked, his voice thick with need.

"Yes. Always," she replied.

Lucas leaned forward again as her fingers stroked across the skin behind his ear before disappearing. "Can you tell how horny I am for you right now? Touch me if you want." He held the word please back, scared it would come out as begging.

She grazed his jean-covered erection, causing him to hiss.

"You're fucking hard, Lucas." The way his innocent schoolteacher said "fucking hard," coupled with the anticipation of more, made his cock judder

The temptation to pull her into a kiss overwhelmed him. The moment in the lake was a taste of her, and it wasn't enough. He fisted his hands. Building her trust was imperative, and he'd cause himself pain to give her that gift.

She moved closer. Her fingers stroked through his hair, now dry after the lake. He purred when her fingertips made his scalp tingle. He fought the lure to lift his blindfold and see his effect on her. He longed to watch her muscles quiver and her lips part. He shifted in his seat.

"Keep still," she whispered. "It's tricky drawing someone who wriggles worse than the kids I teach."

"Reminding me of the day I saw you outside the school is going to make me wriggle more," he said, attempting to lighten the moment. But there was no chance. He didn't care if people clocked his arousal. "You looked smart and sexy in your pencil skirt and blouse."

"Was that the skirt you imagined me wearing when you played with yourself?" The gentle way she said "played," rather than stroking his cock, was his undoing.

"Yes. I wanted you against a wall as you held my cock. I loved the idea of sliding your knickers down your thighs and easing your feet farther apart." He shook his head. This was going quickly from anticipation to verbal foreplay. "Do you call it playing with yourself when you do it?"

"I do," she said. Her fingers trailed down his face and stroked his cheekbones again. "As part of those exercises I mentioned before. I use these plastic things called dilators. They're shaped like different-sized dicks. I grew up thinking masturbation was wrong. I heard a

religious person on a podcast once. Anyway, some believe that, but not all Christians."

"I didn't know that."

"I wish I hadn't heard those podcasts. I followed the rules they said a good Christian should abide by even though I was tempted to try other things." She huffed. "When the hospital said I needed to use the dilators to stretch myself, they suggested masturbation would help to relax. It kind of made it okay. More than okay. Since then, I've played with myself a lot."

"What was dilation like?"

"It hurt sometimes, and the idea that it was pointless if I wasn't going to find someone I felt comfortable enough to have sex with got to me at times. But I persevered. That's why sex is so important to me. I'm sure it's important for everyone, but you go through all this physical therapy and pain, but you can't reach the goal yourself. You need someone else to get past the last barrier."

Her honesty warmed his heart. She placed so much trust in him. And he vowed never to share her secrets.

"Would you have slept with me that night in the bar to get past the barrier?" he said, using her words.

He sat on his hands to resist lifting his blindfold, surmising she'd share because he couldn't see her.

"No. I wanted someone experienced who'd make it good, but I also needed someone I could trust and talk to about my body. I wouldn't have told you all of this that night. I'm terrified of getting hurt emotionally."

"I'm a bit clumsy with your emotions sometimes, but I've been hurt, and I'd rather crawl through glass naked than cause you that pain." It was a statement he shouldn't have made, and it was probably his saviour complex kicking in, but his past pain had taught him a lot about emotions and that some people's experiences damaged them for years.

"You said Max called Lexi toxic. She really hurt you."

Lucas nodded. "She broke my heart, and it's taken a long time to heal."

"I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"Thank you." A little chink in his heart healed from hearing her words.

"It's hard to trust someone, to give them your heart and watch them destroy it like it means nothing, isn't it?" she uttered.

"Who hurt you, Gabs?"

"I thought we were talking about you."

"We were, but I want to talk about you, too." *And help your confidence.*

"How did you know someone hurt me?"

"Maybe we're bonding over more than just fear."

She sighed. "I had a boyfriend when I was eighteen. I met him at church, but he also went to my school. I tried to be the good, innocent, Christian girl, because I liked him. I think I loved him. I decided to lose my virginity one night before my exams."

"And what did he do? Because I'm ready to disappear a dickhead tonight."

Her fingers trembled where she touched him. "After we tried to have sex and it..." He held his breath. Her fingers neared his lips, and he kissed them. She sighed. Maybe she thought he'd reject her if she shared her story. There was no chance. Her past made him want to celebrate her while also beating the shit out of anyone who hurt her. "When we tried to have sex, and it didn't work, he rejected me and humiliated me publicly. It was then I went to the GP who dismissed my worries. After that, I decided not to try again but to focus on church and what the podcasts I'd listened to instructed. It's taken a lot to forget that experience. I don't want anyone knowing about my condition and calling me a freak."

"You're not a freak," he replied. "We all have stuff, call it baggage or whatever. But you are not a freak. You're amazing. Inspiring."

"Don't call me inspiring," she huffed. "I'm not trying to inspire anyone. This is my life, and I didn't have a choice. I'm just trying to live it and get through it."

"Sorry. Yes, that's a good point. I hadn't seen it that way."

"It's okay. But I don't want to be seen as a poster girl for this condition. I want to be normal." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he spoke. "I'm not normal."

"Me neither. But your condition doesn't make you abnormal."

"But I feel it every day. When those I work with talk about stuff I've never tried, I nod along, but I don't know how any of these things feel or if I ever will."

"Can I let you in on a secret about me?"

"Always," she whispered, her breath light across his cheeks.

"I've only had one proper adult relationship. The only woman I loved dumped me for someone better and then used me to make her partner jealous and is still trying to now." He pursed his lips and dragged air through his nostrils. "I thought I was helping a friend, but I suspect she contacted the journalist who caught her leaving my house. I can't let myself fall for a friend who treats me like that again."

"I wouldn't do that to you, but it explains why you don't want to get emotionally invested with someone or have a friendship when this is over."

He nodded. "Sex is fine, but I can't have my heart broken again."

"I'm sorry you went through that. I won't ever treat you like she did, but I will do my best to respect your boundaries."

"You promise not to fall for me, beautiful?" he teased.

She chuckled. "I'll fight it with everything I have, even though I've seen farm animals fall in love with you and I know how you look in a wetsuit."

He couldn't stop his smile even if he wanted to. "But do you know what?" He cocked his finger and beckoned her closer even though, with his blindfold on, he couldn't tell if he was directing her correctly.

"What?" Her breath ghosted his cheeks.

"No matter what happens, whether we have sex or not and whether we become acquaintances or never speak again after the two months is up, you should know something. However abnormal we sometimes feel, we're still fucking awesome people."

"Do you know what else?" she asked.

She smoothed her fingers over the lines of the confusion on his forehead. "There are multitudes of women out there wanting to fuck you and be what you want them to be. And you don't need to date them to be happy."

Was that what he wanted? If he wasn't going to let anyone close enough to tell him he wasn't enough again, then that was his future. His voice wavered. "And there's someone out there for you who won't think you're abnormal and will want you as their very fuckable future girlfriend."

She cleared her throat. "The jury is still out on whether I'm fuckable, especially at the moment with my condition."

"Princess, I'm doing everything I can to build up to sex slowly, but right now, if I wasn't the good guy I need to be, I'd show you exactly how fuckable you are. You're so damn sexy, and I don't just mean your body but everything else: your kindness, your little quips, and how you battle your anxieties. The way you owned that bloody paddleboard was incredible. I love those moments where your confidence shines. You're so fucking hot."

She cupped his jaw. He wanted to lean in for a kiss. There were so many places he imagined touching her, but in tonight's class, only one of them got to be the artist.

"You are, too, Lucas. When I get home tonight, I'll use my vibrator until it breaks. Playing with myself while thinking of you will be my new obsession."

He growled at the image.

Her thumb stroked his lower lip, and he parted them. "And when I use it, I'm going to remember how it felt to have my thumb on your lips like this, although I'll imagine your lips...somewhere else."

His erection pressed into his jeans. It hurt from how much it wanted to be buried inside her. "I'm very good with my lips." He lowered his voice until it was barely a rasp. "And my tongue."

"Some of my favourite videos are ones involving a man going down on a woman," she stuttered. He eased open his mouth, and the tip of her thumb slipped between his lips. He scraped her thumb lightly with his teeth. He remembered that their easel was mostly hidden, but he still wouldn't push her too far.

The scent of strawberries and lilies filled his lungs, and he reached out his hands, murmuring when he gripped her trembling thighs. She wouldn't be the only one pleasuring themselves when they got home.

"Oh." Gabi's gentle wonder spurred him on. He flicked his tongue around her thumb before sucking lightly. She slowly eased her thumb away. "Was it okay to do that? I made sure no one could see us, but I'm still not sure. It just felt right."

He squeezed her thigh. "If it felt right, then that's okay. Keeping testing your limits and making those small steps."

"Thank you," she replied. Her paintbrush returned to its sweeping sounds.

"You've got five more minutes," Sophia announced to the group. "And then we'll let you get home. Some of you enjoyed yourselves tonight."

The laughter was more pained this time. Lucas and Gabi weren't the only ones struggling with desire.

Chapter Twenty

GABI

Fifteen minutes later, they walked hand in hand to Lucas's car. After all they'd shared and done in the painting class, it felt natural.

Gabi shivered at the memory of Lucas teasing her thumb. She'd never have done that sober, if not for him. Everything he did raised her confidence, including his willingness to be vulnerable, but her confidence would be a journey rather than a moment.

"What will you do with the painting?" Lucas asked, cutting into her thoughts.

Gabi shrugged. "I'm not sure. Sophia said I could pick it up framed next weekend."

"Give it to Evie. She'd love it. She loves me more than the fans." Lucas chuckled. "Show me the photo of us with our paintbrushes again."

Gabi held out her phone. On the screen, she, Lucas, Sophia, and Aidan stood with paintbrushes in the air. "You all look really good."

"And you look beautiful."

Gabi's cheeks heated.

"You didn't have to insist on a photo of just Aidan and me, but I'm glad you did," Lucas said, swiping through the photos.

"I wanted the fans to realise you're friends and not the enemies the media suggests. I can't imagine you having any enemies. Well,

maybe the Bulls mascot. I saw the photos of you tying him to the goalpost last month.”

“That guy is a dick. He cut my tie in half so I tied him to the goalpost.” Lucas shook his head, although he smiled. “I let him go after two minutes. And the media is weird. Aidan was never my enemy. We got on even when I was with the Giants, and we played against each other. He’s a good guy.”

“Why do the fans say you’re rivals?”

Lucas dropped his head, and his lips tilted down. “I did an interview once, and they compared our stats, but one of them was wrong. I said I’d scored more tries than him. It got blown up into this whole thing about me saying I was the best forward the team ever had. There was never animosity between us, but it gave the fans a reason to hate me.”

“When you post this photo, it will prove you’re not enemies. I asked Aidan to comment under it and repost it.”

“You’re too good.”

Gabi grinned. “I try.”

“Did you enjoy yourself this evening?” Lucas asked.

“I did.” There was a bounce to her step. “I’ve not experienced a date like that before, and it was better than the one at that restaurant. Thank you for helping me with my challenge.”

His chest puffed up, and she revelled in how broad he was. “Princess, you don’t need to thank me. I had a blast, and I love this pact. I’d forgotten dating could be fun.”

“Even if it is fake dating.” But it didn’t always feel fake. The kiss in the water, the way he hissed when she touched him—those things were physical, though. From what he’d said about Lexi, he didn’t need another complication. Gabi didn’t want to hurt him, although she didn’t fully understand what he’d meant when he said he was dumped for someone better. Maybe he meant better for her, because the Lucas she spent time with was pretty amazing.

His laugh was more of a cough. “Yeah.”

Her eyes flicked to where he stroked the back of his neck with his spare hand.

“What was your favourite part, aside from seeing me fall in?”

She sucked her lips into her mouth to stop from saying, *Spending time with you, learning about you, and laughing.*

No strings and no emotions.

Focus on getting past the sex barrier.

"Touching you and seeing how hard you got," she replied, the words a quick jumble. That wasn't a lie. "And hearing your fantasies about me. How about yours?"

He growled. "That was fucking hot. Who knew art was such an aphrodisiac? But as much as I hate paddleboarding and refuse to do it again, I enjoyed seeing you in a wetsuit."

The physical stuff. This wasn't anything more to him, and she needed to follow his lead.

"Out of curiosity, what were you wearing underneath your wetsuit?"

"To help your fantasies later when you stroke your cock?" She used his words and delighted at their instant effect on him.

"Fuck, woman. Sweet, innocent, good girls shouldn't have filthy mouths like yours."

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Her stomach fluttered.

Damn, damn, damn.

"Yes, I want to come in my hand when I imagine stripping you of that suit and finding your swimming costume underneath it."

"Bikini, not swimming costume." Gabi's smile betrayed her. It was nice to be attractive for more than just a great personality. "I bought it to wear abroad one day. It's one of my dreams to leave the UK."

Lucas stopped and turned to her. "You've never been abroad?"

She shook her head. "I've never flown, either. I'd love to. There's so much of the world to see. I want to start with Europe. I was pretty sheltered when I was younger, especially after Evie left. And now I don't really have friends to go away with. I could go alone, but..."

"It's safer and more fun with two?"

"Exactly."

"About this bikini," he said as they continued walking, "when do I get to see it?"

"Now, if you want," she replied, trying to dispel the anxiety testing her resolve. "I'm wearing it under my hoodie. I didn't have anything to change into after paddleboarding. I managed to dry it under the drier in the changing rooms. It was either that or go commando."

He swallowed. "Princess, are you trying to kill me?" They reached a cut-through that led to the car park. There was no one else around. "First, you tell me you're going to flash me and then that you nearly went commando."

"Sorry." She chuckled. "With you, it's like I can do or say anything."

The arousal from the painting class merged with the memory of their kiss from the water. Lucas blanketed her in safety while guiding her through challenges and new experiences.

"Anything?" he grunted.

With her confidence soaring, she grabbed his hoodie and dragged him so that she was pinned between him and the wall. She fixed him with her stare. Under the dull lights of the cut-through, his thick eyebrows dived together as he stared at her.

"In romance books," she whispered, "the sexy hero must do the lean."

He lifted his arms and bracketed her head. His body trapped her. She breathed in his musky scent. He leaned closer. His lips teetered on the edge of hers. "Like this?" he whispered.

"Yes. Throughout the art class and before, I imagined your hands on me and what you would do." He tracked the sweeping of her tongue against her lower lip. "The way you sucked my thumb will fuel my playing sessions. You make me hornier than any person has before." Boldly, she slid his hand under her jumper.

His skin brushed hers, making her quiver.

"Are you sure you want to do this here?" His fingers trembled as she nodded slowly. He checked either side of them. "No cameras. Perfect."

In the darkness of the cut-through, his dirty blond hair was nearly black. He resembled a gritty hero, like Batman, with a devilish soul hiding beneath a cloak of honour. She wanted his darkness as much as his light. His fingertips were light across her bikini top at first. They grazed her nipples, and she whimpered.

He squeezed her nipple between his fingers. "You're horny for me. You're desperate for me to play with you. Such a needy, good girl."

She panted.

He cupped her breast before sliding his hand under the top. His palm was soft against her, and she moaned as he lifted her hoodie.

He grunted as he stared at her, his gaze like licks of fire against her skin.

With his eyebrows raised in challenge, he waited.

"Touch me. I want your mouth on me," Gabi begged.

Lucas pulled down the thin material of her string bikini. His warmth quickly replaced the cold air as he caressed and licked her nipples. He trailed kisses across her skin, and everywhere he touched chilled rapidly as the air touched the wetness he'd left behind. "I need you higher for this, gorgeous."

His fingers pinched her waist, and he lifted her, pushing her back against the wall with his body. She wrapped her legs around his waist and was rewarded with his hard cock pressing between her thighs.

Her nails lightly scratched his scalp, and he moaned louder.

"I love your tits," he said, pinning her wrists with one hand and holding her steady with the other.

He leaned back and continued to pleasure her breasts with his mouth. She quivered against him as his tongue twirled around her nipples before sucking them. He tortured them with his lips and teeth as she ground against him.

His deep, throaty laugh burned her skin hotter.

She hissed his name in surrender.

He continued to feast on her. His lips travelled up her chest before pressing against her mouth. Her skin burned everywhere he touched.

"You're so fucking beautiful, but if I'm meant to seduce you with anticipation, I must stop."

"You sound pissed off," she said with a giggle.

"Because I fucking want you. It's like I'm cutting off my dick right now. Stopping is agony. But it's for the best."

"If you say so," she replied with a wink. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on like she was back in the lake and needed to stop him drowning.

His growl shook his body. "You're a naughty tease, and I can't get enough of it or enough of you. But no." His forehead pressed against hers. "Sexy brat."

She giggled again. No one had called her that before.

He shifted her bikini top back up and eased her hoodie down, grumbling the entire time. He pressed his lips hard against hers.

She'd missed out on so much over the previous years, and she gave everything to the kiss as if she were controlled by years of pent-up need.

Eventually, he eased her down to her feet, holding her carefully as she wobbled. He feathered her lips with kisses.

"Next time, I'm doing that to your pussy, princess."

Chapter Twenty-One

GABI

Gabi checked her phone. A flutter hit her belly when she found a message from Lucas.

You need to play it cool.

It had been like this all week since their date. If the way he'd pressed her against a wall and left her begging was a precedent for their dates, tonight would be eye-opening.

She pressed her lips together to stop from giggling as she considered stocking up on vibrators.

They'd not met since their last date, but the regular messages in which he'd told her he was thinking about her left her craving more. As soon as she'd gotten home from their date, she'd used her vibrator. Her skin flushed at the memory of sliding it inside her, not for dilation, but because of Lucas. His promise to lick her pussy next time they were intimate had her fucking herself so hard she screamed his name when she came. She's never screamed while playing before.

The day he messaged that he'd stroked his cock while remembering the way her nipples felt against his tongue nearly caused a house fire. She'd got so distracted daydreaming about his mouth, she left the iron on one of her work blouses. Rose's shouts were the only thing that got her out of her lip-biting revelry.

She swallowed loudly, sat in her desk chair, and surveyed her classroom.

Get a grip, Gabs. You need to focus on decorating your classroom, not the guy doing you a favour. Lucas was a bad boy, but sensitive, too, and he had a heart she wanted to protect, especially from Lexi.

But I can't let him get hurt with me, either. She opened her phone.

Lucas: I'm excited about our date and what I have planned for the two of us, although your choice of bouldering sounds fun.
Will I be able to keep my hands off you?

She squealed and cleared her throat.

A couple of hours until she was on the bouldering wall, giggling and finding ways to outdo him. That was a friendship. Gabi gritted her teeth. But he didn't want friendship, and she couldn't get attached to him.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Pam asked as she entered Gabi's classroom.

Gabi looked to where Pam stared. "What do you mean?" Gabi kicked herself. She should have snubbed her.

She'd beamed while fixing the cloth bunting. With a summer of sports, including football competitions and the Olympics, red and blue were the best colours for her decorations, and the children would love them when the term restarted in a couple of days.

Pam thumbed one of the pictures of a football, causing the edging to come away from the backing. "Nothing. You know best."

Gabi's shoulders hunched as she tried to ignore Pam's criticism, but within seconds, she questioned the colours, topic choice, and the position of the pins holding the images on the boards.

"Great work, ladies," the headteacher, called out as she popped her head through the door.

"Th—"

"Thanks, Auntie. We've worked hard on it. Only the best for the children," Pam replied.

Gabi's phone beeped in her hand, announcing an email.

It was a reminder about next month's hospital appointment. Her shoulders sagged. They weren't horrible appointments, but they were a reminder of how she wasn't like others.

"That reminds me, Gabi. If you continue posting on social media with your new boyfriend, we'll need to meet about our social media policy. I can't have the school's reputation affected."

"Okay," Gabi said, scratching at the cuffs of her hoodie. "But that wasn't him. It was the..." She side-eyed Pam, who prodded at the edges of her display. Gabi lowered her voice. "...hospital about my next appointment."

"For your syndrome?" Pam asked.

Gabi's mouth dropped. The head blushed.

"I've got to go. See you later for family dinner, Pam. Don't forget you're bringing the wine."

"Yes, Auntie. And maybe we can chat about my raise. Dad said you'd move things around the budget to make it happen."

She nodded at Pam before leaving.

"How do you know about my syndrome?" Gabi asked. Her fingers trembled. She ditched her phone and busied herself with the display.

"Auntie told me after she drank too much. I told her it couldn't be real, as I'd never heard of it, so we Googled it. Who knew you were such a freak?"

Gabi's throat itched, and emotion welled in her chest. She breathed slowly. "That information was confidential."

"Auntie is the worst when she's had wine. I know so much about the staff here, but nothing compares to your weirdness. Is it true you've never had a period? I wish I hadn't, but that means you're not a proper woman, right?"

Gabi needed to escape, but she didn't want to be someone who ran from confrontation, either. Her hands clenched into fists.

"Does your boyfriend know about your syndrome? I'm guessing not, because he wouldn't date you if he did."

"He knows most of it," Gabi hissed, "and he doesn't care."

Because our relationship isn't real. It's a pact. Maybe that was why he didn't want to be friends. He didn't want a freak hanger-on falling for him.

She knew that wasn't how Lucas saw her, but her past pain, coupled with Pam's insults, filled her head with demons that dragged her into a pit of self-flagellation.

"Come on, Gabi. Of course he cares. It's ludicrous that an elite rugby player, especially one as sexy as him, fancies you, and that's without your problems."

Gabi tried to shut out Pam's digs.

Gabi's phone buzzed again.

Pam grabbed it before Gabi reached it. "That's probably him telling you he's changed his mind." She sneered as she tried to unlock Gabi's phone. "I read more about your syndrome. I have a lot of questions."

Gabi pushed hair from her face with trembling hands and pulled at her cuffs. This was why she didn't tell anyone about her syndrome.

"Maybe I should call your boyfriend and tell him the things I've learned about MRKH to check if he knows." Pam wagged Gabi's phone in her direction. "Tell me, Gabi, are you—"

"What are you doing with my sister's phone?" Evie snapped as she stepped into the classroom. Gabi's shoulders slumped. She didn't need her sister fighting her battles.

"I was helping her unlock it, as her hands were busy making the display." The lie slid off Pam's tongue. "And you're not allowed on site. Aren't you a glamour model? This is a primary school with impressionable kids."

"Pam, it's the school holidays, and there aren't any children here," Gabi squeaked. "And Evie isn't a glamour model anymore."

She'd stood up for herself! What a breakthrough. She smiled until Evie bristled and glanced at her. "And I'm not ashamed I used to be one, either."

"I'm not ashamed of it or you," Gabi said.

Evie guffawed as she raised her eyebrows at her.

"What are you doing here, Evie?"

"I wanted to invite you for a coffee because I haven't seen you recently. You've been busy with your dates." Her lip curled as she said the word dates like it offended her. Gabi had only been on three.

Gabi stared at Pam, who watched the sisters with a sneer.

"I'll finish this tomorrow," Gabi muttered, grabbing her bag. Her gut twisted. She didn't need to feed Pam any more information to use against her, and who knew what Pam might share. "Let's go."

She shoved Evie towards the door with a huff, pushing her slightly.

"What is wrong with you, Gabi? Slow down."

"Just go, okay? We don't want to miss the best pastries," she stuttered. "Or whatever."

As Gabi hustled Evie out of the classroom, Pam said, "Gabi, let me know when your next appointment is so I can cover your

lessons. I have a busy schedule, and you have so many of those doctor things."

Gabi tensed.

"What does she mean?" Evie asked as Gabi walked with her to the front gates.

"Nothing. She's trying to cause trouble. Ignore her."

Chapter Twenty-Two

GABI

“How long has that been going on?” Evie asked as soon as they sat in the coffee shop.

Gabi shrugged. “Nothing is going on. It’s fine.”

She checked her phone. She was meeting Lucas soon on the other side of town. There wasn’t time for this, but she’d avoided Evie too many times recently.

The smell of roasted coffee beans mingled with floral fragrances. Several groups of mums and their toddlers sat together in front of a neon sign covered in fern.

Life, love, and coffee, the glowing pink letters between the green leaves read.

“Gabi, talk to me.” Evie’s unwavering stare pressed her for a response.

Gabi sipped at her scalding latte, trying to distract Evie from the conversation, but her sister bullishly met things head on without taking time to understand the subtext as usual.

“I’m handling it,” Gabi replied between gritted teeth.

“Like you handled Mum and Dad?” Evie asked, her eyes softening. “Do they know why you moved to town?”

“They don’t need to know everything about me. Isn’t that what you said?”

Gabi picked at her cookie as Evie stared at her over the rim of her mug.

Gabi debated telling her about her syndrome and what she'd faced after going through her ordeals alone. If Evie had still been living at home when Gabi questioned why she hadn't started her period yet, she wouldn't have told her that periods and body development shouldn't be discussed. That was what their mum had said. Evie wouldn't have ignored her worries by telling her that girls develop at different ages. Her big sister would have marched her to the GP and stayed until they gave her answers.

If Evie knew Gabi's history, guilt for not being there for her, even though it wasn't Evie's fault, would crush her. Gabi didn't want anyone else hurt because of her syndrome.

The teenage girls beside them bent their heads over a phone and giggled. Gabi's heart pinched. Loneliness dogged her now as much as when she was their age. Even in a room with others, she felt like she was on the outskirts of life. Lucas didn't make her feel like that. Through his confidence building techniques and her work with her psychiatrist, it was as if she was tentatively embracing her identity.

But what would happen when their friendship ended? She'd be alone and too scared to tell people about her syndrome because they'd react like Pam. Shame sickened her.

"What's going in that head of yours, Gabi? I'm exhausted looking at you."

Gabi stared back with wide eyes. "I'm debating the quickest route into town. I've got to be at the climbing centre soon."

"Another date?" Evie replied with a heavy sigh.

"Yes. Another *fake* date."

"Is it to you? Is it fake?"

"We're friends. It's to help him with the fans." Gabi pushed her fringe from her eyes.

"And what's in it for you? Josh has said multiple times that Lucas isn't the guy you want your little sister to date."

"Which is fine, because we're just friends. There's nothing in it for me except getting out of the house, which you want for me. Besides," Gabi continued, using Evie's railroading conversation techniques, "have you considered that maybe you don't know him as well as you think you do? I've seen him with his niece and others, and he's nice. Sometimes, he's the sweetest guy—"

"Oh, shit. You're already falling for him. I knew this would happen."

"I'm not."

"It's obvious from how you look at him in the Instagram photos. He'll hurt you. He can't be trusted." That point did hit. She felt anything was possible when she was with Lucas, but all the familiar anxieties crept back when she was away from him. Could she trust him with her secrets, or would he gossip about them like he'd gossiped at the art class?

"He won't hurt me because I won't fall for him. I know what kind of guy I want to be with, and that's not him. This is fake dating." She'd spent so much time deciding the kind of man she wanted to lose her virginity to that she hadn't fully considered who she wanted to be in a relationship with beyond a "good guy," but what did that mean?

"I bet he's already damaged your reputation," Evie said, leaning back like she'd hit her target. "What if the fans hate you, too?"

"Are you for fucking real?" Gabi shook her head.

"See, you're already swearing. You didn't do that before him."

"How do you know? You don't know me, Evie. You left home when I was twelve. My life has changed. You moved here and lived with Grandma while I had no one. I needed someone."

Evie's face dropped. "Why? Did something happen?"

Gabi scratched her forearms. She shouldn't have thrown that in Evie's face. It wasn't Evie's fault she left. But she could've returned or checked up on her. She left her to suffer alone.

"No. I meant, you know, teenage years." The prospect of confrontation choked her.

"I'm here for you. You can tell me anything." Evie reached for Gabi's hands, but Gabi sat back, knocking her drink and splashing hot liquid onto her jeans.

"I need you to listen to me rather than tell me what I should do and feel," Gabi said, wiping her jeans with the napkin Evie handed her.

Evie squinted as she stared at Gabi. In a rare moment, she fumbled her words. Gabi's phone vibrated with a message from Lucas asking if they were meeting outside the climbing centre.

"Fuck," she said, drawing the attention of the teenage girls. Her whole body itched, like hives covered her skin. "I'm meant to meet Lucas in fifteen minutes in town."

"I'm still worried about you. You're not strong enough for a player like Lucas. He'll mess with your head."

Gabi pulled a hand down her face. Evie might be right, but it would be okay as long as Gabi didn't fall for him.

"Evie, I don't mean this cruelly, but you have no idea how strong I am or have had to be growing up. You don't know me. Maybe if you'd taken the time to understand me when I moved to town, you'd realise why I struggle to speak to you about the past. I've got to go. Thank you for the coffee."

Gabi pushed through the chairs.

Evie shouted her name, but Gabi shoulder barged the door open. Pain clogged the back of her throat as she strode to the climbing centre and a date she now wanted to avoid.

Chapter Twenty-Three

LUCAS

Lucas checked his watch. He stared up and down the street for the fifth time and back to his phone.

Gabi was ten minutes late, but she had never been late to the dates they'd had so far. She hadn't replied to his message where he asked if he'd be able to resist touching her.

He released an anguished breath. He could be pushing her beyond her limits. She was tricky to read. But if he'd lived with the trauma she had, he'd probably be the same. Trusting must be near impossible for her.

Lucas made a fresh commitment to be the kind of guy she'd trust. Feelings for her were creeping into his heart, but he couldn't let them grow. He was a stopgap for her, and that was right. He wasn't boyfriend material, especially not for someone like her. There was no way someone as awesome as she was would ever think he was enough.

He shuffled from foot to foot, shoving his rucksack on his back. He needed to tell Gabi his anxiety about their date. It would be better face-to-face. He was terrified of heights, but this was called bouldering. That must mean moving from fake boulder to fake boulder near the ground.

As he checked for Gabi again, a couple caught his eye. The tall guy pointed at him. The man wore a Bulls team shirt. Lucas waved, but the guy stuck up his middle finger and shouted, "Prick."

Lucas sighed heavily and turned away. He should be used to it.

Emails from several clubs scouting him for their teams remained unanswered in his inbox. The offers were some of the best in his career, but all involved moving. He'd be away from the town he loved and his friends. Henry and Amy wouldn't be a short walk away, either.

During the three years he'd played for the Giants, he'd missed too many of Amy's milestones because he hadn't seen her regularly. He couldn't miss any more. He wanted to warn potential boyfriends or girlfriends and take her to her first fifteen-certificate superhero movie. He hadn't allowed her to attend a rugby game because she shouldn't see how fans treated him.

Was it wrong to say he missed the way Giants fans had sang his praises? Lexi had said he was an attention whore like she was. He'd loved how she and others would cheer him on from the stands, but the memory left him hollow now.

If he were with another club, he wouldn't see Gabi at games, either. By then, she'd be with a good man with depth and influence, someone worth dating—a guy nothing like him. She'd move on and forget Lucas easily. That was how it should be.

Maybe the temptation to make a fresh start and find what was missing explained why he hadn't deleted the emails or offered his apologies.

With the dickhead rugby fan gone, he looked up and down the road again.

Fifteen minutes late now.

His pulse quickened at the possibility something had happened to her. He jostled his rucksack as he spied another Bulls fan. His phone rang, and he answered it quickly without checking who was calling, using it as an excuse to avoid more insults. Only his family, closest friends, and Gabi had his number.

"Hello?"

The gasp at the other end reminded him of Gabi. "Gabi, are you okay, princess?"

Lexi laughed. "Chill out, hun. It's Lexi. Gabi's the girl from the locker room, right? You call her princess?" Lucas fisted his hands. "Is she some precious Disney wannabe?"

The panic in Lucas's voice was replaced with resignation. Gabi shouldn't be laughed at. She was a strong woman but had a softness

to her. He wouldn't share that with Lexi. She didn't deserve to know anything.

"Why are you calling, Lexi?"

A finger tapped his shoulder, and Lucas pulled back his chest in preparation for an angry Bull's fan, but instead, a red-faced Gabi stared back. He held up a finger and mouthed he'd be a minute as Lexi said, "Because we haven't sorted out our night together, and I miss you."

He rolled his eyes. "I've got to go."

He tracked Gabi's movements as she balanced on the outer edges of her feet and tapped her hands against her thighs. Her eyes were red-rimmed, as if she'd cried, and she scraped her teeth against her already raw lips.

He wanted to hold her.

She needed to be held.

"Wait," Lexi shouted. "You should come for that trial at the club. If you rejoin the club, we wouldn't need to have just one night. I was wrong to break up with you. You've changed."

Was she still trying to manipulate him because she'd seen him with Gabi, or was Claude making her question everything? Either way, he didn't want anything from her. "Lexi, I—"

"I'll be in touch." She hung up.

Gabi stared at him. He rubbed the back of his neck at her inspection.

"Did she say something about going to your old club for a trial? Does she want to date again even though she's married?"

"You heard Lexi?"

"She's not quiet."

Everything Lexi did was loud and about being seen. Meeting him after the game had been about being seen by his team in a compromising position. "No, the trial isn't like that. I don't even want a friendship with her. It's embarrassing to talk about."

"We've got five minutes. I got the times mixed up."

"You don't want to know." Lucas shrugged.

Gabi reached out her hand, and he grabbed it like it was a lifeline. Resentment towards Lexi and how she'd treated—and still treated—him sickened him. He'd lost a part of himself and wouldn't ever get that back.

"I do, and you need to talk about it."

Her hand was soft, and briefly, he wondered if Gabi was helping him find some of the part of himself he'd lost. She believed in him, and each time she messaged him, kissed him, or turned up to meet him, it was because she trusted him.

He needed to trust her.

He sat on the curb and pulled her down with him. He traced the pattern on the dirty metal drain.

Gabi shifted beside him and squeezed his hand. He stared into her green eyes.

"Talk to me, Lucas."

He sighed. "Lexi is the only woman I've loved. We met when I was twenty-two. I'd moved to Birmingham to play for the Giants, and within weeks of meeting, she'd moved into my flat."

"Wow," Gabi said.

"She was great at love-bombing, and I lapped it up. I loved her attention. We talked frequently about the future, like how many kids we'd have and when we'd get married. I thought it was normal. I'd only had two brief relationships when I was eighteen. Everything else was sex. Lexi made out she needed me so she could be the whole version of herself."

"What changed?"

"The night I was going to propose was the same night she slept with me one last time before telling me it was over. She'd found someone more suited to long-term and the kind of guy she deserved —someone better than me."

"Better than you?" Gabi cupped his cheek. "She thought she deserved more than *you*?"

He pressed his cheek against Gabi's palm and let her warmth give him the confidence he needed. "It took the year to rebuild my confidence and to see that she wasn't changing her mind. I hoped eventually she'd return to me, and I did everything to show her I was good enough. She'd come to practices and find ways to talk to me, but I suspect it was always in Claude's eyeline. She liked him thinking she had options. She did that with me, too, after we'd been together several months, but I'd thought I needed to up my game."

"That's toxic."

Lucas furrowed his brow. "That's what Max said. But I'd never been in love before, never realised that how she treated me in the relationship and then after wasn't right. I'd only had good people in

my life. Before Lexi, I'd led a charmed life. I'd experienced stress, but I usually laughed my way out of it. And I'd helped others out of their stresses."

"Like you're helping me."

He nodded. "But it wasn't like that with Lexi. When she and Claude got engaged, I realised it was time to mentally move on, but I stayed with the club. Then the whole press thing happened that said we'd slept with each other. Claude treated me like shit. He wasn't great before, because of her game playing, but after that, he worked me harder than anyone else. He said it was to make me a better player, but he found ways to humiliate me, too."

"What a bastard." Gabi squared her jaw. "Lexi really messed with you, and he helped."

"Yep." Trusting people had taken time, but Max proved to him some people weren't friends for exploitative reasons. Gabi's brows knotted as she stared at him. "You're wondering why I didn't hang up on her earlier?"

"I know why. You're a kind and caring man," Gabi said, lifting his chin with her finger as he had hers at the painting class. "But you deserve kindness back. When your heart is involved, logic is tricky, but anyone who uses you as she did doesn't care about you. You deserve love, not manipulation, and you'll find someone who sees you for who you are and not what they can get from you. If you want that."

Lucas held his breath as he stared into Gabi's green eyes. She may be a petite princess, but she was a warrior. And fuck, he liked her, but he wasn't enough for her. She was incredible, and he was a player, someone who liked attention and cared too much about messing around and making people laugh. If she didn't see that yet, she would soon.

"Thank you." He stumbled over his words. "Have we got time to chat about why your eyes are red?"

She worried her lip with her teeth again. She shoved her hair from her face, and the redness in her eyes tugged at his heart. "I'll give you the highlights: Evie, syndrome, and Pam."

"You'll tell me more later?"

She nodded.

His heart jumped. She trusted him. "Okay. I'll hold you to that."

"We should get moving." She stood and walked towards the climbing centre.

"I bought you a present," he called out before wincing. His sudden burst of vulnerability made him feel shy. He wasn't used to this kind of support in a relationship, even a fake one. His cheeks heated as he grabbed a gift bag covered in hearts from his rucksack and held it to her as she turned.

"You don't have to wear them now, but you can if you want," he stuttered. "I didn't wrap it because I got more tape stuck to me than the paper, but I found this old gift bag." His face was getting hotter.

"It's a pretty bag." Her brows knotted together as she stared at the hearted-covered bag between her hands.

"I had it lying around. Something Amy gave to me," he lied. He'd chosen the bag on his way to the climbing centre. Lucas ran his fingers through his blond hair.

"Shall I open the present now?"

"Wait until you're in the changing rooms. If you hate it, I don't want to watch you try and pretend you like it." He gave an awkward laugh.

She tilted her head in suspicion. "Is it dodgy?"

At her cheeky wink, he smiled. "I'll let you decide. Quick, let's go. We don't want to be late. I'm looking forward to this," he lied again. He still hadn't told her he was scared of heights.

His heart thrummed. He wanted to check how red he was in a mirror.

He couldn't let himself get any more emotionally invested. He needed to protect himself.

"Thank you for the present," she said before pecking him on the cheek.

His heart fluttered.

Shit.

Chapter Twenty-Four

LUCAS

Lucas swallowed loudly as Gabi ran out of the changing rooms with a bounce in her step. She threw her arms around him. "This is the best present ever!"

She jumped back and gave him a 360 turn. "I can't believe you bought me Superhero leggings." Her green eyes sparkled, and her grin never faltered. He desperately tried to avoid staring at the way the leggings highlighted her perfect butt. That wasn't why he'd picked them.

He wasn't shy, but he was tempted to pull on the back of his neck. He was the experienced one, yet this grateful woman made his stomach swirl.

"We've talked about Wonder Woman since we met, when I saw those..." He cleared his throat and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Knickers."

"Oh." Gabi blushed. Her cheeks were the cutest shade of cherry.

The edges of his mouth cocked up in a cheeky grin. "Do one more spin, baby."

She rolled her eyes, but her grin highlighted her cheekbones when she turned. As she returned to face him, she winked and said, "Like what you see, *baby*?"

He choked. Gabi was incredible, but confident Gabi was another level.

"Very much." His voice strained. He fought the need to ask for another hug.

"Good," she replied. She held out her hand, and he intertwined their fingers. His heart jumped at the heat of her touch. "Then let's go bouldering."

* * *

Lucas stared in awe as Gabi grabbed the handholds above her. Her biceps tensed as she reached for one nearly out of her grasp.

Bouldering wasn't climbing over boulders. Only Gabi's grin had stopped him from making that comment to the instructor in their earlier induction.

But now, he stood at the bottom of a six-metre bouldering wall without a harness, ropes, or anything stopping him from falling. Not that he could move his feet from the spongy mat.

He wasn't even wearing a helmet! This couldn't be safe.

Gabi and her leggings kept him sane. As Gabi hung onto a handhold and considered where to put her feet, he struggled not to react to the view of her thighs clenching and her tight bum. She was beyond sexy. But even her bottom, which he was desperate to get his hands on, wouldn't make him climb the wall like she continued to.

The wall was so short. He'd be at the same height in a line-out, but his fear of heights wasn't logical. And he hadn't been pushed into the air during line-outs since he was a teenager, except when Claude had done it to panic him.

"Are you climbing up to meet me?" Gabi shouted as she sat on the platform on the top, meaning he could now climb safely. She stared at him. Her eyes twinkled. "Or do you want me to go up the wall again so you can stare at my ass?"

"I was admiring your technique and learning from it," he shouted.

"Sure you were. You need to join me at the top so we can get a photo for your tour of local activities."

"We can get it when you're down," he replied.

He should have explained his fear before they got this far, but it was like paddleboarding. He trusted her but didn't want to appear gutless in front of her, either.

"I'm not coming down until you come up." His hands shook as her eyebrows touched.

"What's the view like up there?" he asked hoping to distract her as he stretched out for the first holds.

"It's okay." She looked around the centre.

He yanked his sweating hand back and thoroughly dried it on his joggers.

You can do this, Lucas.

He gripped a hold, and his foot rested on another, but his palms dripped with sweat. He tentatively raised his head, hoping Gabi wasn't watching. Their eyes met.

Lucas slumped.

Although he'd been the happy-go-lucky guy when he was younger, he'd had a fear of heights since he'd fallen off a climbing frame as a child. Generally, he'd avoided any situations where it would be a problem. That was until Lexi told Claude about it after their wedding.

"Wait there."

"As if I'm going anywhere," he grumbled.

When she reached the bottom she stood close. "I didn't realise you'd hate this. I'm so sorry. I did it again," Gabi said, pulling him from his thoughts. He didn't need to hide his fears from her, like she didn't hide hers from him.

"I should have told you, but I've had bad repercussions telling people about my fears before."

"Lexi related?"

Lucas nodded. "She told Claude about my fear of heights, so for one of the team's teambuilding sessions, Claude insisted we abseiled for charity. That was when my normal fear of heights turned into terror. I showboated my way out of it, so no one realised how panicked I was," he stuttered. His lasting thought had been that if you joked your way out of it, then people would find you funny, because that was what you wanted, not because they were embarrassed for you.

"But you were panicked."

He nodded. "The worst part was Claude's and Lexi's comments on the bus on the way home and for the next month. A few teammates stood up for me, but the taunts got to me."

Lucas closed his eyes and counted to ten. The humiliation he'd endured during those months of bullying partly explained the emails from other clubs still sitting unanswered in his inbox. He was reaching his limit with the fans.

Gabi rubbed his back slowly. He took her hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles.

She believed he deserved to be loved, but he'd spent so long leaning into the bad boy persona that he convinced himself he didn't give a shit. He'd believed if he played better and became the best forward the team had ever seen, the taunting and snide comments wouldn't hurt. But they were wearing him down. It was like being subjected to Claude and Lexi's cruelty, but on a daily basis, no matter what he did.

Who knew bouldering would gift him these revelations? If only he could climb the fucker.

"Lucas, we can go."

"I don't want to let you down."

"You can't let me down. You're amazing. And you don't have to fake confidence around me. No expectations."

"I'm not giving in, Gabs. I didn't get to where I am by giving up," he said between gritted teeth. "But I'm scared."

When he caught Gabi's eye, her tender smile eased the tightness in his chest. "Do you really want to do it? I'm with you with whatever you decide."

Lucas glanced at the top. It was only six metres. He considered saying they should divert to the café. She'd do it for him. As he looked back at her and caught the worry lines around her bee-sting lips, he said, "Can you talk me through it, princess?"

"For sure. I've got you, and you've got me. Bonded through fear, right?"

He chuckled as she smiled at him.

"Batman wouldn't be too scared to climb," he mumbled.

"Batman wouldn't be able to floor men on a rugby pitch by day and make me a horny giggling mess when I reread your messages at night. Only you can do that. Batman is a grumpy fucker, whereas you, Lucas Knight, are funny, caring, hot, and the best rugby player I've ever seen."

He grimaced. "My attention whore side thanks you."

"You're not an attention whore. You have a praise kink like me. And you deserve praise." Her eyebrow quirked. "Are you delaying, or is this a way for me to build your confidence?"

He shook his head and smiled. "A bit of both."

"How about I pretend you're helping me?" she asked. "Or I can climb over that side so you can stare at my ass again as motivation when you need a moment."

He laughed, and the tension eased again. "I like that idea, but it might make my hands sweatier. I don't know what the fuck is going on with them."

"Did you put chalk on them?"

He shook his head. No one mentioned chalk. Gabi held out her hand, and he slowly stroked each of her hands in turn, covering them and instantly reducing his sweat and improving his grip. He gazed up at the top of the wall again and planned a route, but it all blurred.

"Watch where I go and then copy it when I get to the top," she whispered, sensing his thoughts.

He nodded, adding a pained smile as thanks. She winked before she started climbing. "I'm so glad you told me the best route. I get so nervous on this stuff," Gabi shouted out for the benefit of anyone listening. "And thank you for telling me this hold I reached for is tricky."

He would have laughed if he wasn't focusing on every stretch and twist she made. She faked nervousness so he appeared confident. She was more than his Wonder Woman. She was his...No. Not possible.

Before, she'd climbed like a monkey, but she took it slow and steady this time. Each movement was considered. She tried to decipher the route that might work best for him, perhaps so he could commit it to memory and follow. He couldn't be sure of that, but knowing her like he did, he believed it.

Her butt was the distraction his anxiety needed. Soon, she waited for him on the platform at the top.

He started to climb, remembering the route she took and her perfect bottom that had transfixated him. The temptation to look down was huge, but it would stop his ascent. His hands trembled, and he willed them not to slip. Gabi blew him a kiss as if she could read his thoughts. He could stare at those beautiful lips all night.

"You can do this, Lucas. You're facing fears and helping me face mine. You're incredible," she said loud enough for only him to hear. "And if you do it, maybe I'll give you a treat."

"When we get down, though, right? I'm not doing anything up here." His voice wavered.

"I'll give it to you wherever you want," she whispered.

"You did it!" she squealed as he reached the platform and sat next to her.

"Do you want your treat now?" She made a blow job movement with her tongue pressing against the side of her mouth.

"Gabs!" His cock hardened. Her tinkling laugh was infectious, and he managed a smile as she shouted down for one of the instructors to take their photo. Lucas didn't move except to turn his head to smile. The ground came into view. His stomach rolled, but before he could wobble, Gabi kissed him hard on the mouth.

"You're so fucking sexy when you face your fears," Gabi whispered against his lips. "I need to suck your cock later."

Lucas choked. This woman would be the death of him, and he was gripping on for all he was worth.

Chapter Twenty-Five

GABI

Lucas opened his front door, and Gabi peeked through. They'd barely stopped talking the entire walk back to the house Lucas shared with Max and his fiancé. Now they were here, the familiar anxiety crept up on her.

"Don't worry. They're both out," Lucas said as a painting of Max in his rugby kit in Aidan's recognisable style caught her eye. "No one will disturb our cookery class."

"Why are we having a sensual cookery class at your house?" she asked as she ran her fingers across a framed *Wicked* poster. From what Lucas had said, this belonged to Max's fiancé.

"The person running it is recovering from an illness and didn't want to pass it on. We're doing it online. Unfortunately, I'm not taking you to a cosy cookery school just out of town in the Cotswolds. I will take you one day."

She bit her tongue to keep from asking how that would be possible if he left the club or they ended the friendship.

"Do you have any posters or paintings up?"

"Are you trying to see my etchings? I have a couple in my room if you want to ditch the cookery class and spend the evening there," he replied with double raise of his brows.

"You're so cheeky."

He kissed her knuckles. He rasped, "You like me cheeky, don't you, princess?"

His gaze was like little feathers tickling her skin.

She swallowed. "Most of the time."

"Good girl."

The doorbell rang.

"You get it while I set up the laptop in the kitchen down there." He pointed at the end of the corridor. "It will be the ingredients. We don't want to be naughty and miss class."

Gabi opened the door to a man with a grumpy face and thick forearms, wearing a Cloud Cookery School apron and holding a basket.

"This is from Ruby, my fiancée. The class starts in ten minutes," he said gruffly. He had a fluffy dog by his side. She bent down, and it danced around her. "Sorry about Cookie. I've got to get back. My beautiful woman needs me."

Gabi closed the door, bemused by the stranger.

She walked to the kitchen, lingering on Lucas's flirting and the things he'd told her. His explanation of the Lexi situation confirmed what she'd suspected from the night she'd met him. He was cheeky, but with so much damn heart, and she wanted to fight everyone who questioned whether he should play for the Bulls. He was more than they deserved.

As Lucas positioned the laptop, Gabi studied his body in his sexy grey joggers and black T-shirt that clung to his pecs and teased her with his sculpted abs. His broad shoulders betrayed his strength. His vulnerability on the climbing wall and his fearless determination to conquer it made her want to imagine what it would be like to be his girlfriend.

But this was a pact, not a relationship, and everything about him told her they'd say goodbye in six weeks.

Lucas turned, his head tilted, and he gazed at her. "You good?"

She nodded.

He casually pushed her hair from her eyes. "You'd tell me if you weren't, like I should have told you sooner about the climbing wall?"

"I would."

His hand lingered on her ear. He trailed a finger down her neck, and her breath hitched. "Because you can tell me anything, Gabs."

It was anticipation. It was nothing more. He was following the pact and her requests.

But it felt so real.

Her pulse sped up.

"I don't know if it's the messages and the things we've done together, but I'm getting more comfortable with how you touch me," she said.

"I'd noticed."

"And more turned on." His grin made her shiver. "The little we've done together is better than the porn I've watched."

"Good. And I love that you've watched it and learnt your dirty talk skills." He lowered his voice. "I won't forget how you said you wanted to suck my cock, you filthy mouthed princess."

Gabi sucked her lips in, but her eyes felt like they were twinkling. "And I know you were a little distracted at the climbing centre by the call from Lexi and by your fears—"

"And by your ass. Your butt was like gold at the end of the rainbow."

Gabi giggled. "Well, I know you were distracted, but if you want to touch me more, I'm game. You've been cautious after our moment in the alleyway where you..."

He brushed kisses against her neck. "Licked your nipples," he whispered in her ear.

Her face heated. "Yes."

"Thank you for your green light. I want to ensure we go at your pace, but you're right, I was a bit in my head because of things from my past and my fears."

"Then I'll keep helping you with yours as you help me with mine. Speaking of which, are we ready for the sensual cookery class?" Gabi pointed at the screen where a woman had flipped the screen to broadcast.

"Right, everyone," a gravelly woman's voice blasted from the laptop. "Thank you for coming to today's Couples' Sensual Treats cooking class. I'm sorry I can't do this in person. Bloody illnesses, eh? I'm Ruby Cloud of Cloud Cookery School."

Lucas looked at the laptop. He entwined Gabi's hand in his and pulled her to stand in front of him. "We're in this together, princess," he growled in her ear.

Ruby continued, "My fiancé, Garett, the man with the finest forearms in England, should have dropped off ingredients with you.

He'll join me later. We devised these treats together when we were falling into a forbidden romance. You're going to love it."

Lucas's chuckle thrummed through her. She quivered, and he gripped her tighter.

"Once you're wearing your aprons, I'll let you introduce yourselves. I'll be starting with my favourite rugby player, Lucas. He doesn't like me telling people, but I met him when I did a charity bake-off competition with children from local schools here at Cloud Cookery School."

Gabi turned to stare at a blushing Lucas. Nothing Ruby said shocked her, although based on the murmurs of the others in the class, they were surprised by the local rugby bad boy. "Lucas sponsored the day and donated things he'd bought from local businesses as prizes. Good to see you again, Lucas. Sorry it's not in person."

"Are you sure you're well enough to lead the class?" Lucas asked.

"You're too sweet. But I'm good. Aprons on, everyone."

Chapter Twenty-Six

GABI

Gabi stretched her neck from side to side. "I think we need to mix the cannoli filling."

She filled the bowl with ricotta and mascarpone.

Lucas stood behind her. "Let's do it together."

She gripped the bowl, and his hands covered hers. He brushed his lips against her neck as they stirred the mixture. The scent of sugar wafted between them as they added candied peel to the mixture. Each time he grabbed a new item, she wriggled her bum against him.

"Naughty school teachers will be my downfall," he groaned.

"I hope so."

At his chuckle, her confidence bloomed. As they continued to work together, piping the mixture into the cannoli, she found little ways to touch him, and each time she did, he returned the movements.

With the cannoli on the side, they returned to decorating their chocolate cakes.

Gabi giggled as she wiped her finger in the chocolate and smeared it across Lucas's cheeks.

"Oi, you, I'm trying to focus." He hip-bumped her.

"I'm so sorry. Maybe you should bend slightly so I can tidy you up," Gabi replied, wishing she had a step so she could be at his

height. She stood on tiptoes and grumbled, "I can't reach your cheeks."

Lucas got on his knees and said, his voice thick, "I will always get on my knees for you. All you have to do is ask."

She shivered and glanced at the screen, but they were on mute as everyone baked.

She brushed his cheek with her lips before licking them. "You taste so good."

He choked. "Gabs, you shouldn't say that when I'm this close to your tits."

Gabi bit her lip. The action elicited a groan so gravelly she could feel it between her thighs. Slowly, she wiped the chocolate off his cheek as he gripped her waist.

"I thought the view of your curvy ass was perfect, but there's something irresistible about gazing up at you."

He squeezed her waist tighter, and she bit back her moan.

As she stared into his big blue eyes, he grinned and winked.

"You're so fucking cheeky, Lucas Knight."

"I know." His hands slid beneath her top, and his thumbs stroked her skin. "And I love how much you get off on that."

Her cheeks heated, and he stood with a chuckle. He ran a finger through the chocolate and wiped some on her lip. "Let me get that for you."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips hard against hers. He eased her towards the countertop and away from camera. His arms bracketed hers, and she cupped his face. His lips opened at her insistence, and they made out. He moaned into her mouth as she swiped his tongue. There was no pressure to take it further.

"How are you all getting on?" Ruby asked from the screen.

"I'm doing fucking amazing," Lucas growled before taking her hand and leading them back to their cakes.

He retied her apron for her as he added, "You got a bit dishevelled there." He gave her ponytail a quick tug. "We'd best get on, or the only thing good enough to eat will be—"

"Don't say it," Gabi squealed. "I'm struggling enough to concentrate as it is, without thinking about you—"

"Returning to my knees and licking your perfect pussy?" Gabi swallowed loudly. "Okay, I won't say it. I'd hate to see these cheeks get redder."

He kissed her briefly before standing beside her. He beamed as he hip-bumped her again.

* * *

As the class neared its end, Lucas took a selfie of the two of them in their aprons.

"Thank you to everyone for coming," Ruby said. "Be sure to tell your friends about the cookery school. I hope you enjoy your treats. Try not to make too much of a mess with them." She giggled before signing off.

Gabi grabbed a chocolate-covered strawberry off the plate as Lucas posted the photo and a couple of others from the evening, tagging the cookery school.

During the class, his teasing had returned. She couldn't be sure if his initial pensiveness on their date had been the result of Lexi or the climbing, but she didn't care, because it meant she was getting to know him and, more importantly, trust him.

She sucked the strawberry as she stared at him. As he looked up, she winked.

"Are you being dirty?"

"I thought you liked it when I was dirty." She gifted him a smirk.

"I fucking love it."

He cut a piece of the filled cannoli and dipped it in the chocolate sauce. Gabi tracked each flick of his fingers as he coated the pastry. He fixed her stare as he added a strawberry. She licked her lips in anticipation.

"Open wide, princess," he rasped.

She opened her mouth, and he slipped the sugary concoction between her lips. The sweetness of the chocolate and strawberry hit her tongue instantly, making her groan. The cream coated her mouth, and she closed her eyes. The pastry crunched against her teeth, and the soft texture of the rest of the cannoli made her mouth tingle.

"Fucking hell, Gabs. That's one of the most sensual things I've ever witnessed."

She opened her eyes, catching him shifting his tenting joggers.

He gulped down a glass of water as she stared at him. His Adam's apple bobbed with each swallow. He wiped the remaining droplets off his mouth, and she bit her lip. The class was exactly what it had promised, but even with the way she was relaxing around him, the anxiety around sex remained. Flirting and teasing was one thing, but sex was like a fucking bomb in comparison. She wasn't sure if she'd ever get to that point.

The rosy hue of his lips transfixed her. Kissing was something she'd do all night if he were game.

Her skin prickled with heat as he stepped closer.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm remembering all of our kisses. Did you have a favourite?" She reached for his chest and, emboldened, slid her hand under his T-shirt. His abs rippled against her palm.

He hissed as she stroked his skin. "I can't pick *one*."

He pulled at the elastic of her hairband, and her hair fell to her shoulders. He threaded his fingers through the strands.

She held her breath as his lips neared hers. "You see, Gabs, they all have something different and fucking hot about them. In the bar, it was that first kiss, the first taste of you. It was tentative and sweet yet had so much heat."

"That was the alcohol."

"That was my needy Wonder Woman discovering how sexy she is." His breath ghosted her skin. "Then there was the one on the farm. That one got me so fucking hard. I wanted you straddling my lap so you knew what you did to me because I love how much you need to know you turn me on. And you do. All. The. Fucking. Time."

"Even when paddleboarding?"

"Why do you think I fell in? Your bum is perfectly curvy, and every time I'm around you and not squeezing it, it's a moment wasted."

Heat climbed her body. She could dismiss his words, but she needed to believe them and believe in herself.

"And then there was the moment against the wall after the painting where I got to enjoy your beautiful tits." His hands slid under her top.

Wetness collected in her knickers, and she was in danger of leaving a wet spot on her new leggings. "But right now, though I'm torn between building the anticipation and taking things slow, I

fucking want you. How's that green light now?" Lucas asked, referring to before the class when she said he could touch her more.

"Great," she stuttered, her voice hoarse.

He stepped her back until she was against the countertop. The counter chilled her as heat raged between her thighs.

"I'm doing the hero lean," he said in her ear as he edged closer. His arms bracketed her, enclosing her.

She ground herself against him.

His thumb slid between them, and he brushed her pussy above her leggings. "You're soaking already."

"It's everything about this evening. It's you." She swallowed and stared at him as he ran his thumb up and down her clit.

She whimpered.

"Good girl."

"Do it again," she begged.

She pushed herself against his thumb, showing him the way she liked to touch herself.

He glanced at her lips one more time. "We shouldn't. But—"

"The only thing stopping this is you. I'm all in. I'm needy for you, Lucas."

"Fuck it." His lips crashed against hers, and he slid his thick hand inside her leggings.

As his thumb rubbed her wetness around her clit, her mouth dropped. Lucas's tongue slid inside her mouth as he continued to pleasure her.

His lips were soft but his body urgent as he played with her clit like it was his to discover. She drowned in desire at the smell of his natural musk mixed with sea air. Her arousal climbed, flooding her limbs with heat. She tried to widen her thighs to get his fingers inside her. Aching filled her belly, and she kissed him harder, pressing on him to show him how much she needed more. She reached for his arm to push him deeper.

He pulled away briefly to growl, "That's right. You're so hot when you take control and grind your pretty pussy against my thumb." She wanted his scent to linger on her flesh. "You're so wet. I can't wait to taste you and slide my tongue into you as you grind against my face. Would you like that, baby?"

Gabi whimpered. He slipped his finger deeper, and she shuddered. He shoved her vest up and pulled the material of her

sports bra down. With his spare hand, he swiped a finger of chocolate sauce from beside her and wiped it across her nipples, groaning as he licked and sucked it off her tits.

Her moans echoed around the kitchen as he pushed her closer to orgasm. Melted chocolate, sugary cream, and sweet strawberries were a haze of decadence surrounding her.

"Are you going to come for me? Show me how good my sexy badass princess looks when she lets go and comes against my hand."

The front door smacked against the wall with a bang.

"Lucas, I need to ask you something," Max shouted. Gabs shoved Lucas away. Her clothes were in disarray, and she yanked at them. She burned with embarrassment as she redressed and got far away from Lucas. "Jack and I saw Aidan. He said you and Gabi seemed less like a fake couple and more like—"

"I've got to go," she said as Max and Evie's friend, Jack, entered the kitchen.

"Evie can't find out about this," she whispered as she shoved her bag in front of her.

"We'll go. Sorry, Gabi." The panic widening Max's features was nothing compared to Gabi's.

"It's okay. But I really should go," Gabi squeaked.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," Lucas replied.

"I know," she lied.

She refused to make eye contact with anyone as she bolted for the front door. Humiliation controlled her. She gripped her bag tighter. As she grabbed the door handle, she paused.

Was she overreacting?

Her past hadn't prepared her for moments like this. She could go back. Lucas would help her process things rather than panicking. But what if Evie found out?

"Sorry, Lucas. I guess Aidan was right, though," Jack said.

Gabi dropped her head. It was too late. Even though her relationship with Evie wasn't what it should be, she might recognise Gabi was falling for Lucas and stop this thing.

And Gabi couldn't let it end because Lucas was her chance to get past the shitty situation her body put her in.

She tapped a quick message to him, scared he might follow her.

Gabi: Don't come after me. I need to process. Please.

Her phone beeped with a reply as she slammed the door.

Lucas: Okay. I was about to chase after you. If you change your mind, I'll be by your side in an instant.

* * *

Gabi kicked off her trainers and dumped her bag in the hallway of her house.

"Rose?" she called. "Rose, are you here? I need to chat. I think I overreacted again tonight."

She searched the house, only remembering as she reached Rose's open bedroom door that tonight was Rose and Charlie's dance practice for their wedding.

Gabi ambled to her room and slumped on her bed. Would she always run away when things got too much? Lucas said he'd help her process, but he was what she had to process. She was a grown-ass woman who needed to make her own decisions.

She stared at his message again.

I'll be by your side in an instant.

The worst thing was she believed it, and that was why she couldn't contact him. This was a short-term pact. He didn't want friendship after this, and everything he'd shared about Lexi helped her understand why. She couldn't rely on him to help her process because, within six weeks, she'd lose that.

With Rose out and Evie too overprotective, she was alone. She contemplated calling her mum, just to hear a familiar voice, but she wouldn't talk if Gabi's dad were nearby.

She scrolled through photos of Gabi, Evie, and their parents from a holiday when she was seven. That was before Evie's rebellious stage. They were happy then. A tear slipped down her cheek at the pull to return to when life was easiest.

But the knowledge she had about herself and her body had obliterated the chance for it to be easy again.

Gabi stared at her ceiling, remembering her dad making her choose between Evie and her parents when she'd said she wanted to move closer to Evie. She'd chosen a life where she could discover her identity away from her stifling parents, but instead, she was left with

this rollercoaster of emotions and constantly believing she'd never be more than the names her ex-boyfriend had called her.

Gabi stared at the superhero patterns on the leggings Lucas had gifted her before pulling the duvet up. She'd loved him touching her and feeling like she was conquering her body rather than being ruled by it. But now, her fucking head plagued her. Would she ever feel normal?

She swallowed the lump in her throat.

She looked at the photo of her family one last time before attempting sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LUCAS

It was the final minutes of the match, and there was no sign of Gabi in the stands.

Lucas glanced at the seats she'd sat in the first time she'd watched him. Instead of a beaming Wonder Woman, floodlights lit a glaring Evie.

He'd sworn Max and Jack to secrecy about what they'd walked in on a week earlier, but the damage with Gabi was done. The only message he'd received from her was to arrange the next day's date. She was distancing herself.

She must be ashamed of him because he wasn't enough.

He shook his head. That wasn't true. They weren't dating, and she was happy to be around him until she thought Evie might learn what they'd done. Gabi wasn't manipulating him. She was clear the whole time what this was. They'd made rules, for goodness' sake. But the way she'd bolted brought old anxiety back that he was the guy someone kept in their life until they found someone better. Gabi made it seem like he was someone she wanted to be around. But not anymore.

Lucas looked again into the stands. A group chanted insults. The fans would never accept him, and he didn't have Gabi's adoration for sustenance.

"You okay, buddy?" Max asked, running alongside him.

Lucas shrugged as he spied the biggest brute on the opposing side, a guy the team called Ogre, the perfect name for a player nearly seven feet with a wall of muscle.

Lucas eyeballed Ogre. *You and me*, he mouthed. *You're going down.*

He couldn't make Gabi proud or the fans like him, but he could help his team score a try.

Ogre used his finger to make a slicing action across his throat.

Max hissed. "Don't piss him off. You'll get hurt. You've taken enough knocks to the shins."

"So what? I don't matter. Ask the fans. They'll tell you."

"Is this about Gabi? You're seeing her tomorrow. You can chat it out then."

The game was restarting. Josh stood at the side, preparing for a line-out. Lucas lined up in front of Max. It was a running date tomorrow through a park in town, five kilometres. Finally, something that didn't scare him—except seeing Gabi and pretending he wasn't falling for her and hadn't jumped every time his phone had buzzed scared the crap out of him.

To her, he was just a person helping with her with her sex problem. And then she wouldn't need him. He was attracted to the wrong woman again. But it was inevitable. He'd call any man who spent a day in her presence and didn't fall for her a liar. Gabriella Draper was a goddess.

Someone in the crowd wearing a Bulls shirt shouted something derogatory at him. He couldn't hear the words, but he caught the sneer and the laughter from the man's friends.

Lucas stared at Ogre. He needed a win.

"Lucas, don't do it," Max hissed behind him.

"I need to."

Josh tossed the ball as Lucas turned, and with the help of Gavin, they pushed Max into the air to catch it.

He chucked it back to Banjo, who tossed it to Josh. Banjo sprinted as Max and Lucas ran into position. This was their favourite play because they had to work perfectly in sync, which they could do because they were a team that understood each other.

It was Max's turn with the ball next. The opposing side, the Hornets, expected that, so Max quickly threw it again. The Hornets would expect Banjo to catch it, but the ball sailed past him, and Lucas caught it.

This was his moment for a try. Fuck the fans and the people who made him feel less. He was an incredible player, and he'd show everyone he was more than enough.

He jumped as a Hornet's player dived at him, flying past another that ran at him.

There was something special about a night game. Darkness flooded the sky as he battled the dropping temperatures. Running through the cold air, his lungs hurting, and his skin freezing yet sweating was glorious. He lived for these moments with his team. They left him to run as they tackled and distracted others.

This was it.

Fuck Ogre. Nothing was stopping Lucas.

Two players came at him from the right, and with Ogre on the left, he'd have to slip through the narrow space between them. He glanced to his side, but his team was blocked. He was on his own.

He shouldn't have riled Ogre.

Max was right.

As he neared him, Ogre hunched down. Lucas tried to dive through the gap, but there wasn't enough space. The entire force of the Ogre and his steel-like shoulders slammed Lucas in the chest. The guy was massive enough to hit nearly every muscle on Lucas's torso.

Lucas did everything to stay up, but he was no match for Ogre, who scooped him off his feet, his hands pinning his thighs hard enough to bruise, and rammed him into the ground.

The crowd gasped, and no one jeered him for the first time in a year.

The ball rolled backwards. Lucas lay winded and dizzy. Josh and Gavin shoved Ogre out of the way. It took two of the team's biggest guys, yet Lucas thought he could take him alone.

I'm a wanker.

Banjo snatched the ball and threw to Max, who dived across the line. Ogre pulled Lucas off the ground, nearly yanking his arm out of the socket.

"You gave it a good go," Ogre grunted, "but you never stood a chance."

Story of my life.

As Max kicked the ball over the posts, making the conversion and signalling the end of the game, Lucas hobbled off the pitch and

down the tunnel. There was nothing to stay for.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

GABI

Gabi checked her phone. The only message was from her housemate, telling her to go easy on Lucas after the previous night's game. With Rose and Charlie's wedding in a month, she and Rose barely saw each other and resorted to texts to stay in communication.

The message made no sense. Gabi had attended all but the game's last two minutes, hiding in the back of the stands. Lucas took a couple of hits that left her grimacing and wanting to see him in the locker room to check on him, but she'd kept away. The return to school after the holidays made for a long week, and going to the game left her exhausted, as had her struggles sleeping due to a particular rugby player.

But it wasn't the children at school that left her crawling to the weekend. It was Pam's digs about Gabi's syndrome, framed as derogatory questions.

She hadn't stayed for the entire game because Pam has called her repeatedly. Thinking it was an emergency, Gabi left the stadium in the last minutes and returned her call. Pam demanded Gabi do her lesson prep that weekend and reminded her she was covering classes while Gabi was attending her hospital appointment the next month.

With that and the meeting Gabi still needed to have with the head about her social media, she was ready for this run to clear her

jitters.

But none of it explained why she needed to be gentle with Lucas. Did something happen with the fans after she'd left?

She checked his social media for clues.

He was getting more likes than before. Gabi lingered on his blue eyes and winning smile in his photo with Aidan. That had brought him a lot of positive attention. She giggled at the one from the climbing wall. No one else knew what she'd offered as the photo was taken.

She smiled wistfully as she zeroed in on their cookery photo. His grin as he kissed her gave her butterflies, which was a problem.

As much as the photo suggested more, he wasn't her attractive boyfriend. He was a means to an end. She was still scared of intimacy and crossing the sex barrier, but now she was scared of all of that with him. It could tie her emotions to him forever.

She scrolled the comments under their recent cookery photo. There were more good ones than before. People celebrated him, but trolls still threw insults about his playing, saying he didn't belong in the town. A couple caught her eye as she scrolled again.

Is this one married to your boss like the last one was?

She's not as hot as Lexi.

This relationship is fake.

They were right. The relationship was fake. And she was his unattractive sidekick.

She shook her head. Tiredness, on top of the comments, distorted her feelings about herself.

Gabi waited at the side of the park for Lucas to join her for the local organised run. A couple of people watched her as she tucked herself behind a tree. The second looks from strangers began when Lucas started posting about their dates. Were these strangers comparing her to Lexi as well? She dropped her head and stared at the ground.

"You've got a lot going on in your head, princess," Lucas said softly behind her.

Gabi turned to find him smiling gently. Her stomach flipped.

"I'm worried about the run," she admitted. It was barely a thought compared to the others mangling her brain, but it was something she could share.

His brows knotted. "But you run in your spare time."

"Yeah, in a quiet gym. I don't want to be seen, and this means being seen. I'll probably trip and end on my arse with every bastard watching."

"I've got you, like you had me at climbing. If you fall, I'll catch you." Lucas gave a sheepish smile. "And so you know, I want to pin you against this tree and kiss you when you swear. It's so hot."

"Oh." She returned his smile. "Is this the time to tell you how much of a fucking wanker you are?"

Lucas laughed long and hard. "It's always a good time to tell me that." He cupped her cheek. He brushed her lips with hers. "Chaste, as we're in public."

It still had her body quivering. "It creates anticipation for our pact, too," she said breathlessly, reminding herself the kiss was about their deal.

Lucas appeared to wince. It must be her anxiety making her read too much into things.

"Exactly. We can't forget the pact. I'm sorry about last week. Max and Jack won't say anything to anyone, including Evie."

Gabi's shoulders relaxed. "Thank you. And sorry for being quiet on text this week. School was, well, school."

"No worries."

Gabi pushed her fringe from her face. "Shall we run?"

Lucas nodded as they lined up for the race.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LUCAS

Lucas hissed as his foot caught a dip in the path. The bruises to his shins from the tackles during the previous night's match were punishing, but they were nothing compared to the purple and red imprint of Ogre's shoulders in his torso.

"Sorry our dance class tonight was cancelled. I could search online for something else," Lucas said. *Please say no. Please say no.*

"It's okay."

Lucas sighed with relief. The sooner he was home, soaking his muscles, the better.

"Please stop outpacing me," she said as she ran by his side.

"Sorry." He grimaced every time he sucked in a breath. Usually, he wouldn't break a sweat, but with each slam of his feet against the path and wincing breath, he was desperate to reach the finish. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "I forgot how little your legs are sometimes."

She elbowed him in the stomach, and he winced. Vomit climbed his throat, and he swallowed repeatedly to push it down.

He glanced at Gabi, but she focused on the path. "Sorry, I meant how much shorter they are compared to mine. Your legs are perfect."

"No, they're not."

He spied her smile out of the corner of his eye and chuckled. Confidence looked good on her. He glanced at her legs. The leggings he'd bought her emphasised the strength in her thighs. Even with

pain turning his belly with each step, he'd give anything to have those thighs wrapped around his head as she rode his mouth.

"We forgot to get a picture of us before the race," she said between panting breaths.

"We'll get one after, although I won't look my best."

"When do you ever?" she teased, proving she wasn't the shy little mouse Evie and Charlie said she was.

"You're too cute and cheeky for my liking." They'd run over four kilometres. There wasn't much left, but the pain in his shins made it tricky to focus. The hot tub called his name, and with an empty house due to Max and Jack spending the day in London, no one would catch him crying while he iced his shins. And no one would tell him it was too soon to use a hot tub after getting bruised. Fuck that. He needed a beer and wet heat.

He glanced again at Gabi. Dark circles framed her lower eyelashes. She pushed her fringe from her face and avoided his stare.

"Is everything okay?" He skimmed her ponytail with his hand. "Gabs?"

"I read the comments on your cookery post," she panted. Lucas tried to make eye contact, but she avoided him. "One guy said I wasn't as hot as Lexi."

Lucas fisted his hands as his temperature rose. He'd hunt the author of that comment down and punch his fucking lights out, and then he'd challenge him, bloody-faced and moaning, to spend one hour in Gabi's presence and not fall under her spell.

"Those people are nasty, spiteful shits who don't know what they're talking about. You're beautiful, sexy, and the most incredible woman I've met. I'm lucky you spend time with *me*." Although she probably wouldn't if it wasn't for the pact. Still, he wanted to hold her close so she'd never read anything negative about herself again. "I'm sorry you experienced that. You only deserve praise. We don't have to post any more photos."

"We must. You need to stay in this town." Her vehemence made him stop. He was the one who'd said they couldn't be friends, but she was against it. His heart thudded in his chest as she pounded the path, her ponytail swinging. He couldn't hope she'd want anything long-term with someone like him. He didn't know how to do relationships, and he wasn't boyfriend material for someone like Gabi. She'd realise how much better she could do, although the idea

of her with someone else was like his world turning black and white after he'd briefly witnessed technicolour for the first time.

She turned and stared back at him. "Why have you stopped?"

He ran to catch up with her. "Sorry. I had loose shoelaces. But you believe me when I tell you you're the hottest woman I've ever met, right? Because you are. When the pact is over, men will drag each other to the ground for your smile."

She guffawed.

"Seriously." *And I'd crawl over each and every one of them with their fingers digging into my bruises to hear you hum as we kiss.* "The only thing stopping you from dating is you."

"And my sex issues."

"Which you're getting past because you're fucking incredible. Even with everything, you're fighting to control your body and future. Do you know how phenomenal you are? I'm lucky you speak to me, let alone kiss me."

He spied her grin. Even complimenting her made him happy. And it was all true.

"How are you feeling after what happened last week when you nearly orgasmed against my fingers before we were interrupted?" He could've asked subtly, but he wanted her to remember her near-climax like he had. It was fucking sensational, and he'd tired his hand out thinking about it all week. "You went quiet on me."

"I'm sorry. I needed to process alone, and school was shit, and I... I didn't know how to feel about it all. I felt ashamed, too."

Lucas dragged in air. The bruises on his chest seemed to have their own heartbeat, but he willed the pain to pause. "Ashamed of...?" Me?

"How I reacted. Growing up, I missed out on loads of things. There's so many new things to process now. Teenagers get caught kissing or doing other stuff for the first time, not primary school teachers in their twenties. I should've handled it better."

"There's no age limit for stuff like that. I've been caught doing... things in the last year."

"What sort of things? I bet you didn't get embarrassed and freak out like I did."

"Wanna bet? Max walked in several months ago while I was stroking my cock watching *Supergirl*. I was embarrassed because I wasn't just wanking, I was dressed as a superhero."

She squealed. "You dressed up to wank?"

His eyes bugged out. "No, fuck no. I did not dress as a superhero to wank. I'd come back from a local fancy dress charity event, and repeats of the show were playing."

"Tell me you weren't dressed as Superman, because he's her cousin," she teased.

"I was Batman, obviously. I wanted to be anonymous at the event. I was sat at home, dick out, still wearing the mask."

Gabi stopped and bent double. Her body shook with laughter.

"Oi, you. We've nearly finished the race, and people from two towns over can hear you laughing. I told you about the Batman wanking mask moment because you should know that we all get embarrassed, especially when someone catches us."

Gabi wiped tears from her eyes. "Sorry. It's just, that's quite an image." Her giggles made him laugh and hiss. Laughter did his bruises no favours.

They resumed their run. The finish line was in sight.

"The fans don't deserve you," she said as they ran the last bit to the finish. She turned her head to look at him, no doubt convincing him of her seriousness. "You were breathtaking at last night's game. I couldn't look away."

She sprinted away with a red face but kept checking over her shoulder for his reaction.

"You were there?"

The person in front of them stopped right past the finish line. Gabi was about to run into her.

"Gabs," he shouted.

Everything hurt as he chased her. He dodged a forgotten water bottle and jumped a hole in the path. As she crossed the line, she saw the stranger and hopped to the side as Lucas approached. She crossed into his path, and Lucas knocked her to the ground. They rolled on the grass.

"Sorry, I was trying to save you," he said, flat on his back as she straddled him. "Are you okay?"

"Says the man with bruised shins."

Gabi kissed him, and he pressed his palm to the back of her head to keep her lips against his. Her fingers stroked his cheek, and she hummed as he deepened their kiss. He grabbed her butt gently and

held it. His dick pulsed against her stomach. She grabbed his shirt and ground herself lightly against his erection.

His moans seemed to remind her where they were, because, suddenly, she pulled back.

She thumbed her bottom lip. "Your shins look bad." Her voice was husky. "You must have taken a beating at the game."

"I've had worse. And I'm a badass. I can take it."

The lightness on her face was new. "So, as you're a badass, you don't want me to kiss all your bruises better back at your house?"

Heat flooded his groin. "Hold on. You should definitely do that. Even badasses need kisses—but only if you promise to make them like feathers when you get to my chest."

Her brow furrowed, and he rolled them so she wasn't sitting on his chest. He pressed his lips to her forehead. "I looked for you at the game, but all I got was a glare from Evie."

"Nothing new there."

"Where were you sat?"

"Near the back. Evie and I aren't chatting much, and I wasn't in the mood for a lecture. What's wrong with your chest?"

"You saw the game. I'm strong, but I can't take a beating from Ogre, something I should have considered before I pissed him off. If I'd stopped being a dickhead at the end of the game, I would have avoided the worst two minutes of my life."

Those furrows returned. "I left before the end because of a work thing. Did you make a big bad man angry?" she teased.

He stared sheepishly at her as he lifted his shirt to reveal his chest.

"Fucking hell," she snapped, the green of her eyes blazing darker than he'd seen before. "Tell me where Ogre is. I'm going to fucking kill him. No one hurts my fake boyfriend."

Lucas pushed his T-shirt back down and placed his arms on either side of her head, caging her. "It was my fault. I'd love to watch you take him, though. I'm pretty sure you could do anything you set your heart to. Thank you for having my back."

"If I'd seen him do that, I'd have waited for him at the end of the match and taken him out with nunchucks."

"Nunchucks?" Lucas pressed his lips together to stop from laughing.

"I watched *Kick-Ass 2* last night. But I stand by the sentiment."

"The next time it happens, you can hurt him however you like, and I'll use my superhero powers to get you out of jail."

"Only if you promise to wear Batman's mask when you do." Gabi winked. "Although I'd prefer it if you did the Spider-Man upside kiss. I'd peel your mask off and kiss you before you rescued me."

"I'd be there in an instant. No one puts my fake girlfriend behind bars for wielding nunchucks."

She smiled as she pecked Lucas on the lips. "Thank you. Now let's get you home so I can look after you."

His heart burst at the words he'd never heard from any woman, not even Lexi. His throat was thick, and he knew when she walked away from him, it would destroy him, but instead of arguing or telling her he was okay alone, he replied, "Okay, beautiful."

Chapter Thirty

LUCAS

The water scalded him as he stood in it, but it was nothing compared to the emotional pain prickling his chest. He sat in the hot tub and let the blistering heat caress his aching limbs.

With his eyes closed, he pretended Gabi changing into his T-shirt upstairs was no big deal. Obviously, she didn't have her bikini with her, and she couldn't join him naked. He gulped at the image of a naked Gabi climbing onto his lap.

Today was their fourth date, which technically meant they might have sex after their next date. That was what they'd suggested when they'd shared their list of dates weeks ago at the farm, but she hadn't mentioned it, and he wouldn't bring up it until she did. Because if he only got to kiss her and tease her for another month until their pact came to an end, it would still be the best fucking month of his life.

She'd given him something impossible. He'd conquered fears of water and heights and laughed for hours. Gabi was magnificent when she pushed beyond her anxiety and when she challenged herself. Every time he made her laugh, smile, or even wink, he got a rush of joy that left a little nugget of hope in his chest, hope that people might see him like she did rather than as the local arsehole. No one who spent more than a minute with him believed he lacked confidence, but the Lexi effect had eaten away at his self-belief. Gabi showed him that there was goodness in his soul and that he

deserved more, and that he got to help her made every second in her presence memorable.

Feet padded on the decking beside him, but he kept his eyes closed. His cock pushed at his swimming shorts. He worried his lip as the steps got closer.

"You can look if you like," she said quietly, proving she was as nervous as he was.

The last time she'd visited him, she'd ridden his fingers in his kitchen, but this was just two people in a hot tub. It meant nothing.

Lucas opened his eyes to find Gabi smiling. Her joy was for him alone.

"Do you need help getting in?" he asked, massaging the roof of his mouth with his tongue, desperately clawing saliva back.

The cherry colour of one of his team shirts concealed her skin, but his gaze fixed on her nipples pressing against it.

"Yes, please."

He jumped up. Water poured off his body. She offered him a hand, and he took it readily. Her ponytail swung as she climbed the steps, and he resisted the temptation to wind it around his hand. The need to touch her was unrelenting.

"Fuck, that's hot," she squealed as she eased herself into the water.

He licked his lips.

"Really fucking hot, Lucas."

"I know, baby. Keep swearing like that, please. I beg you."

She shook her head and pushed at his chest. His breath caught.
"Bugger."

"Sorry. Oh my god. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to touch your bruises."

"Let's sit and pretend you're not hurting me and making me horny all at once."

"Shit, okay, sorry." She immediately sat. Her T-shirt rose in the air as it filled with water. She let go of him and pushed it down. "It's boiling, though, like I might lose my fucking skin."

He chuckled as he submerged his body. "And I might come if you keep swearing like that. Filthy-mouthed brat."

She laughed as he covered his groin with his hands.

"You promise there's no chance Max and Jack will appear?" she stuttered. Lucas raised his eyebrows, and she held up her hand.

"Not because I'm going to do anything like—"

"Ride my fingers?"

Her cheeks pinked, and he winked at her.

"I don't want to be this naked when they come home."

"You're wearing a T-shirt."

"With your name on it."

"Show me," he growled.

He twirled his finger in the air, and she turned. His name was emblazoned on her back. He'd given her a choice of rugby shirts, and she'd chosen this one. She'd branded herself with him, and even if it was just a shirt to her, it meant everything to him.

"Good girl," he whispered, but the way she bit her bottom lip as she turned back suggested she'd heard.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked, pointing at the cooler, trying to distract his arousal. "I've got soft drinks, beer, and cider."

"Fruity cider?"

He nodded, remembering he'd been drinking cider the night they met. "But I'll only give it to you if you promise not to flash your knickers like you did the last time you drank in front of me."

"That would be tricky, seeing as I'm not wearing any." She leaned forward and took the cider, revealing the outline of her breasts beneath his saturated shirt.

"Gabi," he grunted as she eye-fucked him.

Adrenaline rushed through his body.

He cracked open his beer, desperate to fill his dangerously dry mouth.

"I'm changing the subject because I don't want to come in the hot tub from imagining you."

Gabi chuckled. "As if."

"One day, I'll convince you how much I'm desperate for you to ride my dick as I grip your tits and praise your body." She gulped, and he grinned at her. "But for now, tell me about your week. Is that why you're drinking at midday?"

She smiled. "Get out of my head, Lucas Knight."

He loved that he was recognising her thoughts. She was a challenge. Gabi's head was more complex than games against teams he'd not researched. No one knew the real Gabi, but he wasn't just seeing her; he understood her, from her cheekiness to her need to challenge herself or when she required encouragement or when her

anxiety crept in. He should've been there when she was processing after Max caught them the other week. He was adamant she needed him, but he'd promised to let her process however she needed to.

But she still returned to him. She was fighting her fears, and he was so proud of her.

"You're right. Pam's bullying never stops, and there's nothing I can do about it," she murmured. Lucas waited, unwilling to fill the silence. "Don't tell me to speak to the head."

"I wouldn't dare. If you've not spoken to the head, you have your reasons."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Evie wanted me to speak to the head. We fought about that and a few other things last week. That's why I arrived anxious to the climbing centre."

"I wondered." It was like he'd tapped her head, and her thoughts spilt out. He sipped his beer as she stared at him. "Evie doesn't like me, does she?"

Gabi sighed. "You've noticed."

"It's hard not to."

"You're not the person she said you were. You're amazing, Lucas. You're kind and loving, and many people like you for good reason. I don't know if you realise how exceptional you are. You inspire me."

He choked on his beer.

"Too much?" she asked, sliding closer and patting him on the back.

"No, the perfect amount. I've heard too many fans say I'm a dickhead and worthless. I was starting to believe them. I didn't know how much I needed to hear that. Thank you."

She pecked his cheek. "Always. I can't attack the whole town with nunchucks," she said, lightening the conversation, "but I will defend you for as long as I have breath."

She snuggled against his chest, and he trembled. Her touch hurt, but the pain eased with the heat of the hot tub and the painkillers he'd taken, not to mention the buzz of the beer. And any soreness was worth it to have her close.

He held her against him and murmured into her hair, "My beautiful warrior princess."

Chapter Thirty-One

GABI

He'd said *my*. She held onto the word like it was the last chocolate bar in a sweet shop.

She sipped her drink in silence as she rested against his chest. She'd meant every word. His love of the town inspired her to chat with strangers more. In a shop, before she'd left for the race, she'd spoken with an elderly woman struggling to find everything on her list. It wasn't monumental, but it meant something to her.

Lucas wasn't a dickhead rugby player. He was a cheeky man with a massive heart, and the moments spent with him built her up in a way she'd have believed impossible a month ago.

"Was Evie always like this? Always telling you what to do?" he asked.

"A little before she left home. But since we found each other again, she's worse."

"Why?"

"I suspect she feels guilty for leaving and not getting in contact for years." He stroked Gabi's back. His touch was more than comfort; it gave her the power to speak her truth. "Maybe it's because I won't share things with her, but she senses there's something. When I was sixteen, a couple of years after Evie left, I realised I should have got my period... You probably don't want to hear this."

Lucas pressed a kiss to Gabi's forehead, and she shivered.

"I'd listen to you for hours. I want to be someone you can talk to. Besides, periods don't freak me out. My teenage girlfriend had endometriosis. We talked a lot about periods and gyne issues. And Amy talks about everything, including periods, boys, and willies. She's too young for these things but too curious for her own good."

Gabi lifted her head to stare at him. His blue eyes sparkled in the sunlight. "Thank you. It's just my mum never spoke to me about periods."

"At all?"

Gabi shook her head. "She said it would come when it was ready and not to be anxious, but that women's things were private."

"That's awful."

"My parents were closed off to discussions about most things a teenage girl needs to discuss, and I didn't have friends to ask. I only had church and couldn't speak to anyone there." Gabi's throat itched, but she wouldn't abandon the conversation. She craved the opportunity to speak to someone who listened without judgment.

"Around sixteen, I tried to make a GP appointment with our family doctor, but I was scared my parents would find out. Doctors aren't allowed to share medical information, but our village was tight-knit. I searched on the Internet, but I didn't know what was wrong with me. None of the hits gave me the information I needed, and Evie, who would have helped, was gone. She left me when I needed her."

"You went through so much alone."

She tucked her hair into a bun. Water lapped at her chest as she curled back around him. Cocooned between his thick arms and broad chest, she breathed in his sea air scent and rested her head carefully against him.

"I tried to forget about it, but it was impossible. I distracted myself with church and the boyfriend I told you about. I thought I loved him. I liked having someone that was all mine and who my parents couldn't control."

"That's understandable." Lucas squeezed her. "And that's when the boy who I will torture if I ever get my hands on him hurt you?"

Her laugh was strained. It hurt to revisit this, but the freedom in sharing was like fresh air pumping through her skin and into her heart. "He was an idiotic teenager. When he tried to...penetrate

me...I thought it was my hymen, but it was so painful, and his dick wouldn't go anywhere. I lost it. He flipped out. It was chaos. And then he told everyone at school I was a freak. I suspect he thought he'd done something wrong."

"I hadn't considered that. You don't have to defend him, though."

Gabi shrugged. "I know, but it was a lot for him. I went to the GP eventually, and I should have told them I wasn't having periods, but they explained the problem was probably my hymen because it was my first time. They gave me the STD talk and told me I shouldn't have unprotected sex. It was too much. If I'd had the confidence, it could have been different."

"And that makes things hard with Evie?"

"I needed her. I was so alone. So now, when she tells me what to do, I'm torn because she doesn't know what I've experienced, and I'm angry she didn't call. But I can't tell her, because as much as she pretends she's confident and strong, it'll upset her. She loves me, but she doesn't understand me."

"And she doesn't listen to learn about you."

"Exactly. If I tell her what happened, she won't listen properly. She'll react. I love her, but it's too late for her protection. Living my life without the humiliation from my past eating away at my confidence is difficult enough without her opinions or guilt."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. Lucas held her, stroking her back as she organised her thoughts. "Am I selfish for not telling her?"

Lucas shook his head. "No. You're dealing with a shitty past and working through it as best you can." Gabi smiled, although her lips trembled. "Who goes to your hospital appointments with you now? Rose?"

"I go by myself, like I always have. I can't rely on anyone else."

His chest tightened, and she relaxed her hand. "Gabs, sometimes I don't think we have much in common, and then you speak my mind. Being alone is my experience as well. I've got my brother locally, but his world is Amy, which is right. My parents emigrated to Australia eight years ago, and although I talk with Mum every fortnight and visit every couple of years, it's not the same. I miss them a lot, but my mum the most."

"I bet she misses you, too."

"She does. I'm lucky that I've got my rugby friends. Max is the best friend I could ask for, but if I leave the team, we'll drift apart, and I'll be alone again. No one from my old team stuck by me after the gossip. I hadn't proved myself enough for them to believe me, I guess. For now, I'm the only one I can rely on."

"Do you really think you might leave?"

Lucas nodded. "I don't want to, and I'm doing everything I can to stay, but I'm struggling to ignore the nasty comments and the hatred. I might be able to move three hours away. I'm not going to the Giants. I can't go back."

"Good. They don't deserve you. When will you decide your future?"

"At the end of May, the end of the season. I'll know by Coach and Rose's wedding."

One month to go. And there was only one month left of their fake dating sex pact. "So," she broached, "do you want to be alone together until then? We can rely on each other until you move clubs. If you move clubs."

"I'd like that a lot."

Silence descended. Under the covered roof of the hot tub, Gabi let her worries fly on the breeze. They were secluded and hidden, and in their hideaway, anything seemed possible.

"Can I shift you slightly?" Lucas asked.

Gabi nodded. Lucas slid his hand under her leg and lifted her so she sat on his lap, her legs and arms wrapped around him.

"After all that outpouring, I thought you'd need a proper hug. And I need one, or I'm going to rampage on all those who hurt you." Lucas's eyes were glassy with unshed tears. She kissed him on the lips.

Lucas hissed as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Shit. Your bruises."

He kissed her and squeezed her in a full hug. "It was worth it."

His heartbeat thudded against her chest. He met her gaze, and she studied how his blue eyes highlighted the light gold aura stretching from his pupils.

He smiled under her inspection.

She wrinkled her nose and rested her head in the crook of his neck.

"Can you tell me a bit about you and sex? You said penetration was a problem with *that* guy." Joy hit her belly when he said *that* guy with such vehemence. "But you've helped your body prepare for penetrative sex with your dilators."

Gabi counted her breaths to regulate her breathing. "Yes."

"How can I make it good for you when we have sex? What should I know about your body?" Lucas asked tentatively.

"It's about to get anatomical," she said, attempting humour to ease the moment. "You know the vaginal tunnel, the bit of the body leading from the entrance to the cervix?" He nodded. "Mine wasn't fully formed. I didn't have much there. So through sticking these increasing in size plastic things, dilators, inside me over the last year, I lengthened my vagina to be a more 'normal' length."

"Okay."

Gabi continued to talk to his chest, carefully tracing the outline of his bruises, unable to watch his reactions. "The dilators have done their job, and now I can have sex. Which is where you come in."

"You don't need dilators again?"

"If I stop having sex for a long time. As with any muscle, you need to keep it stretched." It was so clinical, but most of her experiences were. She used the language her specialist had. She rubbed her mouth. "But I don't know if I can have sex."

"The medical team said you could, right?"

"But"—Gabi squeezed her eyes shut—"I mean, psychologically. I want you. You're so fucking hot, and you'd make it amazing based on what we've already done. And you listen to me, really listen, which is crucial for us to have sex, and all of this makes it easy to trust you, but..." She breathed slowly.

"But?" Lucas prompted.

"But I'm scared. It's a step I want to make, but it's big. I've worked on this for a year, and it was sometimes painful. What if it doesn't work and I need surgery, or what if it doesn't work because of me? My body has let me down, and what if this shows me I'm never going to be okay? I've been through so much to get to this place, but what if it isn't enough?"

"Gabs." He tucked a finger under her chin and lifted her face to meet his gaze. "Then we do whatever it takes. And if that doesn't work, that's okay. Lots of individuals and couples"—he cleared his throat—"or fake pact dating friends don't have penetrative sex."

"Bullshit," she replied.

"Seriously. There's so much more to sex than—" He pushed the tips of his finger and thumb together on his right hand to make an O shape and stuck his finger inside it repeatedly.

She swiped his hands away. "I'm not sure if you're mature enough for this moment." She squeezed her lips together to stop laughing.

"I'm the best guy for it," he countered with his smile. "You know the clit has more than eight thousand nerve endings, and there are more erogenous zones around the body. Your neck, your lips..." As he said each area, he kissed the one he was referring to. "Your inner wrist."

"How do you know this?"

"Research," he explained. "I want to make this good for you."

She licked her lips as he pressed kisses against her other wrist. "And this doesn't put you off? I mean, conversations about vaginas and plastic dilators and abnormal bodies?"

"Your body isn't abnormal. There's no such thing. Everybody's bodies and brains are different. The most important thing is good communication between two people, or more than two, if that's your thing."

His lips heated her skin, and she shifted against him while humming.

"And most importantly, you don't have to be ready for anything. I'm happy listening to your little noises when I kiss your wrist." He kissed her wrist again, and as if on cue, she moaned into the warm spring air.

Chapter Thirty-Two

GABI

Lucas stroked her back. She wanted his hands under her shirt. Where before today, their intimacy was hot and heavy, and sometimes planned, this was safe. The proximity and his touch left her breathless as her pulse climbed.

"What fruit does your shampoo smell of?" he asked. "I can't work it out."

"It's mango and papaya. It means even on the worst days at school, I can imagine sitting on a beach, the sun against my skin and a cocktail in hand." But for the first time, she wasn't alone on the beach in this fantasy. Lucas was beside her, her leg draped over his thick rugby player thighs as he stroked her skin.

He purred. "Perfect."

She shifted against him.

"Are you okay? You keep wriggling," Lucas asked.

"Sorry, I'm just...horny."

He cleared his throat and repositioned her. "Same."

"I wondered..." She steeled herself. She could do this. It was silly to ask, but they'd said communication was important. "Would you rub my back under my shirt?"

His hands fisted her shirt, dragging it up. His skin was warm, and she sighed and wriggled a little. She ran her nails across his scalp, and he murmured his pleasure.

"I'm still thinking about your joke about not wearing knickers," he groaned.

She whispered in his ear, "I wasn't joking, Lucas."

He growled and gripped her butt cheeks. His hands kneaded them as she repositioned herself so she sat on his groin. It jerked underneath her, and she ground herself against him.

"Fuck, that's so good," she whimpered, closing her eyes. His swim shorts trapped his erection, but the grinding friction teased her clit.

Lucas licked and sucked her neck as he squeezed her arse, pulling her against him, rocking her against his cock. "You like that, don't you, baby?"

"Yes," she gasped. "You're so hard. No one can see us, can they?" She looked over her shoulder. "The fence is high."

"No one can see anything. We're alone. No one can hear us, either. The garden is too big."

"Will you touch me like you did last week? Touch my...pussy," she said, stumbling over her request.

He slid a hand between them. "I'll do anything you want."

She pulled up the hem of her shirt until her breasts were on display. Her nipples were hard, and as Lucas rubbed his thumb slowly up and down her clit, he swirled his tongue around her nipple. She leaned her head back.

Her belly spasmed. Her limbs ached with need, and he growled against her skin. She writhed against his finger, murmuring his name. "Keep doing what you're doing. Just like that."

She held his head, scratching at his scalp as he feasted on her breasts.

Her legs shook. Past voices said she shouldn't be doing this in public with Lucas, but she shook her head, erasing them.

"You're so fucking wet for me, baby," he grunted. "Soaking."

He scratched a nail across her inner thigh, and she begged, "Slide a finger in."

His finger pressed inside her.

"I was worried it would hurt," she gasped. "My toys don't, but I didn't know how this would feel. It's so good already."

"You're tight. You're taking my finger so well. You're doing this."

Her whole body clenched with need for him.

"And so fucking responsive," he added. "I can't get enough of you." He thrust his finger in and out of her pussy.

She rode it. It wasn't as thick as her dilator. "Two," she cried, and he added another.

Her hands shook where she gripped his shoulders.

"Fuck, I want to taste you." His voice was hoarse. "And finger you and fuck you. I want it all."

"Then do it."

He cocked an eyebrow, and she nodded and repeated, "Do it."

He grinned hungrily as he lifted her and placed her on the edge of the hot tub.

"Shirt on or off?" she asked as he positioned her so her back rested against the fence.

"Keep it on. I like that you're wearing my name, but keep it pulled up."

"So you can stare at my tits as you tongue-fuck my pussy?"

"Fuuuuuuck," he said, dropping his head before meeting her stare. "You're such a dirty-mouthed good girl. I have a lot to thank spicy books and porn for. I'll enjoy watching those tits bounce when you come on my mouth."

With one last trademark Lucas wink, he gripped her thighs and licked her breasts. He travelled down, swirling his tongue across her skin, biting at her inner thighs.

"You taste so good, beautiful." His lips vibrated against her skin.

She clenched her thighs and sucked on her lower lip as her belly coiled in anticipation.

Lucas pressed a hand against her stomach as he swept his tongue across her pussy. She jolted against his mouth, and he chuckled in that deep, seductive way that made pressure rise in her belly. He looked up at her, checking on her or revelling in her reactions.

Both were likely with Lucas.

With each lick, his tongue stripped her of her anxieties. She widened her legs to force him closer and deeper.

The desperation to come remained from when his fingers were plunging inside her.

He pinched her nipple, and she cried out.

There was so much happening, and it overwhelmed her in the way she needed, quieting the voices from her past that said she

wasn't capable of this. She was desperate to have his dick inside her. But she desired this first.

Her medical team had said foreplay was vital, and it was like Lucas had read a training manual on how to make her ready for him. When she cried out, he repeated the angle of his tongue or the way he'd licked her clit, adapting to her pleasure. He shoved one of her thighs over his shoulder, and his tongue pressed deeper.

He pinched her nipple again.

"Yes, tongue-fuck my pussy," she moaned between gasps.

"That's right, say those dirty words." He shoved his hand in his shorts, and it moved as if he was stroking his cock. Licking her made him hard. He wanted her like she wanted him.

"I need your fingers inside me, too," she pleaded. "I want you to finger-fuck me."

He smiled broadly as he slipped two fingers inside her.

Water droplets slid down his back, and she wondered how he'd taste. What it would be like to lick his skin, bite him, wrap her mouth around his cock?

She craved him.

She wanted all of him.

Gabi gripped the edge of the hot tub. The fence pressed into her back, but the rough wood was nothing compared to Lucas's fingers thrusting inside her pussy.

He licked and sucked her clit. She bucked against his mouth, but it didn't stop him. Nothing could. Her head lolled against the fence as his tongue dipped inside her pussy before sucking hard on her clit. There was a little pain, but it was eclipsed by her desperation to come. Her limbs tightened.

"More please," she begged.

"Pinch your nipples," he demanded, his voice thrumming through her.

He resumed sucking her clit and finger-fucking her as she squeezed her nipples.

She was so close, and where her fears tried to surround her, pleasure annihilated them. He thrust his finger inside her again and again.

Her body coiled like a tight spring. It was as if she was levitating as he sent her off the edge.

"I'm coming," she gasped as she thrust against his face. He didn't stop as her body shook and her legs wobbled. She'd made herself come many times, but this was like everything around her was a ball of light bursting into flames. Waves of passion hit her again and again.

As the light blinding her faded, she cried out, "Stop, I can't take it anymore." Lucas looked up at her. His pupils were dilated, and his glistening lips parted.

She panted as her body continued to shake in the aftermath of her orgasm.

"You fucking came, and it was the most beautiful thing ever," he rasped. Gabi gripped his body as he kissed her. He held her just as hard. "You did so well. You broke down a barrier, princess, and you looked sexy as fuck doing it."

He kissed her neck as he rested between her thighs. His erection pressed against her.

"Take me to your bed, Lucas. I'm ready." He quirked a brow as she panted, her chest heaving. "Please."

Chapter Thirty-Three

GABI

She couldn't stop shaking. Adrenaline, anticipation, and anxiety left her panting.

Lucas carried her to the shower.

He held her tightly while washing the hot tub water from her skin. A kiss followed every touch. His sweetness and heat caressed her skin as he washed her breasts, soaping them with his body wash that smelt of sea air.

She pined for more as he washed between her thighs and stripped his shorts off.

Water cascaded through his hair as he knelt at her feet and licked her pussy.

"You're going to make me come again," she warned, and he chuckled against her clit.

"Princess, that isn't a bad thing. It's a challenge I'll conquer."

"I want to stroke your dick."

He growled as he stared up at her. "Fuck, your sweet little good girl mouth makes everything a hundred times hotter."

He stood with his arm on the shower wall beside her and kissed her hard. She wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked it as he moaned into her mouth. It thrust against her palm as they made out. Water dripped down her breasts, and he pushed against her. His thick thighs pressed against hers, and she drew her nails up them, whimpering into his mouth when they flexed beneath her fingertips.

"I don't want you to stop, but this will be easier in my bed."

"Short girl problems," she teased.

"Perfect girl challenges," he said as he continued to press kisses to her lips.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to his bed. She cocooned herself against his chest, holding on for all she was worth and reminding herself it would be okay. He laid her down on the bed and settled between her legs.

"This room smells of you," she murmured as she stared into his beautiful blue eyes.

"Sweaty and gross?"

"Like the beach."

The softness of his stare did nothing to temper her need for him, but it added a gentleness to a moment filled with possibility and fear.

"That's your tropical scent," he said as he brushed kisses to her neck.

She ran her fingers through his hair, and he closed his eyes and hummed. "So good."

His dick pressed against her.

She felt safe and protected, like she could say anything, however stupid it might sound outside of this space. "I like touching you," Gabi whispered. His eyebrows quirked, and she giggled. "I loved touching your cock, too."

"I'd watch your dainty fingers stroke it all day."

"Maybe later. But first..." She winked, and he chuckled.

"What do you need me to do?" He pushed strands of wet hair out of her eyes. Awe clouded his face, making her heart ache. "How can I make this good for you?"

"Do what you do best."

"Such a charmer," he said with a smile.

"With a condom and lube." Her fingers trembled as he reached for his side drawer. He settled back against her and kissed her fingers with featherlight touches. "How are you so good at this? You understand my body better than I do."

"Experience helps. And because of everything we've shared, I recognise your needs."

"Has our fear bonded us?" she teased.

"Keep doing that, and I'm going to kiss that cheekiness right off you." She giggled as he swept his tongue across her nipples. "Yes, princess, our fear has bonded us, and so did your willingness to share your fears and your past with me."

"Thank you for giving me the space to do that." She cleared her throat. "Are you scared about having sex with me?"

"A little. I don't want to hurt you or make your anxieties worse, but I really want to fuck you, too." He ran a hand between their bodies, and she opened her thighs wider. His thumb toyed with her clit. "I've dreamt about this pretty pussy for a month. I've imagined the noises you'd make as I sink my dick in you. I've fisted my cock to the fantasy of you coming as you ride me, your tits bouncing and your mouth open."

He watched as she wetted her lips. His fingers played with her, and he slid one in and thrust gently. He pulled it out. It glistened with her wetness. He sucked it hard with a filthy smile. "You taste fucking amazing."

Her thighs quivered, and she bit her lip. "Let's make your fantasies a reality, Lucas. Make me come on your cock."

"That's my girl."

His shoulders flexed as he ripped the foil of the condom wrapper and pinched the end of the condom before rolling it down his erection. She swallowed loudly as she stared at his cock. The ones in porn didn't compare. Seeing Lucas Knight's dick close-up was a revelation. Its thickness and the way pre-cum leaked at the tip before he covered it sent her pulse rocketing. She wanted to taste it. She wanted to watch his face as she stroked it.

"Stop staring at my dick like that, princess, or I'm going to rip this condom off and—"

"Make me get on my knees and suck it?"

The strangled sound that left his mouth made her heart swell.

"I was going to be a little more delicate with my language."

"You don't need to be delicate with me. I like it when your badass side comes out, although I like your sweetness, too."

He beamed and blushed, and it was all she could do not to taste his smile.

"Show me where you need the lube before I come in my hand." He gave her the bottle and helped her wobbly fingers squirt it out, although his hands shook nearly as much.

She covered his cock all the way from the head to the base, smiling when he hissed at the heat of her hand and the cold lube. She fixed him with her gaze when she brushed the excess against her pussy.

"You don't know how fucking delicious you are." The way his pupils dilated as he stared down her body, pausing at her tits, left her in no doubt about his beliefs.

Briefly, he trailed kisses up her thighs. "I'm going to go slow," he murmured against her skin. "I want you to tell me if you want deeper, for me to pull out, or whatever you want and need. You're in control of this, okay?"

She nodded.

"Use your words. I need your words."

"Okay," she replied. "No more foreplay. I need your dick inside me."

"Yes, baby." He positioned his cock at her entrance.

This was it. The moment of truth. "Will you keep talking to me to stop my brain working overtime?"

"I'll do whatever you need. I've got you like you've always had me."

"You've had me, too. Thank you. I'm nervous, but I thought I'd be terrified."

He brushed kisses to her forehead as he pushed inside her. "I'm glad you chose me for this... That I'm the man lucky enough to take your virginity makes me so fucking hard."

He paused, and she nodded. And he pressed deeper. It was different from her toys, which she'd expected, but the mixture of arousal and awe and knowing it was him inside her made her light-headed. She sucked in air.

"You're taking my cock so well. And you feel amazing."

"Tight?"

"So fucking tight. My dick hasn't ever had a pussy this sweet or perfect. But it's because it's you, my Wonder Woman, my warrior. When I'm inside you, the desperation to kiss you is fucking intense." She grabbed his head and pulled it down to her, kissing him hard. His tongue slipped between her lips. It was hot and heavy, and her chest rose and fell as they made out.

His dick filled her, stretched her. She hissed at the pain.

Lucas fixed her with his blue eyes, now darkened with arousal.
“Okay?”

“Fuck me, Lucas.”

He pulled out slightly and thrust back in.

“Yes,” she said breathily. “That’s so good.”

There was pain, but it was minor compared to the pleasure starting at the tips of her fingers and going the length of every vein and muscle.

“You look beautiful lying underneath me. I can’t get enough of your needy, sexy body,” he growled. He licked and sucked her nipples, and she pressed herself against his lips.

She squeezed his bum with her feet. “Harder, fuck me harder.” Maybe he was being careful not to hurt her, because, at her words, his pounding became frantic. He thumbed her clit. She bucked against him. Her whole body was alive and sensitive to his movements, and she begged for more.

“So fucking sexy,” he hissed as she matched his rhythm, pushing her body into him with every thrust. It was actually happening. All those tears in therapy and moments of pain in dilation were worth it for this experience she’d never forget, no matter what came next.

“Fuck, Lucas,” she cried out. Where the hard plastic of her dilators stretched her, Lucas’s cock gave her pleasure unlike anything. His fingers against her clit swirled faster, matching the frenetic beat of her heart.

She was on the cusp of coming, but he had to be, too. He grunted with each thrust. His arm was beside her head, and she scraped her teeth against it.

Anxiety about not coming churned. She didn’t have to come, but she wanted to. She squeezed her eyes tightly to shut down her brain. Lucas seemed to sense she required his words.

“That’s right, give me everything you’ve got. Keep squeezing my dick like that. I can’t wait to come inside you. I love that I’m the first dick to enjoy this perfect cunt.”

She was on the edge of orgasm. “Don’t stop,” she demanded. If he changed anything, all would be lost.

“I’m not fucking stopping, Gabs. I want you to come on my cock and scream my name as you do. I want your wetness dripping down me and your tits in my mouth as you shake with my dick inside you.”

Her orgasm exploded as she careered over the edge. Her body shuddered, and everything clenched and released as a fireball blasted light behind her eyes. Tears streamed down her face as she screamed his name.

The power of her climax blinded her.

Lucas grunted as he thrust one last time.

The roar of emotion from conquering her body's problems decimated everything else, and as her breathing calmed and her body began to settle, she was aware of Lucas pulling off the condom. He dabbed her tears and kissed her forehead.

"You're amazing. You know that?"

She panted, "Thank you."

"Thank you. You were everything." He slipped out of bed. "I'll be back real quick."

He returned and gently cleaned between her thighs with a warm, damp cloth while whispering, "You were incredible."

She kissed him hard on the mouth. He pulled her against his chest.

"Sleep, princess. Just sleep. I'll be here for you when you wake up. I'm not going anywhere." Eventually, her breathing slowed to a soft rhythm, and her eyes closed. There was so much she wanted to talk about and ask, but with the soreness between her thighs and ache in her heart, she needed rest.

"That's right. Sleep," he said softly as she drifted off.

Chapter Thirty-Four

GABI

At the vibration of her phone, Gabi eased her aching body from the bed.

This was worse than the soreness after a run, but it carried more endorphins than any workout. She brushed her lips with her fingertips, feeling her smirk.

She stared at a napping Lucas. He lay on his front, his arms outstretched. She could stare at his blond hair, fluttering eyelashes, and cute smile as he dreamed forever. And the way he'd cared for her meant he'd gone from hot to god-like.

Danger thrummed like a warning bell in her head. This was just sex.

The temptation to slip back into the bed and see precisely what face he made when she stroked and tasted his dick made her suck in her lips.

Her phone vibrated from her bag again. She pushed away the clothes she'd removed before the hot tub and dragged the phone from her bag.

There were a handful of messages from Rose. She scrolled her notifications, also seeing numerous messages from Evie.

She opened Rose's first.

Rose: Answer your phone. I need to speak to you asap.

Lucas made a soft sigh as he turned. She licked her lips as her gaze trailed down his body.

"Are you going to keep eye-fucking me, or are you getting back into bed so that I can give you another orgasm?" he murmured, opening one eye. "You're incredible when you come."

"So you're not offering to help my aching muscles in the hot tub?" she replied.

"We both know how that would end." He opened his eyes gradually and stared at her. "You're so sexy. Come here."

She climbed into the bed, and he held her against him. Her phone vibrated.

"Rose is desperate to get hold of me. Can I answer?"

"Of course."

"Where have you been all day?" Rose asked.

"Ummm, busy."

Lucas kissed her neck, and she shivered. She glared at him, but that drew a bigger smile. His eyes glinted as he slid down the bed.

"I've been messaging you all day."

"It's only late afternoon," Gabi stuttered as Lucas brushed kisses down her body, avoiding her pussy, then dragged his lips up her thighs. Gabi held her hand over her face as his mouth travelled higher.

"I was sorting out wedding stuff, but Evie called me. She wanted to know where you are because you're not home, and you're always at home—her words."

Lucas pressed his palm against her stomach, and she held it there. He lifted his head and winked at her. His mouth returned to hover above her pussy. She eased her pelvis forward, desperate for more. At his chuckle, she covered the mouthpiece.

"Gabi, are you listening to me? Where are you?"

"I'm out."

Lucas lifted his head, and she muted her mobile. "Tell her you're lying in Lucas Knight's bed as he tongue-fucks your pussy. You can mention you came on his dick as well."

"I will kick your ass."

"That would sound scarier if I wasn't admiring your beautiful lips and imagining them around my cock."

Lucas licked her pussy, and she whimpered.

"Gabi, you're with Lucas, aren't you?"

She unmuted her mouthpiece. "Of course not." Her whole body trembled as Lucas twirled his tongue around her clit.

"I know you are," Rose replied. "You better meet me at the pub in the next twenty minutes, or Evie will be at Lucas's door."

Gabi reared back, but with the bed against her, there was nowhere to go. "Why would Evie come to Lucas's house?"

Lucas jumped out of bed as if a firecracker had been shoved somewhere intimate. With wide-eyed panic, he yanked on joggers and pulled a hoodie over his head.

"There are photos online of you and Lucas making out in the park this morning. I only stopped her by telling her you were meeting me at the pub after you went shopping alone."

Gabi didn't know whether to laugh at Lucas running around or drag him back to bed to finish what he started. She was worried about a confrontation with Evie, but it didn't rank as significant after the day she'd had.

"I'll be there in less than thirty minutes." Of course, the pub they always met in, the one Evie and Rose used to work at, was twenty minutes away. "Distract her until I arrive."

Gabi hung up and stared at Lucas, who murmured with a flitting gaze, "What do you need me to do? I'm ready for whatever your sister throws at me."

Gabi smiled. "As much as I'd love to watch you be my superhero, I should meet her at the pub alone and pretend nothing has changed."

His shoulders slumped briefly. "Are you sure? I can come with you or give you a lift or whatever you need. I'm here for you."

She didn't regret anything, but there was so much to come to terms with, and she couldn't be responsible for his emotions and her own unpredictable ones in front of him.

She knelt on the bed and cocked her finger. As he leaned closer, she yanked at the ropes of his hoodie and kissed him hard.

"It's for the best, Lucas." She needed to process everything that had happened, and proximity to Lucas and his perfect dick wouldn't help.

"Was it all right, though? I didn't hurt you?"

"It was amazing. You were amazing. I can't thank you enough for what you did for me."

"You were..." She held her breath as she waited for him to finish his sentence. He gritted his teeth briefly. "You were the best."

* * *

Gabi waved at Lucas, who stood at his window. She'd promised to message him once she'd survived Evie's interrogation.

He waved back, a soft smile on his lips.

She attempted to run to the pub, but everything was sore. At least she was wearing her running kit, but it would lead to more questions from Evie, especially if she arrived empty-handed after spending the afternoon "shopping."

She shrugged. She wouldn't tell Evie what she'd done, but she wouldn't let her railroad her, either.

Gabi jogged past the rugby club. Her grin was unwavering as she remembered the wink Lucas gave her when he first saw her at his game. She'd fucked Lucas Knight, an elite rugby player and the sexiest man in the world.

But more than that, she'd fucked the guy who was fast becoming her closest friend.

Her feet smacked the pavement. Echoes of her running bounced off driveways and little garden walls.

She'd never believed losing your virginity made you a new woman or any of the shit people peddled, but this was different. Tears brimmed at her eyes before sliding down her cheeks, but it didn't stop her journey. If anything, it made her run faster as she attempted to beat her spiralling thoughts into submission.

Memories of her first meeting with the consultant, learning about her syndrome, and having the dilation process explained to her choked her. The first time she'd tried dilation alone, she'd felt like a failure because she wasn't sure what she was doing. She'd called the hospital the next day and gone back for another instruction session.

Her pain culminated in a ball of emotion, and she sobbed, stopping at a corner, her eyes so full of tears she couldn't see her route.

The therapist warned her that after she first had sex, whether it went well or badly, this might happen. Maybe she should have

stayed with Lucas to talk this out rather than do it alone and panic. He was a great listener.

But he's not your great listener.

Grief for all she'd experienced, everything she'd suffered that no one would understand, gripped her like a vice. Her syndrome was unfair, as was the way it was dealt with over the years, but she'd never raged or grieved or declared how wrong everything was. Not like this.

A large church loomed amongst the houses. She wasn't sure what she believed anymore, but it was like this was where she was supposed to work some of it out. She sat on the wall outside the stone building, her swinging heels hitting the brick. She yanked up the hood of her sweatshirt and raged through her sadness.

The street was empty.

"There was so much pain," she mumbled. "It wasn't the life I wanted. I never deserved any of it. No one does."

For the first time, she let herself get angry at what she'd lost. She didn't let the guilt of knowing others had suffered more in life than her take control. This was her time to grieve. She reflected on memories of the people around her at school, and then university, joyfully learning about themselves while having sex and trying out relationships.

For years, she'd hidden her identity. When she finally believed she could be sexual, she'd been denied the chance to discover it because she didn't have anyone to experiment with.

And then Lucas appeared in her life.

Gabi cried for her eighteen-year-old self who was humiliated by her ex-boyfriend, for the scared woman who first went to the GP, and for the shell of herself who'd endured tests and consultations. She'd held on to those experiences, and she wasn't sure how to let go.

Her phone rang. She checked the screen, and her body trembled as her heart squeezed.

It was Lucas.

Her finger hovered over the answer button, but she couldn't put this mess of emotions on him when he'd already given her so much.

She cancelled the call and shoved the phone back in her pocket.

She gulped air and swiped her sleeve at her cheeks to wipe away the tears.

Gabi touched her lips as she remembered Lucas taking care of her, listening to her, and ensuring her safety. She was lucky to have her first experience with him. She'd tell him eventually.

She got back to her feet and continued to the pub.

She trembled as she realised she was different now, though not because she'd lost her virginity. She was different because she'd finally allowed herself to feel and exist in the way she'd craved. She'd embraced her desires with Lucas rather than avoiding them, and now, she needed to decipher who she was after moving past the fears that had held her back for years. But she'd have to do that alone. Whether he moved or not, he wasn't hers to keep.

As she reached the pub, panting, she tapped a message to Lucas. Her fingers lingered on the x button. After everything they'd shared, kisses at the end of the message wasn't a big deal.

Evie shouted at her from the other side of the road. "Gabi, I was worried about you."

Gabi waited until Evie was safely across the road. "Sorry. I was shopping. I got distracted."

Gabi gritted her teeth under Evie's inspection. "Where are your bags? Why are you dressed for running, and why didn't you answer my messages? What's changed since last week?"

Gabi held her breath.

"Cat got your tongue? Let's get a drink." Evie held the pub door open for Gabi. "And I want to know why two people who are fake dating are all over social media with their mouths stuck together."

Gabi took a deep breath and sent her message to Lucas.

Gabi: Thank you for today. You were more than I could have imagined, and I'm grateful you took the time to make it amazing for me. I'll be in touch. Take care. xx

Chapter Thirty-Five

LUCAS

Lucas's feet brushed the grass as the swing took him higher. He leaned back. Amy had tried to teach him the names of the constellations last year, but he had been too busy tickling her to listen.

As he stared, the stars blurred, but one was brighter than the others.

"Like Gabi," he murmured as the swing carried him back and forth. "What did your text mean? Did I do something wrong?"

He hadn't been someone's first in a long time. For Gabi, it wasn't just her first time, but an event to conquer her past and pain.

He wished he was home with her in his arms as they watched superhero movies and discussed their past or anything else on her heart. Her determination, care for people, and belief in everyone, including him, would have kept him close all evening.

He stared into the sky as he swung back and forth. If all she wanted were friendship and fun activities, he'd grasp that with two hands and never let go.

Lucas closed his eyes, but he saw Gabi's face as she orgasmed. She was beautiful. It was like every wish she'd ever had came true as she made the glorious O shape with her mouth.

When he woke and found her staring at him, he was torn between ravaging her and asking if she wanted to be his girlfriend. But she'd never be his. She chose him because of his reputation. The

reason she wanted him to be the guy she lost her virginity to was the same reason why she wouldn't want him for anything else. She was perfect. How could he be enough for her? He was someone to fuck. Like with women in his past, he was a means to an end before they found their person. Although it had niggled him when this had happened in the past, knowing that that was all he could be for Gabi hurt him worse than a beating from the Ogre.

"You're scaring Amy," his brother said from the back door, a hint of humour in his voice. The light from the kitchen showed Amy's silhouette next to him. "You okay?"

"Fine," Lucas said with a long sigh. Sex combined with feelings—was there anything better and yet so fucking awful?

"Come on, little brother. What's going on? And remember little ears are listening," Henry added as he and Amy joined him.

"I know about sex, Dad," Amy said with a dramatic huff and eye roll.

"How?" Henry's voice echoed across the garden.

"One of the girls at school told me. When a man loves a woman or a woman loves a woman or a man loves a man, or someone loves someone—is that pan? Anyway, when people love each other, they have sex. Sometimes, people have it when they don't love each other. But you have to be careful, or babies are born. That's called safe sex."

"Bloody hell. I didn't learn most of that until I was sixteen."

Amy shrugged. "Lucky I didn't end up with an older brother or sister, isn't it?"

"I wasn't having sex at sixteen, never mind." Henry shook his head. "In this conversation, we're going to talk about friends."

"Whatever." Amy rolled her eyes again. "Tell us about your friend problem, Uncle Lucky. What have you done now?"

As much as he was reeling from the day, his lips tilted in a smile. Amy and Henry were the duo that always brought him out of a funk. If he left, he'd miss their company. Even at his lowest, they raised him up.

"I haven't done anything. I had a nice day with my friend, and we napped all afternoon."

"Lucas," Henry warned

"Napping because we were tired after our run and other exercise."

"Exercise?"

"Yes, exercise and conversation. Energetic conversation." Lucas swallowed loudly.

"You two are so confusing," Amy huffed before sitting on the swing next to Lucas and kicking her feet to move it.

"Was it bad...conversation?"

Lucas chuckled. "No, it was the best conversation I'd ever had. I'd like to have many more conversations with her and maybe enjoy meals together."

"I don't see the problem."

"I don't know what's happening," Amy added.

"You and me both," Lucas replied. "Get your headphones, Amy Boo. Your dad and I need to use keywords."

Henry winced as Amy jumped from the swinging seat. "Amy, I've told you not to jump from the swing when it's high. You might break something."

"Whatever." Amy rolled her eyes. She shouted as she ran to the back door, "Get the talk out of the way so Uncle Lucky and me can play on the swings. You two are so annoying when you're like this."

"Is she okay? She's full of attitude today." Lucas stared as she disappeared into the house.

"She saw her mum. Ingrid wanted to show her off to her grandparents, but she didn't like how Amy was dressed, that she's given up dance, or anything else about her. Amy came home crying. Her mum spent the whole day making digs."

"Ingrid doesn't deserve Amy. Is there anything you can do about it?"

"I'm working on it. But back to you. Gabi problems?"

He smiled at the sound of her name. "Yeah, Gabi."

Henry sat on Amy's swing.

"Gabi and I had sex today," Lucas confessed. "I'm not sharing why, but it was significant for her."

"Okay."

"She had to rush off after we woke. She said she'd be in touch, but I was worried about her and..."

"Lucas?"

"I can't stop thinking about her. I called, but she didn't pick up. And then she sent me a message." Lucas repeated the message from Gabi. He didn't need to retrieve his phone. He'd memorised every word.

"Shit, man. It seems like a good message and that you had a lovely day."

"Lovely day?" Lucas choked on his laugh.

"I'd rather not think about my brother as the local sex god. So that was the message? Is it a goodbye?"

Lucas's shoulders slumped. "That's what I thought. I hoped I'd read it wrong."

"Do you want to see her again? I've not spent time with you two together, but Aidan said you two were really into each other during the art class and that it didn't look like fake dating."

"When did you see Aidan?"

Henry kicked his heels and started the swing. "He sees me for osteopathy treatment. The life of a retired rugby player can be painful. So much damage is done from those years on the pitch that it's good to keep on top of it."

"Way to kick a man when he's down."

Henry laughed. "I'm keeping an eye on you so you don't end up like Aidan." Henry glanced at Lucas. "Are you and Gabi meant to be dating, or was it something else?"

"I can't fully explain that without sharing her secrets, but we are helping each other with some issues and agreed to date for two months. In five weeks, we go our separate ways. I'm falling for her, hard. I can't stop thinking about her. I want to make her laugh and be the man she needs, not that she needs anything, because she's fucking amazing. But I want to be worthy of her time, her smiles, and her orgasms." Henry choked. "But what I want doesn't matter because she doesn't feel the same. Fuck, I'm back to knowing I'm not enough."

"Like when you moved here?" Lucas nodded. "I don't fully know what happened in the past, so I can't comment on that, but you are enough. That little girl in there adores you because she knows what I know."

Lucas cocked his eyebrow.

"That no matter what others say, you're awesome. You make us laugh, and you're always there for us."

Lucas bit his tongue. He hadn't told Henry he might move clubs, but until he knew more, he needed to protect him. Was that another reason he didn't want to tell Gabi his feelings, to protect her so she

could find a man perfect enough for her? Someone he could never be.

"You're pretty fucking awesome, too."

"You could tell me more often. A single dad needs to hear that stuff. And when it comes to Gabi, you haven't chatted with her about where you stand. She might think, as you're dating for another five weeks, she doesn't need to say anything else because she'll arrange a date another time, or she might want to be friends or have more sex. Have you replied?"

"And say what? 'Thank you for your message, it was great, best wishes'?"

Henry laughed loudly, and Amy ran out the door. "What are we laughing about?"

"Your uncle needs to improve his texting skills." Henry grabbed Amy while he sat on the swing.

"There's nothing wrong with my texting skills," Lucas grumbled. "Fine. I'll message her tomorrow. Maybe she needs time to process our...conversations."

"Right. I've solved Lucas's problems. Now it's your turn," Henry said to Amy.

"Can we solve mine with ice cream, please?" Amy replied.

"Ice cream and a chat." Henry nodded. "But you need to know I think you're perfect. You're an incredible girl who brings happiness and care wherever she goes. Your friends are lucky to have you, and I am the luckiest dad in the world."

Amy hugged Henry. "You're the best dad. You really think I'm perfect?"

"Even when you're full of attitude, I couldn't love you more." Lucas's heart hurt as Amy hugged her dad tighter. "Shall we raid the freezer for ice cream?"

"Yes." She dragged Henry off the swing. "But none for Uncle Lucky, because he's grumpy tonight."

"For the record, I can't stand either of you, and I'm the only perfect one in this garden," Lucas said gruffly before running to the back door, overtaking Amy and Henry. "And I'm eating all the ice cream."

"Nooooooooo," Amy shouted as she giggled and chased after him.

But as he teased her and Henry, he couldn't push away the anxiety from knowing he might soon be leaving them or about the

text. Knowing he'd never been enough for anyone in the past ate away at him. Maybe if he was lucky and Gabi still wanted him, he'd have another month with her. He just needed to keep his feelings in check.

Chapter Thirty-Six

GABI

“Sorry I’m late for our final fittings, Rose. Pam phoned on a Sunday!” Gabi called to the changing rooms.

Evie huffed from where she sat on the padded bench. The hem of her lavender bridesmaid dress rested on the floor as she tried on nude heels. She glanced at Gabi with her head tilted and lips tight. So her suspicion hadn’t diluted after the previous night’s pub trip, not that Gabi had revealed anything.

“It’s okay. When I’m done, you can try on your dress,” Rose replied.

“Are you okay in there?”

“Yeah, just trying to work out where all the straps go.” She giggled.

Gabi rifled through the dresses on the rack, but it was as if the layers of pink and lilac chiffon were suffocating her. She breathed slowly and let her almond oil and vanilla aroma calm her. She’d needed a long soak in the bath the night before to ease her tenderness.

Gabi blushed.

If she closed her eyes, she felt Lucas’s mouth on her nipples and his dick in her hand. She wanted it against her palm again.

Gabi slipped her phone out of her pocket. Still no reply from Lucas. She reread the message she’d sent him, cringing at its formality. But she’d no clue what you sent to someone after they

made out with your pussy in a hot tub before popping your cherry in one of the best moments of your entire life.

She quivered, remembering his mouth on her, his thighs pressed between her legs as he'd fucked her deep. Her body tingled with craving for more and only from him.

"Are you waiting for a message from Lucas?" Evie touched her arm, her voice softening. "You *were* with him yesterday, weren't you? You need to be careful. He has a bad rep for a reason, and he'll hurt you."

Gabi shook her head. "You're judging him, and you shouldn't. He's funny, kind, and has a massive heart for others." Evie's eyes narrowed. "Do you think I'd tell you where I was when you're so judgemental? I can't tell you anything about my life."

"So you *were* with him?"

Gabi's phone rang. She held it to her ear, mouthing, *I've got to take this.* She stepped out of the shop.

"Hey, how are you?" Lucas asked gruffly. Flashbacks of his praise as he slid inside her made her stomach burn. She took deep breaths as she pressed her body against the wall to stop from doubling over. She needed to ask Rose if it was normal to be this needy after sex. "Princess, are you there?" Lucas stammered.

"Yeah, I'm here," she said, nearly humming as desire gripped her belly. Passion controlled her stuttering breaths.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted to chat, but then you answered the phone, but if you don't want to, that's cool," he rambled. "I wanted to talk about yesterday. Is this a good time?"

Gabi glanced in the bridal shop. Evie scowled from the window with her hands on her hips. Her long lavender chiffon dress fell like a waterfall down her body. Rose petal details decorated the bust. She was an angel with the face of a devil.

Gabi smiled. "This is kind of a good time. I have a few minutes before I try on my bridesmaid dress. I'm in town with Evie and Rose."

"I'm in town, too." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to check you were okay after yesterday and that..." She held her breath as she prayed he wouldn't say he regretted it. "...that I didn't do anything wrong."

"Wrong?" She breathed slowly, remembering his lips against her thighs, his fingers deep inside her. "It was unbelievable. You were

perfect."

He couldn't be nervous. He was experienced, but his shaky laugh suggested otherwise.

"Perfect?" His voice hinted at a smile. "You were breathtaking. I can't stop thinking about you," he said, his voice deeper than before, "or what we did."

She sucked in a breath. "You were so fucking hot."

"You and your dirty mouth," he growled. She covered her lips with her hand. "Are you smiling, baby?"

"Maybe." Gabi looked around, but there was no beautiful blond rugby player with thick thighs and broad shoulders. There was no chance the sexiest man who'd ever existed hid easily.

"I'm smiling, too."

Her pulse sped up. "Do you want to meet after my fitting?"

"I'd love to."

She did a little dance before staring at the shop. Evie was gone. "I should be free in ten minutes. I'm in a bridal shop opposite the awful restaurant where we had our first date."

He chuckled. "I remember it well, unfortunately."

Gabi grinned. "What a night, eh?" Everything had been so different a month ago. "Come find me and bring an oxygen tank. If I remember right, the dress is too tight."

Lucas laughed. "I'll be there in ten minutes. Laters."

She bounced from foot to foot. Evie would be livid, but Gabi wanted her to see how incredible Lucas was even though, in a month, their friendship would be over.

Rose exited the shop, her fingers pinching the bridge of her nose. Evie ran after her.

"I didn't mean it how it sounded," Evie pleaded. "I meant spaghetti straps don't suit everyone, but they look great on you."

"What's going on?"

"I said the wrong thing," Evie whispered. "I was anxious."

"About?" Gabi asked. Her sister never appeared anxious, just brusque.

Rose lifted her hand. "Evie, you didn't upset me. Charlie called. The florist has gone into administration. We need to find a new florist in less than a month and—"

"We'll sort it," Evie said. "I know people."

"Lucas knows a lot of local businesses. He might be able to help," Gabi replied. Evie's lips turned down. "But Evie probably knows the same ones. What can I do?"

"Try on your dress to check it's okay. We're meeting Charlie at the Tavern to sort out the florist problem. Get there when you're done." Rose hugged her as Evie hailed a taxi.

So Evie and Lucas wouldn't run into each other today. It was probably for the best.

Gabi walked back into the shop with an extra spring in her step. Lucas was coming.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

LUCAS

Lucas opened the door of the bridal shop. Somewhere, a bell sounded, announcing his presence.

He glanced around the shop for Gabi, Rose, and Evie, his fingers tapping restlessly against his thighs, but it was empty. Smirking mannequins stared at him.

He attempted to distract himself by studying the racks of dresses covering one side of the room. He ran his fingertips across a long ocean-blue gown with a split from floor to thigh. It would be perfect for Gabi. The split would highlight her runner's legs, and it was off the shoulder so he could admire the strength of her upper arms. The way it was cut would also give his lips access to her neck. He smirked. It would allow him to run his fingers across her collarbone. He held his breath as he imagined her trembling beneath his touch.

"Lucas?" He turned. Kalia walked towards him, arms outstretched. "What are you doing in my shop? You've missed some of the rugby wedding party. Thank you for recommending me to them and others. You've been great for business."

"Anything for you, Kalia," he replied, hugging her.

"How is your adorable niece?" she asked. They'd met when he wanted a local business to provide Amy with a dress for one of Ingrid's parties. He'd recommended Kalia's shop to anyone who'd listen since. She had a way with children; she and her husband were

foster carers. A couple of times, Lucas had given her and her husband rugby tickets for their former and current foster kids.

"She's good. Trouble but in the best way. She loved her Kalia original. She wouldn't stop wearing it for a month, even when playing in the garden. Your dresses are beautiful." Lucas shoved his hands in his pockets. "Are any of the group still here?"

"Only one. Rose and Evie left to sort out a florist issue. Are you here for Gabi?" Kalia winked, causing Lucas to pull at the collar of his T-shirt. Kalia nodded at the dress she'd caught him looking at. "That dress would suit her."

"I thought so, too." His cheeks heated.

"Take it to her. She's in the big changing room at the end of the corridor. Make sure you ask before you walk in. A lady likes to choose whether she'll receive a gentleman caller."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, and Kalia laughed.

"I'm tired. Too many chapters of a smutty historical romance last night." He chuckled as Kalia handed him the dress. "Be positive with her. She's struggling with the bridesmaid dress Rose picked out. I've got to tidy here, so I won't bother you."

"Thanks."

Lucas slipped through the corridor. With every step, his heart beat a little faster. He knocked on the door of the changing room. "It's Lucas."

Flutters of an emotion he couldn't pinpoint jumped around his belly as he waited.

"Come in," Gabi begged. "I've got the zip stuck."

His skin electrified as he eased open the door and clenched his teeth. Her back was to him. It wasn't just that she was beautiful, because she was stunning, but the sight of her zip open all the way to the top of her bum made heat race to his groin. His gaze travelled from her ponytail down her back to the waistband of her Supergirl knickers.

"Fuck." He cleared his throat.

Gabi's big green eyes locked with his through the reflection in the mirror. A smile teased the corner of her lips even as she tried to hide it with her hand. His gaze flicked to the nape of her neck, where her ponytail swung. He wanted to wrap his hand around it and give a little tug and brush kisses to her throat.

Lucas sucked his lower lip. "Are you sure you want me here? I can go."

"Don't you dare. I need your help with this zip. Is it caught on the material?"

Lucas placed the ocean-blue dress on the sofa and strode to Gabi. His hands trembled as he gripped the cold metal between his fingers. A smattering of goose pimples rose on her shoulders, and he licked his lips, tempted to trace each bump with his tongue.

He shuffled in his chino shorts, trying to hide his growing erection.

"What's that dress over there?" Gabi pointed at the dress he'd brought with him. Her action made the edges of the top of her dress fold down. A fire burnt his body, licking at his limbs as she displayed more of her skin.

"I thought it might suit you. I want to buy it for you, but I wasn't sure where you'd wear it."

"We've still got a big fifth date planned," she replied breathlessly.

She wanted to continue their dates! She still wanted him. A lightness hit his chest.

"Perfect." He brushed his lips against the nape of her neck. Her ensuing moan made him harder.

He met her stare in the mirror. It travelled down his body, lingering on his dick, which pressed against his zipper. "Nice shorts," she murmured, her voice thick with need.

His finger brushed her neck, and she gasped, arching her back towards him. She was so soft. Delicate. Yet her stare wielded the power to bring him to his knees.

"Your thighs are so muscly and broad. I've fantasised about riding them," she whispered.

"I'd love to watch you grinding against my thigh." He slid his hands inside her dress and cupped her breasts, caressing her nipples. "Your face flushed as you drag your soaking pussy against my skin, using me. My naughty, whimpering good girl taking control. My thigh clenching as you ride me, head thrown back as you get yourself off."

She leaned her head against his chest as his hands travelled down. It didn't matter how tight the material was; nothing would stop his large hands getting to where she needed him.

"I'd love your wet cunt burning my skin. You'd stand on your tiptoes, grabbing my shoulder, and ride me hard." He slid a hand into her knickers. She moaned as he ran his fingers across her clit and used her wetness to make circles with his fingertips.

She shuddered. "I'm a bit sore after yesterday."

"Sorry," he rasped in her ear.

He eased his hand away, but she pressed hers hard against his, the chiffon separating them. "Don't stop," she begged.

Lucas slipped a finger inside her. "Tell me if it hurts."

She murmured in agreement.

Her arm wrapped around his head, and with one hand, he squeezed her breasts, and with the other, he fingered her. He kissed and sucked at her neck as she writhed against his caresses. "I'll take you to a formal in that dress. We've got an end-of-season dinner dance awards ceremony, and you can be my date."

She moaned as he added another finger.

"Yes," she groaned as he sped up his thrusts.

He pulled at the top of her dress, kissing her skin as he peeled it off her shoulders. It draped over her breasts before slipping to the floor like a wave of water revealing a goddess statue. He stared at her reflection as he pumped his fingers deep inside her pussy, the logo tattoo of his favourite superhero moving with each thrust.

"So fucking sexy," he said, his voice gruff with desire.

He pulled his hands away and slid them into her mouth. "Suck, princess."

She sucked her taste off them as he stared at her. He licked his lips slowly as she took those fingers like they were his dick. Lucas turned her trembling body and walked her backwards until she was flush against the cold, glass mirror. He pushed his fingers back into her knickers and thrust them into her pussy.

"Don't fucking stop, Lucas. I want to come, and then I need to get on my knees and suck your cock."

His dick jumped in his boxers. "I love it when you talk dirty."

He got on his knees and licked and sucked her breasts, biting her nipples lightly.

"Fuck," she repeated, trembling. "You make me so needy."

"That's right, Gabs, tell me what you're thinking."

"I want to keep dating you until the wedding. I want to go to the awards thingy with you." She panted. Her flushed chest heaved

with each breath.

"Thingy?" he asked. Lucas grinned around her nipple and bit it harder.

Her laugh was strangled. "Yes, thingy. I can't focus when you're doing that to my nipples."

"You like it, though?" He leaned back and studied her. Everything was new to her, and he didn't want her to agree because she thought it was what he wanted.

"Yes. Don't stop."

"And you're not worried Kalia or someone else might hear us?"

There was a fire in her eyes. Lucas's fingers pressed deeper. She whimpered before whining, "I want people to hear us and know how horny you make me."

"You're so sexy, so beautiful. I've thought about you all night and everything I want to teach you, but you're the one surprising me. I can't stop thinking about you and how you turn me on." He was breathless. Arousal owned him nearly as much as she did.

She held his head to her breasts as he finger-fucked her. He licked and bit her nipples, moving between them, while humming against her vanilla and almond scented skin.

"I'm going to come. Don't stop."

"Never. Not until you're shuddering and dripping from my fingers where anyone can catch you. My naughty good girl." He added his thumb to rub her clit, too. "Mine."

"Yes, Lucas, yes," she shouted.

She held his body as if he were her only means of survival as she shook against him. A throaty growl left her rosy lips.

He stared in fascination at her tightly closed eyes, sweat dripping down her body and between her breasts. He licked a drop, revelling in the saltiness. Her orgasm was the most glorious sight he'd seen.

Her eyelashes fluttered, and she licked her lips.

Gabi opened her eyes and grinned as he gawked at his majestic woman. She kicked off her dress.

"Stand up," she demanded.

He stood, and she slid to her knees.

"Are you ready to watch your princess in her Supergirl knickers suck your dick?"

He nodded, unable to speak, as she grinned devilishly. She slid his zip down and pushed his shorts and boxers to the ground.

"I fucking love your cock," she moaned as she wrapped her hand around it. "It's huge."

She licked the head quickly and then suddenly engulfed it, taking him deep.

Lucas's knees shook. Gabi worked his shaft with her hands as her saliva ran down it. She sucked it like it was her life's purpose. He wrapped his hand with her ponytail. He needed the intimacy. His thumb stroked the nape of her neck.

She groaned around his cock. His vision blurred.

Lucas swallowed hard as she bobbed on his cock, sucking the head while stroking his shaft. He pressed one hand against the mirror as his legs shook violently.

"Fuck, your pretty mouth looks so beautiful around my dick." He couldn't stop staring at her bee-sting lips as they glistened, wet with saliva.

He moaned loudly as her butt bounced with each movement. He watched everything from her slender neck, exposed from where he gripped her ponytail, to her perfect bottom in the mirror. She gave it a wiggle.

His laugh died in his throat as she took him deeper. He glanced at her face. She stared up at him with sparkling green eyes, her lips stretched around his dick.

"Shit, baby. You suck my cock so good," he growled, pulling his spare hand down his face. "So close."

She grabbed one of his arse cheeks and squeezed. With a flat palm, she pulled him closer, forcing him deeper down her throat. Her fingertips traced his balls as she sucked him harder.

Her warm, wet mouth was like heaven. Heat flooded his dick.

"I'm gonna come," he moaned.

Instead of pushing him away, she kept him tight against her mouth. Streams of come left his dick, and she swallowed every drop.

He knelt on the floor and held her.

"That was the hottest blow job ever." He watched in awe as she wiped her grinning mouth. He was transfixed by her smile as he stuttered, "I want to spend the rest of the day kissing you, licking your pussy, and cuddling."

She held his face between her soft hands, and their lips crashed together briefly. He pulled on her ponytail and sucked her throat.

"I'm meant to meet Rose and Evie at the pub," she panted.

"Try on the dress for the formal and go to the pub. I'll make us lunch for when you're done."

Her eyebrow quirked. Her eyelashes fluttered. "You'd make me food?"

"I'd crawl over glass to make you a ten-course banquet if you wanted."

She giggled. "I'll hold you to that."

"If you want the dress, tell Kalia, and I'll pay for it when I'm next in town. She trusts me. I like to recommend her, and she made a dress for Amy."

"Is there anyone in this town who you haven't helped out or who isn't a good friend?"

"Based on how the town still hates me, lots, but you've helped me win the handful of fans I have."

Gabi laughed. "I'll take a photo holding the dress bag. I'll tag you and the shop on my socials. One way or another, I will make this town fall in love with you."

"Thank you."

It took him a few minutes to stand. Eventually, he said goodbye with one more kiss and left the room.

He leaned against the wall and counted to ten as his legs shook. Gabi was doing a damn good job of making him fall for her.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

LUCAS

“Do you reckon you’ll win the game tomorrow?” Gabi asked Lucas during their post-run cool-down walk.

“Of course, and I’ll score the winning try.” Her hand clutched his as if they were a real couple. It was during moments like these he could dream anything was possible.

The spring breeze lifted strands of her hair from her neck, and he struggled not to stare.

“You’re excited for it.”

“Hell yes,” he replied enthusiastically. “Because my fake girlfriend promised to wear my shirt to the game. But you know what I’m more excited about?”

She stopped and turned. “What?”

“Trying that position from your favourite porn video later. You didn’t have to send it to me while I was at practice yesterday, though.”

Gabi giggled. “Wasn’t it respite from the strenuous workouts Coach puts you through?”

“He asked me why I was hobbling.”

Lucas covered her laughter with kisses. Even after her run, she smelt of papaya and mango. She couldn’t be more perfect, which meant it was a matter of time before she realised he wasn’t good enough for her.

As they neared the house, Max passed them.

"How are you doing?" Max asked, referring to the flurry of insults Lucas had found on his social media posts that week.

"Great."

Gabi side-eyed his lie. He didn't want her to deal with the trolling or know it'd made him feel increasingly vulnerable.

"Where are you going?"

"The pub with Jack, Josh, and Evie. Do you want to come?" Max asked.

Lucas looked at Gabi. She shook her head and said, "Another time. It's been a long week, and I need to save my energy for cheering on Lucas tomorrow."

"She's too good for you," Max teased.

"I know." Lucas laughed. "That's why we're fake dating. Real life Gabi wouldn't fall for me."

She elbowed him.

"We're all bowling tomorrow night after the game," Lucas said to Max. "I promise at least one drink with you then."

They said their goodbyes.

As soon as Lucas opened the door to his house, Gabi ran to the sofa and monopolised the best seat.

"You need to stretch," he growled, filling her glass with water from the open-plan space as she leaned back on the sofa and moved her head from side to side.

"I am," she teased.

Eventually, she got to the floor, and he joined her. "I was worried about you this week, with the things you said about Pam."

Gabi stared at him as she pulled her leg over her other thigh. "She won't stop her digs. This week, it was about my paperwork. I hate all the forms I have to fill in as a teacher. I just want to help the kids, especially those struggling with things outside of school. How's Amy?"

"Better. She's having less nightmares, although they always happen after she's seen her mum." He got into child's pose and groaned.

"Some days, she looks really sad at school."

Lucas's brow furrowed as he glanced at her. "Amy said she wants to conquer her fears and hold a snake one day. My dreams are to conquer my fears, too, and to make her proud."

"She already is. She's told me how proud she was of her uncle even before I met you."

Lucas pecked her on the forehead. "Thank you for saying that."

"It's true. So you've already conquered water and heights. What else is there?"

He squeezed his lips together. "Believing I'm worthy of the things I want." *Of you.* Fear of rejection ate at him. Maybe if Evie was on his side or the town was proud of him, then Gabi would see that he was enough. His relationship with Lexi had made him question things he hadn't entertained before. Maybe he was the reason he hadn't been in any other adult relationships. He wasn't relationship material. Wasn't that what a couple of the social media comments about the always single Lucas suggested? "And making this town proud."

"They should be proud of you. You're incredible, Lucas."

They returned to the sofa, and she hummed as he pulled her hairband out and ran his fingers through her hair. "You're saying that because you've only met crappy men. Of course I'm better than the dickhead who broke your heart at eighteen."

She rolled her eyes. When she didn't speak, he added, "I guess, even if the townspeople aren't proud, you've given me something I thought impossible a couple of months ago."

"Me?" Gabi pointed her fingers at her chest, and Lucas laced them with his. "What did I do?"

"Because of you, I can hold my head high in this town." His eyes softened as he stared at her. "No matter what happens next, you and me will have this special link forever."

She beamed. "When you say—"

He uttered at the same time, "What are your—"

"Sorry, you go," he attempted, but she waved it off.

"No, you."

"What are your dreams?" he asked.

She traced his Batman tattoo, and he struggled not to shiver under her touch.

"I want to get past my syndrome, which you know." He nodded. "And I want to travel."

"You spoke about that before. If you could travel to anywhere, where would you go?"

Gabi pressed her fingers to her lips. "I've never been outside of the UK, so I'd start with Greece. I was obsessed with ancient Greece when I was younger."

He grinned. "Me too. And Egypt."

Gabi's eyes twinkled. "Same. I think studying the ancient Greeks is what made me obsessed with mythology, and then Norse mythology."

"Is that why you're in love with Thor?" Lucas asked with a wink.

"Oh my god, that reminds me." Gabi jumped up and ran to her bag. Her bum was so damn curvy in her leggings. "I meant to show you this. I read one of my old romance books this week. Closed door."

Lucas stared at her. "No sex?"

"No sex," she confirmed.

"Have I put you off sex? Was I that bad?"

She launched herself onto his lap and kissed him hard on the mouth. "Do you know how hard it is to lesson plan when all you can think about is having the greatest sex god known to man bending you over a desk and fucking you?"

"Are we talking me or Thor?"

"You, you arsehole."

"Good. So your romance book..."

"I found this list in it that I made when I was seventeen. It's a list of the things I want in a future partner."

"You and your lists," he said with a dramatic roll of his eyes.
"Okay, what's on this one?"

She unfolded the piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Item one: a man like Thor." He raised his eyebrows in her direction, and she hid her face behind a cushion. "You said you wrote this at seventeen? Oh, Gabi."

She was giggling so hard that the cushion shook. "Just read the rest."

"Must have own car. Be a strong pillar of the community." *There's me out.* "Get on well with my family. Go to church."

"Are you sure you didn't write this as the anti-Lucas list the other night?"

"What does number six say?"

"Make me laugh. I guess one out of ten isn't bad. But look at number seven! 'But also know how to take things seriously.' And

number eight says ambitious."

"You're ambitious."

"If you count trying to get as high as Amy on the swing as ambition. The last two say 'mature' and 'lives locally'"

"Some of those are because of the guy I'd fancied from church. I wanted to date him."

"So based on this list where I score two out of ten for my car and making you laugh—"

"Three! You're local, too," she declared.

For now. "So, based on this list, I'm not your future guy. But Henry does pretty well, if you can just get him to go to church and dress up as Thor—on separate occasions, of course." Lucas faked a smile. Gabi pushed him. "So what would be on your list now?"

Gabi shrugged. "I'm not sure. Definitely the make me laugh part."

He fist-pumped. "Get in."

"But still need to be serious. I would like someone Evie got on with, but she only gets on with Josh." Gabi giggled. "And someone who I can turn to when I need them, but that I can be there for as well."

Long-distance relationships made turning to someone when you needed them there harder, so if he wanted to be with Gabi, he needed to stay in town.

Before this conversation, he didn't think he was enough for her, and now he was certain. Lucas gritted his teeth and smiled back. "You know, anyone who dates you has to deserve you. But if you want, I could look for someone like that for you. They would have to be the best person in the world."

Her brow furrowed. "Not until the pact is over, though."

He smoothed her lined forehead with a kiss. "I've got you until then." He shrugged off the conversation, but it lingered in his heart. "Back to that porn video you sent me..."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

GABI

“Thank you for sitting with me,” Evie said. “I know you didn’t say much at the pub the other week, and that’s on me for asking a lot of questions about Lucas. I’ll try not to be too much.”

The crowd roared as players jumped and sprinted.

“You’re not too much, Evie. You’re protective when you don’t need to be, but I love you.” Gabi wrapped an arm around her. “And I had stuff on my mind at the pub.”

“You kept smiling.”

Because of Lucas.

“Yeah,” Gabi agreed.

Evie glanced over a couple of times. “I heard from Mum yesterday. She asked after you.”

Gabi stared at her. “You’re in touch with Mum? Since when?”

“I found photos of Nan. If I sent them to Dad, even though she was his mum, he’d dump them. But Mum wouldn’t, and if he ever wanted to see them, then at least she’d have them. I included my phone number. She messaged me this month. She’s worried about you.”

“There’s nothing for her to worry about.”

The play continued on the pitch, but neither team were achieving much.

"Is that true?" Evie asked. "I know it's my fault we haven't spoken much. I don't always mean to act like I do, but I've seen so much shitty stuff, and I'd hate for you to experience that, too."

Gabi worried her lip.

"I know you have secrets," Evie pressed. "I hope one day you'll be able to tell me what you're keeping from me. But I know why you don't."

Gabi glanced at her. "Really?"

"Because I keep telling you what I think and not listening." Had Lucas told her? "Josh is trying to get me to listen more. We have a tally chart at home, and every day we think I've listened without telling him my opinion, I get a star."

"You two are cute. How many stars do you have?"

Evie laughed. "One. It's been a week."

Gabi chuckled. "Solid start."

"But I want you to know that, although I don't like Lucas and I'm worried you're falling for a man who'll hurt you, I'll still support you."

"Thanks," Gabi said between gritted teeth. That wasn't support.

"And I'll always be on your side. I'd fight anyone for you."

"Thank you. But you don't always need to protect me."

"I want to look after you and make up for the past."

"I know, Evie, but it's not that simple."

Josh kicked the ball across the pitch to Lucas, who jumped impossibly high, caught it, and slung it back to Josh. Josh ran down the wing and slammed it over the try line, rescuing Gabi from the awkward conversation.

"That's my man," Evie shouted, jumping up. Half her pint slopped out. "And yours," she added with a wince.

"That was amazing. The other team doesn't stand a chance. I can't believe how high Lucas jumped. He's incredible," Gabi said.

A man in front of them with salt and pepper hair and a morose glare turned. "He's too independent. All it would take is one mistake, and the other team would have the ball."

"All the lads, including Lucas, are playing a blinding game. They work excellently together and watch each other to get the ball across the line. You shouldn't call yourself a fan if you can't see that. This isn't a one-man show. Their place in the league shows that. Lucas is

an awesome part of the team." Gabi's hands trembled. She'd confronted someone. She did that!

Another man turned around. "You would say that. I saw you earlier. You're wearing a Lucas shirt. You fancy him."

"Oi," Evie shouted. "Don't let your dislike of a great player cloud your judgement, you ignorant arsehole. Gabi isn't biased. If Lucas were shit, she'd be the first to say it. Don't you dare disrespect my sister. She's worth ten of you. Pipe down."

Their grumbles prodded Evie further. "You call yourself Bulls fans? You're jealous of a man who doesn't know you exist because he's busy making this team a contender. You're embarrassing. Turn back and watch him score another try while you cry into your pints. Dickheads."

Gabi chuckled as they turned back. People clapped nearby. It was barely a handful, but maybe the Instagram posts were making a difference. Gabi didn't want to let him down. The night before, he'd made good on his part of the pact. Kneeling behind her on the bed, her body pressed to him, he'd reached around and massaged her breasts and stroked her clit while they fucked. Her thirst for him was unquenchable.

Lucas ran to where the sisters sat. His gaze travelled to Gabi's shirt. His head tipped up, and he mouthed, *Stand up*.

Gabi obeyed, although she rolled her eyes as she did. He turned his finger in the air like he had at the hot tub. Gabi slowly turned, trying to hide her grin. She shoved her fist on her cocked hip as she returned to face him.

"Do you approve?" she shouted.

"Princess," he hollered back and pretended to faint. He lay flat on the pitch until Max walked past and nudged him with his foot.

He winked and waggled his thigh before returning to the game. Gabi covered her giggles with her palm.

Evie muttered but didn't complain as loudly as she had before.

After another try from Lucas, it was half time.

The sour-faced guys gave her one last glare before heading to the bar.

"I'll get a drink. Do you want one?" Evie asked.

Gabi shook her head, and Evie walked off. They hadn't resolved much, but Evie's defence of her and Lucas was a positive. It was a different kind of protection, and if it had come from anyone else,

she'd have appreciated it, which is why she didn't bristle when Evie fought on her behalf. There was still a long way for the sisters to go, but there was hope.

Gabi thought back to what Lucas had said the previous night. His smile had faded when she'd listed off what she looked for in a man. She'd meant him. He was all the things, but instead, he'd offered to find her another guy. She thought he'd find her list funny, but she must have done something wrong. Why were relationships so hard? Even fake ones.

Although the sex afterwards had been incredible, there had been something missing. She resolved to talk to him about it near the end of their pact. If she did it now and he rejected her, she had no idea how she could stand to be around him, knowing she wanted more and he didn't. Being with him was the only time she felt normal and not ashamed about her syndrome. For now, she'd focus on experimenting and enjoying herself and hope she didn't fall too hard.

An elbow rammed her in the back, pushing her against the plastic seat in front.

"Oi." She turned to Pam's sneering face.

"I'm so sorry," Pam replied sarcastically. "You're so short I didn't see you."

Gabi glared at Pam and the man beside her.

"Darling," Pam proclaimed, "this is Gabi. I've told you about her and her *problems*."

Heat burnt her cheeks, and she boiled with rage. She'd not consented to people knowing about her personal life. "What do you want, Pam?" Gabi squeaked before clearing her throat. Pam's man stared at her with a raised eyebrow.

"What are you doing at the game rather than planning our work for next week?"

Vomit climbed Gabi's throat. "I'm watching my boyfriend play rugby." She wanted to tell them to fuck off, but the words clung to her tongue.

"I thought he was screwing the wife of his old coach. Isn't she an Instagram model?"

Evie barged her way through the crowd and shoved Pam out of the way, tipping beer over her expensive-looking boots.

"Ooops." Evie smirked. "Maybe you two should get out of the way. I can't promise I won't throw any more beer in excitement at seeing Gabi's boyfriend play. Is this your boyfriend, Pam? You two have as much chemistry as me and my dentist. Fuck off to your seats and stay away from ours."

Pam stormed off with her boyfriend behind her.

"Thank you," Gabi said.

"Was that okay? I know you don't want me protecting you, but seeing people treat you less than you deserve makes me angry. I hate that I wasn't there for you when you were a teenager."

Silence descended as Gabi fought the temptation to share her history. "It's fine." Shouting sounded from the pitch, and Gabi stared. She wasn't ready for a heart-to-heart, but she was getting closer. "It's the half-time games."

"Yeah," Evie replied half-heartedly. "I love this bit."

A local radio presenter interviewed Sandra, a Bulls fan in her sixties who'd won a competition, then sent her to chase Lucas's nemesis, the mascot dressed in a Bulls costume.

The mascot ran across the pitch with a ball clutched to his chest. Sandra had the look of a pouncing lion as she chased him down. Crowds cheered as she sprinted towards the giant bull. Everyone laughed as Sandra tackled him and brought him crashing down before she straddled him and ripped the ball out of his hands triumphantly. She waved it high in the air.

"I love this place," Evie mumbled as Sandra proceeded to strut around the pitch with the ball in hand.

"Shouldn't the game be restarting soon?"

But Sandra jumped to more cheers as one of the game stewards tried to encourage her off the pitch.

Evie laughed. "It's going to take a miracle to get her moving. She's loving the attention!"

As if on cue, Lucas ran onto the pitch. He whispered something in Sandra's ear. She threw her head back and cackled.

The crowd leaned forward in anticipation. At her nod, Lucas got on his knees and turned.

The announcer shouted that the second half would restart shortly.

Gabi's heart swelled, and laughter bubbled in her throat as Sandra climbed onto Lucas's back. They chased the mascot around

the pitch for a lap, pushing him over. As Lucas reached Gabi, he blew her a kiss. She waved as he piggybacked Sandra off the pitch and down the tunnel.

He'd done what the stewards couldn't and got a beaming Sandra off the pitch.

"Showboating as usual," a guy said as he passed behind Gabi. "The guy will never like this team as much as he adores himself."

He was gone before Gabi could defend Lucas.

The team ran out of the tunnel, skipping and bouncing to warm their muscles. The sun shone, caressing Gabi's arms like a warm blanket. Summer was coming but, with it, dread. Rose and Charlie's wedding was in less than three weeks, and Lucas would be out of her life. She couldn't get attached. But as the second half started, and the sun glinted off his dirty blond hair, she revisited the fantasy of visiting a beach with him. Only this time, he threatened to drop her in the sea while she giggled and protested.

Gabi wanted to wrap him up and protect him from a town that didn't deserve him. A few fans jeered as he downed water, pouring some on his face and flipping his head. Water droplets flew from his hair. It was like a reel of the world's sexiest rugby player. He bent over and stretched his thighs, giving her a wink when he caught her stare. Her grin was irrepressible.

Who cared that he showboated? He was fucking hilarious, in addition to being a secret altruistic hero who did loads to help people in the town. His social media posts always tagged and praised the places he visited. He was doing everything to stay close to his family, yet he was convinced he needed to leave town.

Gabi shook her head. "The Bulls might get another try and beat the Rays," she said, referring to the team from London.

A line of Rays players stood between the Bulls and the try line. Josh strained forward, passing the ball to each of his team, who grabbed and hurled it as they lunged forward. Up and down it went as they pushed the Rays back, gaining a couple of metres. Max threw it to Josh, who twisted and turned. He tossed it to Banjo. One of the Rays slammed into him, taking him down. Lucas pushed the player back, and Max slung the ball to Gavin.

The crowd's gasps were nothing compared to the brutality of each crash of muscle and bone. The desperation was palpable. Tension clouded their lined faces as they fought for the try. Banjo

searched for a gap between the Rays, but they were unrelenting. Banjo dived for the line as two players dragged him down, stopping him from reaching success.

"Come on, Bulls," Evie and Gabi shouted.

She'd be nursing Lucas's sore and bruised body later. Even if he was going to be in agony, he'd still give her those hungry blue eyes and let her ride his thigh.

Lucas shouted to Josh, who nodded. Lucas directed the team into position. Even though he'd only been a Bull for a few years, he had every player's respect. Why couldn't the rest of the town see his significance? They'd probably lose their best player this summer, and she would lose him.

Gabi hollered his name and squeezed her fists tight as Gavin pushed opposition players out of the way, but it was useless. They couldn't get that try.

Lucas lifted his head to Josh, Max, and Banjo and made shapes with his hands. He looked more like he was at a nightclub than on a pitch, but the lads nodded once.

Banjo threw the ball, and Josh leapt into the air as if to catch it. Ray players flew to him, and as soon as his feet returned to the ground, they floored him. But he didn't have the ball. He'd tossed it to Max, who threw it to Lucas, who dived over the players on top of Josh.

Lucas slammed the ball down over the try line as bodies piled on him. But they were too late. Max screamed in delight, and as the bodies moved off Lucas, the crowd went wild. Everyone shouted in celebration, chanting Josh's, Banjo's, and Max's name. The team smacked Lucas on the arse.

Gabi screamed her joy until another woman's celebrations caught her eye. In the crowd, on the stand to the side, stood a bouncing Lexi.

Gabi's face froze. She'd tried to ignore the gossip columns speculating about Claude and Lexi's marriage breakdown. And for the last fortnight, until that morning, she'd ignored comments under Lucas's posts about Lexi. But today, there was one from Lexi under Lucas's game day preparation photo. It was deleted within the hour.

Today will be one of many.

One of many games she would watch Lucas play? He said he wouldn't go to the Giants, but if they were the only team within a

three-hour radius that wanted him, then he'd have to go so he could stay near his family. Maybe that was the real reason he wanted Gabi to find someone else. He was leaving and didn't want her with him. He wanted to go back and find a woman more suited to him. Someone like Lexi.

Chapter Forty

LUCAS

“Did you enjoy the game?” Lucas asked as Gabi rested against him.

He fed her a ketchup-covered chip as Max threw a ball down the lane at the bowling alley. Balls smacked loudly as cheers sounded around the worn lanes. The place needed a coat of paint and a bit of money spent on it, but Lucas had talked most of the team into working on it to support the owner.

“You played exceptionally. I was worried for you at one point, but I put my nunchucks away,” Gabi said as she stroked her fingers up and down his arm.

“That’s my girl. Save them for those who deserve it.”

Her laugh was bereft of her usual energy. Her demeanour had carried a noticeable edge since the team arrived at the alley. Her tics were less noticeable, but as she pushed her hair from her eyes, his pulse accelerated.

“Charlie,” Josh shouted as Coach strode from the toilets. “It’s your turn.”

A fan joined the group with their phone out. Lucas witnessed Gabi holding her breath like she did every time one appeared. Josh grabbed Max, and they posed for a photo. Gabi huffed.

No one wanted a photo with him. He was okay with that. The fans mattered less now that he’d decided he might leave, and having Gabi by his side made everything better. Maybe the fans had put her

in this weird funk. She could have seen some of the nasty stuff he'd gotten from the trolls that week.

"Lucas, it's lovely that you organised for the whole team and their partners to bowl together tonight," Rose said, sitting beside the couple. "Charlie is stressed with the wedding."

"Did you find a florist?" Lucas asked.

"Yes, and they gave us a discount because of you. Do you really babysit their son?"

Lucas shrugged. "I met him at the park when I was with Amy. They call it babysitting, but I call it having a little dude to play rugby with."

"And how do you know the owner here?" Gabi asked. "It's a shame it's so quiet. I guess most people prefer to spend their Saturday nights in bars and restaurants."

Max joined them as someone shouted Evie's name and pointed to the alley. "I found this place while walking around town. I chatted with the owner, Jenks. He's a single dad who moved his family here to be closer to our specialist hospital after his youngest boy got ill. They struggle with the cost of everything. It's why the place needs TLC."

"How's his son now?" Gabi asked.

"He's better. And that time in the hospital inspired Jenks's two daughters and son to train in medicine and nursing. Any study is expensive, but they're working hard. I got closer to Jenks and his kids when I was next door at the soft play with Amy. She went limp after banging her head, and no one there helped. Jenks's son, the one training to be a nurse, came to the rescue. We've been friends since."

"You're too perfect," Gabi said with a sad sigh.

"Coming from a real-life Wonder Woman, that's high praise." He pecked her on the lips.

Gabi trudged to the balls at the shout of her name.

"You're a good man, Lucas," Rose said.

"Tell your fiancé. He thinks I'm the devil," Lucas said with a chuckle as Charlie glared.

"His opinion of you would surprise you. And we've all seen a difference in Gabi over the last weeks. Her confidence has soared since your dates."

"I can't take credit for that," Lucas replied. Gabi flicked her ponytail before lifting one of the heavy balls. "It's all her. She's

magnificent. I'm lucky she lets me hang out with her."

He was torn between rushing to kiss her and asking if he'd done something wrong.

Gabi hit a strike and jumped in the air. Lucas rushed over and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist. "You smashed it."

Evie's grumbles were loud enough to carry from two lanes over. He spied her glare over Gabi's shoulder and waved at her. Gabi turned curiously.

"I'll have a word with her," Lucas whispered.

Gabi shook her head. "Let me."

"If you're sure."

Gabi nodded.

"Okay, I need to chat with Jenks, anyway."

"Evie defended you at the match to two guys in the crowd. She's trying."

"Is it time you told her about your past?"

Gabi shook her head and slid down his body. "I'm not ready."

"Okay." Lucas cupped her face. "Maybe she's glaring because she hates our PDA." He kissed Gabi hard on the lips, and her eyelashes fluttered. She still wore his shirt, and if they'd been in private, he'd have bent her over a sofa arm and railed her while she was branded with his name. "Shit. I need distance from you. I'm thinking too much about you and that shirt."

He turned and walked away, holding his hand over his heart.

Lucas thought about what Gabi had said about the fans. That must explain her funk. He hated that she experienced negativity because she was with him. He didn't care that he shouldn't need defending. He cared that Gabi had to listen to it.

Jenks embraced him. "Thank you for visiting. After your posts, three groups booked lanes for evenings next week."

"It's a team effort." It was probably Josh's posts. Lucas couldn't influence a bucket of dirty water these days. "I'll be here Monday night to paint the walls, and I've talked to Aidan, who used to play for the Bulls. He'll paint a mural for you once I've put the base coat on."

"Thank you. One of these days, I'll bring all my family to the game, and we'll cheer you on. You've been too good to us."

Lucas smiled. "I'm grateful to you and your family for how you cared for Amy after she fell at the soft play. I can't thank you enough for that day."

"It was no trouble. Now, get back to the lane and your lady. She seems lovely."

"She's perfect," he replied. She'd cheered him on throughout the match, and now, she was charming his friends even after her crappy work week.

The pull to destroy her fears settled like a weight on his chest. He wanted more with her, but he'd hold her back. His only adult relationship had failed abysmally because he wasn't enough. How could he believe Gabi wouldn't realise after weeks or months that he was too immature for her? She needed an adult, not a showboater. He was good for a fuck, but nothing more. Although he craved a long-term future with her, there was no chance he'd let it happen. Once the pact was done, he'd let her go to find someone worthy of her. Gabi needed to live her life without him holding her back. And he should move, because living in this town where he might bump into her and a man worthy enough for her would kill him.

He slumped next to Max.

His phone buzzed.

Lexi.

Max glanced at Lucas's phone. "I heard she was at the game."

"Who told you?" *Please not Gabi.*

"Jack, who heard it from Evie."

"Shit. That explains Gabi's anxiety. Lexi waited for me at the end of the match. I hid in the toilets until the team returned to the changing rooms. She scarpered when she heard Charlie." His head dropped into his hands. "I deleted her comment under my post this morning that suggested she was attending the game. I should have prepared better."

"Is she on the scene because of Claude? We've all seen the gossip."

Lucas shrugged. "She wants me to move back to the Giants."

"Don't you dare," Max snarled.

Lucas held up his hands. "I wouldn't. Nothing would make me go back there. But I can't stay here much longer."

"Because of the fans?" Max sighed. "Does Dad know?"

"No one knows except Gabi and the places scouting me. Please keep it private." Max nodded. "It doesn't solve the Lexi problem. I don't owe her anything."

"That you replied to any of her messages shows you're too kind and—"

"Is this the praising Lucas corner?" Gabi joined them. Her fingertips traced his cheek, and he gritted his teeth to hide the moan rising from his belly. "You're a good man. I wish more people saw you like I did."

He didn't know if they were doing this for show or if it was real. With three weeks until the wedding, time was running out. He held her fingers close to his mouth and kissed them gently. "I only care how you see me."

"You two need to get a room." Max smirked.

Gabi blushed. "Sorry. That was over the top. I wanted to show the fans how in-demand you are."

So she was acting smitten for an audience and not because she'd fallen for him.

To the world, he was arrogant, but the more his feelings hit, the more memories of being rejected for not being enough rose. This was why he'd fucked around rather than dated. But he couldn't return to that, not now that he'd fallen for Gabi.

"As long as I have you kissing me better, I'll be okay." Lucas turned to Max, who rolled his eyes. "Speaking of getting a room, are you and Jack going home or out after this?"

"We're clubbing. Make the most of the house. We'll message when we're heading home."

Gabi beamed. "Thank you, Max. I owe you one."

"Why do you owe him?" Evie asked.

"No reason," Gabi said.

Lucas held Gabi's hand. Evie scowled. "Thank you for defending me to some of the crowd today, Evie."

Evie shrugged as Josh draped his arm around her. "Gabi went badass on them first."

Lucas raised his eyebrows and grinned at Gabi. "Is that true, princess?"

"No one insults my boyfriend," Gabi replied. Joy and pain fused at the word *boyfriend*, yet he held onto the word tightly as if wrapping it in his hand might make it real.

"Fake boyfriend," Evie grumbled. *"Lexi was at the grounds."*

"Which I'm not bothered by," Gabi added, but she pushed her hair from her face, revealing her truth.

"I can see you're bothered. Your hair tic gives you away. I spoke to Jack and Max about how Lexi must affect you," Evie grumbled.

Gabi bristled. Her shoulders were tight as she said, "I'd prefer it if people didn't speak about me."

Lucas stroked her hand with his thumb, but the tension came off her like steam off concrete after a summer storm.

"Everyone's talking about you," Josh said. "Have you seen the comments on the team's social media about how Lucas flirted with you during the game? And that you wore his shirt and had a go at some fans?"

Evie elbowed Josh as Gabi's body slumped.

"Shall we get out of here? I've done what I came here to do, and the lads are staying for a while. We can head to mine." Lucas pulled her close and kissed her hair. He attempted to hide her as Evie pulled Josh away. Max walked to Jack.

"I don't want to take you away from your friends," she whispered. "Sorry, I shouldn't get weird about people chatting about me." Her pained voice tore at him.

"You're not taking me away from them." He fixed her with his stare. "And don't worry, you're not the centre of gossip. I won't let that happen."

She stood. "I'll freshen up, and then we can go."

As soon as she was through the bathroom door, Evie rounded on him.

"Evie," Josh warned.

"Lucas, I don't know what's going on between you and Gabi, but don't hurt her."

Lucas looked warily towards the bathroom. If Gabi caught him and Evie talking about her, it would unsettle her even more. "I couldn't. I care about her too much. You need to allow her to make her own decisions and be independent. She's an incredible woman."

Evie folded her arms and scowled. "How can I? I'm pretty sure her colleague is bullying her. What if she's keeping other things from me? I can fix this."

Lucas softened his gaze. "Support and protection aren't the same thing. Just listen rather than force your opinion, and maybe she'll

share more." Lucas lowered his voice as Gabi left the bathroom and walked towards them. "But leave it for now."

"Okay. But I'm worried about her."

Gabi's eyes pinched as she caught them speaking.

"Shall we go?" Lucas asked.

Gabi nodded.

Chapter Forty-One

GABI

Gabi strode towards the corner shop, but she couldn't outwalk Lucas and his oversized rugby player thighs.

She clicked the roof of her mouth with her tongue as she thought again about the discussion between Evie and Lucas she'd witnessed as she returned from the bathroom. Those two didn't chat, so if they did, it had to be about her.

"What's wrong?" Lucas said, stilling her.

"Were you and Evie talking about me?"

"Yeah. I said she needed to listen to you rather than force her opinion," Lucas said with a sigh as Gabi's mouth drooped. "I get frustrated that she treats you like you can't look after yourself when I know what you've experienced."

"But it's still my choice. Besides, I don't want to hurt her."

"Is that all of it? Is there a possibility you don't want her to know because you're ashamed?"

Gabi sucked in a breath. She was.

Things were different now, but there was more to deal with. Evie would ask about her infertility. Evie knew better than anyone how much Gabi wanted children. When they were younger and played dolls, Gabi always pretended hers was her baby.

But that wasn't anyone's business. She sat on a wall, and tears slipped down her cheeks. Lucas sat beside her. He put an arm around her, and she half-heartedly pushed him away.

"I'm not going unless you tell me to, Gabi. Alone together, that's what you said."

Her shoulders dropped, and she wrapped her arms around his chest and cried against him.

"We can talk about it if you want," he murmured against her hair as he rocked her.

She shook her head. He was fast becoming her closest friend, but he wasn't the man to talk with about this. "Thank you, but maybe we just get chocolate for now."

"Okay. Whatever you need, remember I've got you."

But only for the next three weeks, and then you'll be gone.

* * *

Within an hour, they were in Lucas's bed, cuddling as *Spider-Man* played quietly on his television. She shifted against him.

"What are you thinking?"

She wrinkled her nose. "How did you know I was thinking anything?"

"Because I know you. Talk to me. Is this about Evie?"

"No. Lexi."

His chest tightened against her hand. "You saw her at the game."

"And a comment on your Instagram. Are you two..." She swallowed loudly. "It doesn't matter. I'll sound like a crazy, jealous girlfriend."

"I like it when you sound like that." He lifted her so she straddled him. He cupped her face and met her gaze. His eyes held the golden glow like they had in the hot tub. She licked her lips, and his stare followed the path of her tongue. "Ask me."

"Do you still wish you could be together? Is that the real reason why we're only fake dating for another three weeks?"

She expected him to laugh or push her off him. Instead, he sighed. She closed her eyes.

"Please look at me," he asked softly.

She winced as she opened her eyes. His face was blank, and she breathed deeply, relishing the sea air scent that she'll never smell again in three weeks.

"Lexi doesn't mean anything to me. There's nothing between us, at least from my point of view. Whatever her future involves, it doesn't include me. These weeks we have left have nothing to do with her and everything to do with—" Lucas hesitated, and Gabi pressed her lips together. "To do with not wanting either of us to get hurt. I care about you so fucking much, Gabi. More than I thought possible. You've embedded yourself into my heart, and some days, I can't imagine losing you."

Her badass rugby player had a way with words.

"But I'm not the guy for you. You need someone who deserves you, and that's not me. I'm immature, hated by fans, and a stopgap. You said you want someone who can be serious."

"You can be serious."

"I did the finger thing when we talked about sex in the hot tub. I showboat. I fool around. I have a grudge against a man who dresses as a giant bull on weekends!"

"But I like those things about you. You make me laugh."

"Your sister hates me, and I might be leaving. Your teenage boyfriend set the bar really low for your boyfriend expectations. I'm not who you should date. You need someone who deserves you and who's staying around. I could be living hundreds of miles away soon. You need someone who will be here for you, taking you to hospital appointments and by your side always."

"But what if I want you?"

He thought he was saving her by rejecting her.

Lucas's cheeks pinked, and his furrowed brow gave him a lost puppy stare. "We're close because of sex. It makes people think things that, when not filled with endorphins and pure fucking lust, they wouldn't think. I've seen it before."

He had her with that one. She didn't have experience with this. Maybe it was the sex tying her to him. But that wasn't how it felt.

"Gabs, I don't want you to have remorse because you wasted your life with me when you can do better. You have so many regrets from the years when your life was on hold. I don't want to be another one."

"I can't imagine ever regretting anything when it comes to you." Gabi studied his soft features and stroked a finger across one of his eyebrows. She couldn't see what he saw, but Lexi had broken his heart. All his vulnerabilities that he'd probably ignored for years

surfaced. A swell of emotion hit her as she traced his beautiful pout with her fingers. She kissed him softly, and he returned it just as gently.

"I don't want you to find out the hard way I'm not enough for you."

He pulled her back to his chest. This was the rejection from the fans and his past hurt speaking. Over the next weeks, he might change his mind. But he also might not, and she couldn't force him to be in a relationship with her.

"One day, you'll realise you don't need to be a hero. You need to see that people love you for you." If he heard her, he didn't show it. "And I'm not giving up on you. You think letting me go means I'll find what I'm looking for. But I already found him."

"You're missing the kiss," Lucas said. On screen, Spider-Man dropped down for an upside-down kiss with MJ.

"I'd rather stay here. You're warm, and I love your chest."

He pulled his T-shirt off from behind, leaving him in his boxers.

"That's such a sexy move," she whispered as she returned to his chest

"Says the sexy brat who got into my bed in her underwear."

She traced his muscles with her fingertips.

"I love it when you touch me." He stroked his fingers up and down her back. "Can I say something you might not want to hear?"

"I guess," she said shakily.

He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I'm grateful you shared your medical stuff with me. I wish you didn't feel you had to hide it, though."

"I don't want people's judgement. If they knew about it, that's all they'd see even though it doesn't define me." Pam proved that in every interaction Gabi had with her.

"But although it's not your identity, does it affect who you are? Have you made different life choices because of it?"

She hummed a noncommittal response. He knew she had, but he wasn't throwing them in her face. Her therapist had asked her to consider telling her sister and others, but she couldn't face their opinions. Her shame was a rucksack stuck to her back.

"Hey." Lucas pulled her to look at him. He reached for one of the chocolates he'd bought her and popped it into her mouth. "You don't have to tell anyone. I'm proud of you and what you've

accomplished, especially after the shit you've dealt with. I want others to learn how amazing you are, but you don't have to use your syndrome to make that happen. Everyone who's met you knows how amazing you are already."

A hint of a smile played on her lips.

"I've got a normal check-up at the hospital in Birmingham in a few weeks. If you're not training, do you want to come? Not to the appointment," she added quickly. She'd always travelled and faced it alone, but it would be nice to have company. The appointments left her empty yet overwhelmed with sadness. Lucas's presence might reduce that. "You don't have to say yes, and you might not want to be around me after an appointment and—"

"I'd love to."

She sighed with relief. "There's another reason I was weirded out at the game. Pam was there. She started on me again."

"How?"

Gabi stiffened. Lucas stroked her hair. "She said I should be at home working. She's getting me to do more and more of her work. I should put a stop to it."

"Is that why you're always busy during the week?"

"Yes," Gabi conceded. "This week, she reported me for getting too involved in the students' lives because I helped Amy's friend with her grandad's death. She's said I spend too much time on crafts and sports and should focus on the curriculum."

"But the kids gain so much from the extra things you do. Amy's confidence has grown since you joined the school."

Her heart glowed a little brighter. "Pam loves undermining me. She made digs at the game about my medical condition."

"You shouldn't have to deal with this."

Gabi shrugged. "She knows I'm in therapy. According to her, when she reported me, she said I wasn't mentally capable of teaching."

"And yet you're doing all your work and hers? I hate her. I know you'd never let me, but I wish I could give her some of her own treatment."

"Like I do with the people who pretend they're Bulls fans."

"Exactly."

The warmth of Lucas's palm against her back soothed the restlessness that was like a growing abscess in her belly. "I don't

know what to do. The head knows what happens, and I suspect I'm not the first experiencing it. At best, she's casting a blind eye, and at worst, she's enabling it."

Lucas popped a chocolate in his mouth. His forehead furrowed, and she ran her fingertips across his tanned skin. The candy hit his teeth with a tap as he rolled it around his mouth. "You should still report her. Get it on record, so that if it gets worse, you've followed the process. That way, governors or others on the leadership team will have evidence if it escalates."

"Thank you for listening," Gabi said, kissing him briefly. He tasted of chocolate, and she kissed him again. The sweet scent filled her nostrils, and she licked his bottom lip as the slow burn of arousal from the day made her body thrum. She kissed him again harder.

"I always will, well, for as long as I can."

He smiled at her as she straddled him. She ground her body against his and moaned as his hard cock pressed against where she wanted it most. "The movie hasn't finished yet."

Gabi grabbed the remote and flicked the screen off. "I need you. Watching you play rugby today was so fucking hot, but seeing how you care for me and others makes me horny." She slid her hand into his boxers and wrapped it around his erection. "I intend to shout this fucking place down before your housemates get home."

He groaned as she stroked up and down his cock. He kissed her naked shoulders, and his hands pushed into her hair.

"That's my girl." His fingers slipped beneath her bra straps, and he dragged them down. "I have a new position I've fantasised about trying with you. It involves a lot of eye contact and my cock deep inside you. Can you take all of me, baby?"

She hummed as he covered her skin with kisses. "Yes. I'm desperate for you," she replied breathlessly.

He kissed her collarbone, trailing his lips down her body. "I adore your tits."

"Show me how thick you are, Lucas. I need to see all of you."

He pushed down his boxers, and she whimpered.

He yanked her knickers. The gauze material ripped in two. "Lucas!"

"I'll buy you another pair. I've needed this pussy all day, especially when you teased me by wearing my shirt to the game. Lie down."

She obeyed, and he pushed her thighs wide. He dived between her legs. With a flat tongue, he licked her pussy. She gripped the sheet, fisting it between her hands as he sucked her clit and pressed a finger inside her.

He moaned as he alternated between biting the inside of her thighs and thrusting his tongue inside her. He pinched her nipples.

"Yes, Lucas."

She pushed her fingers into his hair and gripped the short strands. His fingers dug into her hips, and she ground her pussy against his face.

Her limbs shook. The anticipation of a night of fucking left her gasping. She was close already. She must have been on edge all day.

"More," she begged as his shoulders hunched and his back muscles rippled.

She wriggled, and he shoved his elbows hard into her thighs, pinning her to the bed.

"Play with your tits. I love it when you perform for me."

He sucked on her clit as he pushed two fingers inside her.

"Fuck, I'm going to come." She thrashed against his mouth.

He didn't stop, even as her hands tangled in the sheet and her back bowed. "So beautiful," he said, licking her off his lips. "But my good girl can give me another."

She couldn't stop panting as he got into position. He slid beneath her and sheathed himself, edging the tip of his dick inside her before easing her up by her shoulders. His cock pressed deeper, filling her.

"Hmmm, your pussy is good and wet for me. You're so fucking beautiful. So obedient."

She bit her lips at his words, writhing as he praised and demanded more.

"Wrap your legs around me. There's my girl."

"Yours." Her voice cracked.

"Only mine." He didn't say *for now*, but she heard it. She stared into his blue eyes that burst with colours. Wrapping her arms around him, their lips crashed together.

The kiss was gentle at first. He kneaded her butt. His tongue caressed hers as she ground against his flesh. His hands seared her hips as he pulled her against him repeatedly.

"You're so deep already," she murmured into his mouth.

"Where I'm meant to be, deep in my beautiful woman." She rocked back and forth against him. "Does that feel good against your clit?"

She moaned, and he licked at her skin. She scratched his back, leaving her mark on him like he'd left his mark on her heart. Their intimacy should have scared her, but she craved more. His hands fisted her hair, and he kissed her throat.

She moved her thighs against him instinctively. His thrusts deepened on every gyration of her body. "That's right. Use me. Fuck me."

She bit her lip, making it sore. His breath caressed her skin.

Her movements sped up as he whispered his adoration in her ear between feathered kisses.

"I'm so close already," she murmured as arousal claimed her body and made her his. Her head rested in the crook of his neck as he squeezed her bum, kneading her cheeks as he continued to rock her closer to the edge of climax.

She leaned her head back and moaned to the ceiling as he held onto her, his cock tight inside her with each thrust of his thighs.

Sweat beaded her chest, and he licked a drop with a devilish smile.

"You're so fucking sexy." His moan ghosted her ear. His hands brushed her thighs as he touched her everywhere he could. "Come for me."

Pressure built.

She needed the release.

He grabbed her chin and held it to stare into her eyes. "Let me watch how you come on my cock. Show me," he demanded.

His words flicked a switch, and she screamed as her orgasm pushed her hard against his chest. She shook against him. Her whole body clenched and then released.

"Fuck," she cried.

"You're so beautiful when you come," he whispered as he laid her against the bed.

"I want more." His eyebrow quirked. She crawled onto her front and bent over on all-fours. She turned to look over her shoulder. "Fuck me. Don't stop."

"That's my warrior," he grunted as he slid his cock back inside her.

Chapter Forty-Two

LUCAS

Lucas stared as Gabi strode through the city farm in her pink wellies, denim shorts, and plaid shirt.

He hung on the gate in awe of everything about her, even the way she swung her clipboard. He'd seen her every day of the last week. Sometimes, she only had time for a quick kiss that turned into more, but whether it was a passionate make-out session, a couple of texts, or her bent over his bed as he owned her pleasure, every moment made him fall harder.

"Put your tongue away, Lucas," Henry said, laughing.

"It's not my fault the most beautiful woman I've ever seen is also the kindest." He beamed.

A parade of giggling and pointing private schoolchildren followed Gabi through the farm. Bringing them on a school trip to help them learn about the local farm and animal care was such a Gabi thing to do.

"You've got it bad, buddy. I've never seen you like this." Henry nudged him. "Do we need to have 'the talk'?"

Lucas punched him idly on the shoulder, although his gaze never left Gabi.

Gabi winked at him. The smile she followed it with as she showed the bubbly kids around the farm had him pressing the heel of his hand to his heart. Her blooming confidence brought air so fresh it obliterated the cow dung.

He licked his lips and imagined it was her on his tongue. Or maybe it was the crisp sandwich she'd left for him before work that morning.

He couldn't let himself dream about a future with Gabi in it, but an image of a giggling Gabi running across a beach, teasing him with her bikini strings as he chased her, wouldn't leave him.

"Are you all set for the European Cup final this weekend?" Henry asked.

The dream blurred. "Yeah. We've got a good chance of winning. I'm packed for the flight. I'm back on Monday." Three days without seeing Gabi. "I'm taking Gabi to an appointment on Tuesday in Birmingham. I've squared it with Coach, but I'll miss our physio session."

"What kind of appointment?"

"A private one." Lucas was tempted to share more. Carrying the knowledge of Gabi's medical condition tested him, but it wasn't his secret to tell. He'd read online that those with MRKH couldn't biologically have children. Although he denied the possibility of a future with her because she needed more, he still imagined one.

"Uncle Lucky," Amy called, "the pigs aren't going to clean themselves."

The children around her gagged as Amy explained pigs were clean animals and rolled in the mud because they get hot. "They haven't got sweat glands to help them stay cool in hot weather."

"She's in her element," Lucas said as Amy talked long and loud about the benefits of mud, including stopping sunburns.

One of the boys joked that Miss Fester should cover herself in mud. The children stared at Pam, who sported a sunburnt face. She glared back and strode to Gabi, who was laughing with a group of other children about the rabbits.

Lucas leaned forward, but they were too far away. He couldn't hear what was being said. Gabi's face drooped, and her shoulders hunched. She yanked at her shorts. Lucas growled.

"It's not your battle," Henry warned. Lucas gripped the fence, his knuckles white.

"I hate seeing her hurt. She doesn't deserve that. She's strong and fierce sometimes, but she's also kind. People use it against her."

"You have it bad."

Lucas shrugged.

"Does she know?"

"She feels the same. But we can't be together." His heart thudded as Gabi chatted to one of the girls and pointed at the chickens.

"Why not?"

"Because she needs someone who deserves her, a man who can take care of her. Someone who gives her a future, not just fun to mess around with."

Henry choked. "Where has this come from? Please tell me you don't believe that. I know you mess around, but I've seen you with Amy. You're like her second parent. Of course you're enough. Who made you feel like this? Was it Lexi?"

Lucas stared at him. "What do you know about her?"

"I've heard the gossip. It was impossible to ignore, especially as you came home not long after it was at its worse. But I never believed it. You're amazing, and anyone who's made you feel like you don't warrant the things you deserve isn't worth thinking about."

Lucas shook his head as parents arrived. "It's partly her and the way the fans have eaten at my confidence. But it's the truth. Gabi is too good for me."

Henry gently touched his arm. "Can we talk about this more after the kids have gone?"

"I can't. Gabi and I are joining Rose and Charlie for cake tasting."

As Gabi lined the children up near the gate, Pam snapped loudly, "What do you mean you haven't planned tomorrow's lesson? This job isn't just fun trips, Miss Draper. The parents don't pay money for you to mess around with rugby players when you should be working."

Gabi fisted her hands and pushed her hair from her reddening face as parents stared. Lucas slammed his hand on the fence and stepped forward. Henry gripped Lucas's shirt. "Just wait. She's got this. Look."

Gabi took Pam to one side. From his angle, he saw most of the conversation, including Gabi's last words. "I'm reporting you for bullying."

Pam rolled her eyes. "My auntie won't believe you."

But Gabi didn't wait for her response. She returned to the children.

"Did we enjoy our trip to the farm?" Gabi asked enthusiastically as if she hadn't dealt with a stressful situation just seconds ago.

"Yes, Miss Draper," the children chimed.

"Brilliant. Let's say a big thank you to Amy's dad, who made this trip possible."

The children turned and sang their thank yous, but Lucas couldn't stop staring at Gabi.

Chapter Forty-Three

GABI

“I’ll call the head on the way to the cake tasting. Are you still okay to drive?”

Lucas nodded.

“Bye, Amy. Bye, Henry,” Gabi shouted. Amy was in the shed, talking to the pigs.

Henry walked towards them. “You must come for dinner sometime.” He leaned in and whispered, “And although my brother can’t admit it yet, I know you two will be together long-term, so we’ll be seeing lots of you.”

Gabi shuffled her feet. What had Lucas told his brother about them? And didn’t they know he might leave soon? Even if she convinced Lucas they could have long-term, he might live hundreds of miles away. “Dinner sounds nice. I’d love to.” The last words came out strangled as she looked briefly at a frowning Lucas.

“I hope Birmingham goes well next week,” Henry said, waving goodbye.

“You told him about the hospital?” she hissed as she waved.

“I said I’d be out that day because I’m taking you to an appointment. I didn’t tell him what it was for. I only told him because we had a physio appointment booked.”

“Sorry, I’m jittery after confronting Pam. She made a reference to the appointment next week, suggesting I was shirking off work and faking my reasons for not being in.”

Gabi climbed into Lucas's Range Rover and called the head immediately.

"I'd like to report a teacher for bullying," Gabi said once they'd got the pleasantries out the way. Lucas squeezed her hand while he drove.

"Who?" the head asked.

"Pam Fester. She makes comments about my syndrome and discusses private matters that I've never divulged to her. She often tells me to do her planning because I've had time out for my appointments."

"Which you have."

Gabi gritted her teeth. "I do more lesson planning for her than I've had lessons away. She calls me during my weekends to insist I do her work."

"You could say no. If you continue doing it, she'll continue asking you."

Lucas squeezed her tighter. Gabi took a breath. "Also, on our trip today, she was rude to me in front of the children and the parents. When I spoke privately with her about her behaviour, she told me she was menstruating, something I wouldn't understand as I wasn't a 'proper woman.'"

"Fucking hell," Lucas seethed beside her.

"This sounds like a problem between the both of you."

"I would like the complaint on record," Gabi replied flatly.

"If you insist. We'll chat again in a week when you've calmed down and others aren't listening to the call. Goodbye, Miss Draper."

"I'm going to fucking rage on that school," Lucas snarled.

Gabi held his hand to her lips and kissed it. "I'll sort it. Thank you for giving me the courage to speak with her."

"It was all you. I didn't do anything." His hand rested back on her thigh.

Gabi stared at Lucas as his skin returned to its golden-brown colour. "Your brother suggested he'd see me lots over the next year."

"Yep." Lucas wriggled. He gripped the steering wheel. "He doesn't believe that I don't deserve you. He will, though. What did he whisper to you?"

She fixed her jaw. "Nothing important. Does he know you're thinking of leaving?"

"Until I've decided, I don't want to tell him. It will be a lot."

Gabi bit the inside of her mouth.

"I'm meeting Claude while you're in Birmingham. The Giants are based around there. I'll cancel it if you want me with you at the appointment."

She pulled her shoulders back. "No, no chance."

"Oh."

"That came out wrong. Why are you speaking to Claude if you're adamant you're not rejoining the Giants?"

"I want to hear their offer to compare it to the others I've had. And I want to cut my ties with them officially."

"Will you see Lexi?" She tried to sound casual as she fiddled with the hem of her shorts.

"I wouldn't put it past her to ambush me." Lucas parked outside the cookery school.

"And what will you—"

Lucas's phone rang from the console, ending their conversation. "Sorry, I've got to deal with this. I'm one of my neighbour's emergency contacts. He's got dementia, and his daughter is out of town."

"Yeah, of course. I should go, then."

"And don't worry about Lexi. She was part of my past, and you've helped me move on. My future will be better because of these past weeks. With you, I've learnt who I can be."

"Your future will be a good one, wherever you end up," Gabi replied. Lucas's comments niggled her. It was like he was moving on already, whereas she was stuck trying to convince him that he was what she wanted.

"Exactly, and it's thanks to you. I hope I've done the same for you. You're going to have such a good life whatever you end up doing."

"I'll miss you."

"I've not gone yet."

Yet. Rejection snapped at her, adding to her frustration from her call with the head.

Rose waved at Gabi from the doorway of the cookery school.

"We'll talk later. There's a lot more I want to say." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll swing home and check on everything. I won't be there long. Maybe I'll be back in time for the chocolate round."

"Sure. If not, good luck this weekend. You're going to smash it." She forced a smile. Lucas shared his emotions and was everything she wanted—yet tension bit at her skin, because it didn't matter what Lucas was. He didn't think they should be together.

"Thank you. But we'll chat before then, I promise."

She nodded, but their moment was ending with too much stuck in the air between them. "Bye, then."

"Bye, Gabs."

His car disappeared into the distance.

Chapter Forty-Four

GABI

Gabi glanced at Lucas, who was focused on the busy Birmingham city centre roads. Red lights meant little in this place, and amber traffic lights meant even less.

Usually, she took the train to Birmingham. During the year she was dilating, she visited once a month for checkups to ensure she made progress. Pam wasn't happy about how much she'd had to cover on those days, but the head had said it was okay.

Gabi's fingers tapped her thighs. Sickness filled her stomach as she remembered the number of times she'd visited the city to be poked and prodded. She wasn't alone now, but at the next appointment, Lucas would be gone. Even if he didn't move on physically, he would emotionally. He could start dating one of the many women who chatted him up.

His forearms flexed as he gripped the wheel. She hadn't seen him since the last time they'd travelled in this car. His neighbour had had a fall, so Lucas had spent all night at the hospital with him. They'd shared a couple of texts, but they'd been bereft of their usual humour.

They were drifting apart already.

"How was France?" she asked.

"I was gutted we didn't win. To be crowned European Champions would have been amazing, especially if it's my last chance for a while." He sighed. "The fans blamed me for the loss."

"But Banjo fumbled the last-minute try that would have won you the game," she crowed. The fans pissed her off. She was losing her friend emotionally and physically, and they were partly why. She'd tried to fix it with their dates and social posts, but nothing worked.

His eyes lit up as they waited for their turn on the roundabout. He glanced over with a hint of a smile. "You saw the game?"

"It was on while I was planning this week's lessons," she replied. She'd watched the game several times over the weekend and paused it every time Lucas had the ball.

"Oh." His face fell, and she kicked herself for trying to appear casual. "The interviewer made out it was my fault because I stood in the wrong place, but that was the play we'd planned. The team knew it wasn't my fault, but I took the heat because Banjo wants to get picked for England. I don't mind. The town hates me anyway, so what's one more match?"

Lucas threaded through the back streets. "Has school improved since you reported Pam?"

She shook her head. "She's still bullying me, but the head hasn't said anything. When I reminded Pam yesterday about my appointment, she said I was playing hooky."

Lucas shook his head. "That's bullshit. It takes a few hours to get to the hospital and another two to get home, as well as your appointments with the consultant, nurse, and therapist."

He'd remembered it all.

"And they always run late, which is fine. I'm glad I get their time. When I travelled by train, it took longer. The emotional impact of the visits means even if I make it back for the last half hour of the school day, I shouldn't be teaching children."

"How are you feeling about today? You go through a lot while you're there."

Gabi shrugged. "I'm used to it."

"I wish you hadn't needed to get used to it." He glanced at her and held out his hand. Hers trembled as she took it. His warmth spread through her body. "Are you sure you don't want me to come? I'd sit and hold your bag, or whatever you need."

"You'd be bored in the waiting room while I went from appointment to appointment. Besides, you've got to meet Claude."

"I'd drop everything for you."

She stared at him, but the busy traffic held his attention.

She needed to deal with her fear of confrontation, but try as she might, she couldn't ask him to come with her or question him about his meeting. She couldn't bear the news that he'd changed his mind about returning the Giants.

"We're here," he said, pulling into the drop-off zone. "You're sure you don't want company? I'll come in with you. Just say the word."

She faked her smile. "No, it's okay."

She walked around to his window. His blond hair shone in the sun, and his blue eyes met hers. She squeezed her hands.

Tell him to come in. Tell him you don't want him to join any team but to stay with you.

But he'd tell her they couldn't be together. There were only so many times she could hear that. She stood by his open window until a parking attendant started towards them.

"Call me as soon as you finish your appointment, and I'll come and get you. It doesn't matter what I am doing or where I am. I will come immediately. Promise me, princess?"

Gabi nodded. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him hard on the mouth.

As she walked up the steps to the hospital, she reminded herself he needed to move away. The town didn't deserve him, and he warranted fans and a club where he'd be treasured and adored. She couldn't stop his freedom, even though that meant losing him forever.

Chapter Forty-Five

GABI

S kateboards rolled past, their wheels rumbling against concrete. Long-haired men in beanies zipped in and out of the crowd, filming their progress.

As Gabi sat on a stone wall in the middle of the city centre, surrounded by strangers, she said goodbye to the future she'd been denied. She'd walked from her appointment in a daze, dodging groups of office workers in matching lanyards falling out of sandwich shop doors. It was always like this after hospital visits. It was as if each one was a reminder of the first, where the consultant had told her about her syndrome and its implications.

Somewhere, a clock chimed two thirty. The guy wearing earphones who was disposing of his Pret bag in the bin near where she sat didn't hold her focus. Neither did the guy surreptitiously washing his hands in the green water of the stone fountain.

Gabi stared at two women who were laughing as they pushed their three-wheeler prams. Plastic toys in bright primary colours were attached to the bars to entertain toddlers too distracted by the array of people in the bustling metropolitan square.

"Not my future," Gabi mumbled to herself as their giggles carried on the wind.

Although she'd focused for the last year on the part of the syndrome that meant sex would be difficult, she'd done her best to avoid overthinking her fertility issues. But it was always in the

background. Hospital appointments brought it front and centre, especially now that sex wasn't the problem it had been.

Without a womb, her options were adoption and surrogacy. The children in the prams wriggled their legs with glee as a pigeon danced around the pram, searching for crumbs. It was so everyday.

But Gabi couldn't see herself in this life.

At the vibration in her pocket, she looked away. It was Lucas. She'd avoided his calls for the past half hour.

She swiped to answer.

"What do you call a dinosaur with two penises?" At his joke, an unexpected peace descended, easing the tension that gripped her shoulders.

"Lucas." Her lips quirked. She needed to ask him about his meeting.

"Dicklocockus. I made it up during my meeting all by myself."

"I can tell," she teased. The warmth of his voice touched her like a soothing caress.

"Rude." But she heard his smile. "Where are you? It sounds busy."

"I'm near the St. John's fountain. The big one, near the library. But—"

"I'll be there in ten minutes. I came for lunch after my meeting and to wait for you."

She held back from insisting he didn't need to. She wanted him to. Although over the past years, it was rare for her to let someone in, she wanted to let him in.

* * *

She smiled as he walked towards her, chocolate in hand. She usually comfort ate after these appointments, but she hadn't told him that.

"I thought you might need this," he said, gifting her a massive chocolate bar. She patted a space on the wall next to her, and he sat close. She broke off a square for him and one for her. "Are you okay, or is that a stupid question?"

In the past, her issues with sex had stopped her from dating. But so had telling men she couldn't have children. If she told them too early, they'd think she was being presumptuous about where their

relationship was going, but too late, and they might dump her because they wanted kids.

But Lucas was her friend and not her boyfriend.

"There's something else about my syndrome. It's not just sex issues. I can't have kids."

"I know," Lucas replied. She stared at his wincing smile. "I researched MRKH after you told me you had it. I wanted to make sex painless and enjoyable for you."

"Oh." She fumbled with her cuffs. "I'd wondered if you'd Google it."

It was another reason she didn't tell others. It gave them the opportunity to make assumptions about her and her body. But Lucas had done it to help her.

"I read you can still adopt or do surrogacy," he said quickly. Gabi sighed. "Talk to me, Gabs. Don't keep it all in there." He pressed his hand to her heart. "What's the most helpful thing I can do right now?"

She held him against her drumming heart. "Listen, and then distract me with something fun."

"Deal."

Gabi smiled sadly as she broke off another two squares of chocolate. She popped a square in his mouth and one in hers.

They sucked on their chocolate as more mums and children stared at the fountain.

As the chocolate melted and the sweetness coated her throat, she found her voice. "At my first specialist appointment last year, they gave me my MRI results. Although I hadn't had periods, I presumed, maybe like many women, I'd have children one day. I kind of believed it was my god-given right. I sat in the room as the consultant told me I'd never have kids. The bottom of my world fell away, and I knew I'd never be the same. I was so alone."

"You're not alone now," Lucas replied. He pulled her hand to his lap and held it between his unsteady palms. As she popped another piece of chocolate in his mouth, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Even after a positive appointment like today's, I remember that day. Coming to this part of the city after my hospital trips became my ritual." The city had changed over the year. Buildings had developed; another had been knocked down to pave the way for

regeneration, but she still came. "I sit here and think about the children I'll never have."

One woman sat on a step on the other side of the fountain as her little girl ran around the pram. She climbed the steps as if mounting Everest and waved back at her mum and then Gabi. Gabi waved back.

"After the consultant told me I couldn't have children, I sat here. I was numb, and yet there were weird thoughts, things like, would I adopt alone, or would I ask a surrogate to have a kid for me, and if so, who? What if I adopted a child and they hated me or rejected me because I wasn't their birth mum? Would an adopted child already have a name?"

"You couldn't speak to anyone?"

"I had the psychiatrist, but as much as they wanted me to open up about this, I wanted to talk about sex. I didn't have anyone else. I couldn't return home and speak to my parents. Evie and I weren't in a place where we could talk. I shared a little with Rose, but we didn't really know each other then, and I didn't want her to think I was stupid."

"You know now Rose wouldn't think that."

"Yes." Gabi nodded. "When I was in school, we studied research about a psychologist who played music to her foetus while it was in the womb. After she gave birth, when the baby cried, she played him the same music, and he'd stop crying and sleep. It was all I thought about when I sat here after my first appointment. I always wanted to try playing music to my pregnant belly and baby one day. That research study and my weird questions were how I managed the trauma of the news. My body let me down, and I didn't know how to cope."

"And now?"

"Therapy has helped. My questions are different. Some of the heartbreak from those times remains. I have hope, and there are possibilities in the future for what I could do. They've trialled successful womb transplants."

"For real?"

"Yeah. Not everyone is offered it, but there are more possibilities now than there were. All of this gives me hope, but as I sit and stare at this fountain, it's like history has burnt those memories to my chest, and the sadness is harder to push away."

Lucas squeezed her again. They sat silently and finished the chocolate one chunk each at a time. "I don't know in what way you need me or what I can do, but I've got you."

She held her hand to his cheek and pecked him on the lips. "Thank you." She pressed her forehead against his and closed her eyes. "Thank you," she repeated.

"My beautiful warrior princess."

After a beat, she pulled her head back. "I'm ready to be distracted now."

"Are you sure?"

"I need to do something fun."

His eyes glinted. "I have an idea."

Lucas held her hand as they walked past the fountain.

Gabi waved goodbye to the little girl and the ghosts from her past. It was time to write her future, not drown in the past. The syndrome wouldn't go away, but it didn't have to. It was part of who she was.

"Goodbye, Gabriella," she whispered.

Chapter Forty-Six

LUCAS

Lucas held Gabi close as they sat on the barge tour and listened to the stories of the real *Peaky Blinders* and the history of the Birmingham canals. Water lapped at the boat as a Brummie-accented man jovially told them about murders and secret liaisons.

Gabi's tropical scent lingered on her skin. He kissed her forehead. After his meeting, he'd planned to reinforce his thoughts regarding her finding someone who deserved her. After a run-in with Lexi and seeing her with Claude, he was more convinced than ever he couldn't be one of Gabi's regrets. He'd rather be alone. She needed to find someone who was relationship material.

But as she gasped at the story of the Birmingham gangster who hid bodies in the canal, he just wanted to hold her close and never let her go.

Fucking messy head.

The talk ended, and the narrow boat drifted between the older parts of the city.

At a tap on his shoulder, Lucas and Gabi turned to find Sandra, the fan Lucas had piggybacked around the pitch several weeks earlier, smiling. "I knew it was you! George, didn't I say it was Lucas?" She poked the man beside her, who folded his arms and grumbled. "I couldn't believe it when I realised we were behind you. Can I get your photo?"

"Sandra," Lucas sang her name. "Of course you can."

Her grin broadened when she elbowed George in the ribs. "He remembered my name." She turned back to Lucas. "This is my husband."

"Nice to meet you," Lucas said with an outstretched hand. George grumbled.

Gabi pulled her shoulders back and glared at George.

"Sorry about him. He's prickly because the Bulls lost the European Cup. I've told him it wasn't your fault, but he won't listen."

"It wasn't his fault," Gabi snapped. "Banjo should have thrown left, not right. Josh was wide open and shouting for the ball, and it was obviously the play they'd rehearsed, but knowing Banjo, he was planning his celebrations. That Lucas caught it was due to Lucas's skill. He threw it back to Banjo because that would have won them the game. Banjo was next in line. But he dropped it, and now everyone blames Lucas because Banjo, the boy who grew up in the town, couldn't possibly make a mistake."

Sandra and George stared at her. Lucas's mouth dropped.

"Maybe she has a point," George conceded.

"You said it was on in the background," Lucas said as he hugged Gabi. She blushed. "I love it when you go warrior princess for me."

He kissed her, and she whispered in his ear, "I didn't even need my nunchucks."

"We need a photo," Sandra announced. "I want ones with me and Lucas, then Lucas, George and me."

At George's instruction, Lucas posed for a photo, his arms around Sandra as he pecked her cheek.

"Now it's your turn." Sandra pointed at Lucas and Gabi. "I need a photo of the love birds."

"Us?" Gabi laughed.

"I've followed your story on social media. I've never seen two people so in love, apart from me and my George. Kiss for the photo."

Sandra jostled them into position.

"They don't have to kiss." George frowned. "Everyone can see you're in love."

Lucas held Gabi's face gently between his hands and kissed her.

"Aren't they adorable, George?"

"Like us. But maybe more argumentative than we were at that age," George added.

Lucas squeezed his lips together to stop laughing as Gabi replied, "Hopefully, we can get that out of our system like you two have."

George grinned as Sandra said, "Why are you in Birmingham? You're not returning to the Giants, are you?"

Gabi froze, but Lucas shook his head. "Not a chance."

A stream of breath left Gabi's lips.

The boat eased to the bank. Sandra and George waved goodbye. "See you on Saturday at the game," George hollered. "But no more piggybacks for Sandra. There's only one man for her."

"And it's all you, George," Sandra said.

Gabi giggled as she and Lucas walked hand in hand to the car. He couldn't hold in it any longer. "About the meeting..." Gabi's body tightened, but she didn't let go of his hand. "It was weird seeing Claude after everything. He tried to convince me to return."

"And?" She wouldn't look at him, but she was listening, and he needed that.

"I said I was very grateful they considered me, but I didn't want to go back, only forward."

"Did you see Lexi?"

"Yeah. I struggled to see why I'd loved her for as long as I did, but it also showed me that she was right to leave me for Claude, because I wasn't relationship material. It solidified my thoughts about us. Sometimes, you have to set someone free to find what they're looking for."

"Okay," Gabi said, drawing out the word.

He pulled on the back of his neck. He shouldn't have picked her hospital day to have this conversation. He needed to speak to Henry and regroup.

"I know you think you're not right for me, but I'm not done with you yet." Gabi side-eyed him. "You're a complex man, Lucas Knight."

"I've never been called that before. Usually, it's badass, annoying, or someone telling me I'm hard work to be around."

"Some people aren't lucky enough to see the real you."

His face heated, and he cleared his throat. "Do you want to come for dinner at Henry and Amy's tonight, or have you got planning?"

"I'm sorted until next week. I told Pam I wasn't doing her planning anymore, so I've got more time, and it's helpful not to be alone after today."

"Does that mean you have free evenings all week?" Lucas picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around him. "Just think what we could get up to."

Gabi kissed him. "All except Friday. It's Rose's hen do. Maybe I'll get drunk and accidentally flash my knickers."

"You're still fake dating me, remember?" he growled.

Gabi's eyes widened. "I meant send you a photo or something accidentally flashing my knickers. I know that I'm not to date anyone until we're over, and then I have to find someone I deserve."

"Exactly," Lucas replied. But panic stabbed at his heart. He'd told her he was freeing her, but what if she bumped into her future man at the club on Friday? He might lose her early. Even if she didn't, is this what it would be like in two weeks when she moved on?

Chapter Forty-Seven

LUCAS

“Not again. And on a Friday night when you’ve got a game tomorrow. What now?” Amy shouted as she jumped out the back door and ran down the path with a teddy.

It was easy to forget spirited Amy was only nine, but as her teddy bounced in her hand, he considered the milestones he’d miss after he’d left. A tightness clenched his chest as he opened his arms. Amy jumped into them, and he carried her to the bench.

“How’s you, Amy Boo? School okay?”

She cuddled him, but her little body shook as if she was crying. “It’s fine.” Her words were barely distinguishable, so muffled by his chest. “What are you doing here? Are you having another one of your ‘sad swing situations’? Dad’s words.”

“Something like that. Tell me your problems, and I’ll tell you mine.”

Amy huffed. “It’s Mum. She said I’m too big for my pretty dresses and I should eat less.” Lucas’s heart tightened with rage as her tears wetted his T-shirt. There was a right time to kick off about her mum, but for now, Amy needed his love.

The silhouette of Henry watched from the back door.

“You’re beautiful, Amy, and there’s nothing wrong with any part of you. You wear your pretty dresses, and if you don’t like the ones you’ve got, I’ll take you to Kalia’s, and she’ll make you new ones or funky shorts or something else that everyone will be jealous of

because they're one of a kind like you. Your body is changing, and what your mum says is based on her judgements of her life. Do you know something else?"

"What?" Amy asked, wiping her face on him.

"You're kind, creative, smart, funny, have all these skills, and make a difference to your friends. Your dad thanks his lucky stars every night that you're his daughter. Whenever I'm grumpy and you walk in, I'm instantly happier, and your dad is, too, even when you've got an attitude on you." She giggled as Lucas tickled her lightly. "The fact you're my niece is the real reason I'm Uncle Lucky. You're the most amazing person I've ever met."

"More amazing than Miss Draper?"

Lucas chuckled. "Sometimes, I wish you weren't so smart."

Her happy sigh eased some of his rage. "I told you my problems. Your turn. Is it about Miss Draper?"

"It is," Lucas conceded as Amy laid her head on his chest. He didn't want to leave this town and Amy, especially when she needed him. "I really like her, but she..." How should he phrase this to a child?

Lucas *hmpfed*. "Miss Draper is out tonight and living her life. Which she should." He cleared his throat and fumbled for words. "Do you remember your friend who didn't want you to be friends with anyone else? They were stroppy and mean when you spent time with others?"

"Delta? We're not friends anymore because she was soooooo mean."

Lucas hugged Amy as she tucked herself against him. "I don't want to be like Delta. I want Miss Draper to have friends even though it means she might not want to be friends with me anymore. She might find a friend she gets on better with and is more suited to her."

"That sounds tricky, Uncle Lucky."

"Doesn't it?"

"You need to sort your head out. She adores you," Henry said, making them jump. He flicked a switch, and the lights framing the arbour that the bench sat under lit up.

"Daddy, don't creep up on people in the dark," Amy grumbled before patting the seat so he could sit on the end of the bench.

"Sorry." Henry grabbed the teddy and pulled it onto his lap.
"Were you cuddling Lucky Bear because you were sad?"

Lucas was sure Henry knew what was happening, but it was good he let Amy explain it.

"I was. But I'll tell you about it later. And you can tell me how happy I make you even when I've got 'an attitude on me.'" She turned to Lucas, checking she'd repeated what he'd said correctly. Lucas nodded, and she smiled and cuddled her chuckling dad. "We've got to sort out Uncle Lucky first."

"Deal. So, Lucas, when are you going to realise that you are more than good enough for Gabi? Seeing you two at dinner the other night was like watching two people falling really hard for each other. She likes that you're funny and a bit childish. What did Amy say when she first heard you mention Miss Draper?"

"I can't even remember what I had for breakfast."

"Amy?"

"I said she needs someone who makes her laugh. She smiles a lot more at school now, and she giggled at the farm. Teachers don't giggle."

"But Gabi doesn't know what she really wants even though she thinks she does, because she hasn't dated more than me."

Henry gritted his teeth. "So what? You've only dated Lexi, and you know what you want. Mum and Dad were each other's first loves, and they're still together, and let's not consider my relationship history. I deserve to fall in love and be trusted to know when I have."

"She's not in love with me."

"But she might be one day, and you're stopping that with your worries that you're not enough. Do you trust her opinions on other things?"

"Not always. She thinks Thor is better than Batman." Henry glared. "But otherwise, she has a pretty sound mind."

"So trust her on this."

"But what if she hurts me? What if, in a few months, she realises I'm not enough for her?"

"Is that what happened with your previous girlfriend? With Lexi?"

"Yes." Lucas dropped his head.

Amy stood and grabbed his shoulders. She dead-eyed him as she said, "Then she'll be wrong. You're the best, Uncle Lucky. And just because one friend hurts you doesn't mean everyone else will. Mummy hurt me, but Daddy won't."

Lucas swallowed the lump in his throat. "Thank you, Amy. And you're right, your daddy would never hurt you."

"Daddy, Uncle Lucas needs a hug." The two of them piled on him until laughter filled the garden.

He needed to stay with the club. He couldn't lose this.

But first, Gabi.

"I should tell her I want to be more than just...special friends." His heart beat faster. "But she's at Rose's hen party. They've made it to the club." Lucas checked his phone. Gabi texted him all evening with updates, funny stories, and her worries about how drunk everyone was. "Isn't it a dick m—"

"Uncle Lucky said dick!"

"Yep, and I will be reprimanding him for that later."

"Sorry. But isn't going to her when she might want to spend time with friends a...willy move?" Lucas jostled a giggling Amy. "Although she did say she missed me and wanted to see me tonight."

He tried not to smile. Gabi was having a night out, and she still missed him.

"If you get there and she tells you to go, fair enough, but you don't want to miss out because you were too busy doing what you decided was the right thing. Life is about taking chances, and this is yours."

Amy pushed Lucas off the bench. "Go and speak to Miss Draper and tell her you want to be best friends. Go on, get out, grumpy pants."

"Aren't you going to tell your daughter off for name calling?" Lucas asked with his hands on his hips.

"Amy has a point, and as we both know, she has an attitude on her." Henry winked at Amy, who grinned. "Now, get your grumpy pants out of my garden and tell Gabi how you feel. Go on, get, lad."

Amy and Henry laughed as Lucas stormed out of the garden.

Chapter Forty-Eight

LUCAS

Lucas gripped his phone, ready to message Gabi and ask if he could join her, but there she was, in the club's foyer.

She wobbled on her heeled boots. His gaze skimmed her pretty pink corset, which highlighted her strong arms and delicate collarbone. Her dark hair skimmed the corset's zip, swinging as she tried to stay upright. She'd pinned back the fringe, revealing more of her face, including her fluttering eyelashes. His fingertips itched to caress her skin. His mouth dried as her leather skirt rode up her thighs, showcasing her leg muscles. He shifted in his grey joggers.

Her hips wiggled as she attempted to stay upright, and he moaned breathlessly. Everything about her, from her beauty to her kindness, was flawless. It gave her an aura of goodness with a side of sass.

Gabi ferreted in her purse. She held her ticket aloft. "There you are, you bastard," she shouted as she walked towards the coat booth.

He could message her and ask if she needed a lift home so she wouldn't be surprised when she saw him. That way, he wouldn't gate crash the hen party like the desperate man he was.

Gabi stuck her coat ticket into the booth as a man approached her and rested his arm on her shoulders.

Lucas slouched against the wall as the man whispered in her ear. He wanted to yank him away and slam him into the wall, but Gabi wasn't his; he'd pushed her away repeatedly. She was the most

glorious woman and could have anyone, and she'd chosen some loser wearing a shiny blue shirt. Lucas resigned himself to listening to her stories after the penultimate game of the season tomorrow—if she came at all.

Lucas turned to go.

"Get off me," Gabi shouted. "I didn't consent to your touch. What are you, a predator who hits on drunk women? Prick."

Gabi pushed the man away. Lucas beamed as his five-foot warrior shoved the stranger into the wall. She must have sensed him, because her wide-eyed anger was replaced by a smile so broad he nearly exploded when she waved at him.

"My boyfriend is here, and he's going to watch me kick your ass if he doesn't do it first," Gabi continued. She said *boyfriend* like she meant it.

"I'll let you kick his arse, baby. You're terrifyingly strong," Lucas drawled, not moving. He'd toss the guy out the club if she asked, but he didn't need to. The guy backed away with his hands in the air, apologising as Gabi unzipped her boots like she was planning to beat him with them.

He bolted back into the club as Gabi warned the bouncer about him.

"You came for me," she shouted. His cheeks heated under her gaze.

"Always, princess."

She ran and jumped on him, her boots still in her hand. He nearly toppled but managed to keep her in the air using the wall as a ballast. "I was about to get a taxi to yours. I missed you," she squealed.

Lucas laughed as she wrapped her legs around him. "How drunk are you? Should I prepare for vomit?"

She stopped waving her boots erratically and whispered in his ear, "Not very drunk, but I'd had enough of being out tonight, and I thought it would get me out of the rest of the evening. They're doing tequila."

"Not good for you."

"Exactly. I couldn't have more than a couple of cocktails. As I was leaving today, the head told me she wanted to meet me privately tomorrow afternoon."

"On a Saturday?"

"Yes. Maybe they're finally doing something about Pam." Her breath tickled his neck, and he shivered.

"Are you cold?" she whispered.

He replied between gritted teeth, "No, but the hottest woman in the entire world has wrapped herself around me, and although I'm trying to be supportive, I'm so close to pinning you to the wall and sliding my hand under your tight leather skirt."

He shivered again, and she giggled. She kissed him hard on the mouth. The tropical taste of her cocktail matched her everyday scent, and he was transported to the fantasy of her in his arms on a beach. He growled as she ran her nails against his scalp. "Piggyback me to the car and take me home. There are things I've fantasised about doing to you all night."

With a mixture of fumbling and wrangling, Lucas got her on his back.

"What sort of things?" he asked as they left the club.

"Evie got a stripper for Rose, and he inspired me."

"How?"

"I want to give you a lap dance, baby," she murmured. He held her against him as she added, "I've thought about you all night, and I wanted to tell you something else."

"I've got something to tell you as well, but you first."

"I met a man who fits the list we made for my future boyfriend."

Lucas's heart sank. "Congratulations." Insects clawed at his belly as he forced a smile.

"And while he was telling me about his job as a paediatric doctor—"

"Because he's a pillar of the community," Lucas grunted.

"I realised that I needed to refresh my list of the things I want in a future boyfriend. So I made a new list on a serviette. Do you want to see?"

Lucas sighed. "Sure." But he had questions about the man she mentioned. Was he even good enough for Gabi?

She fumbled behind him and waved the serviette in his face.

"It's got a phone number on it," he grumbled.

"Other side. I used the only thing I could find. I'll bin that half in a minute. Turn it over."

He turned it and found his name in bold pink letters. "The thing is," Gabi explained, "I could meet the perfect man, a real-life Thor,

and he still wouldn't be perfect for me, because you are. I don't want you to let me go. I want you to fight for me, give me Spider-Man upside down kisses, and be my boyfriend. And even if that's not what you want, that's still how I feel and how I'll always feel. Other men don't compare to you."

Lucas gripped her legs as he walked them to his car.

"Lucas, say something."

He placed her on the bonnet of his Range Rover and faced her. "I don't understand how I got this lucky. I'm sorry I kept pushing you away. I know you don't like people talking about you." She nodded. "But I spoke to Henry about us, and he helped me realise that I wasn't being fair to you or me."

"What are you saying?"

"That I'm sorry for listening to my past and my pain more than the beautiful woman with the kind heart and incredible ass in front of me." He cupped her face, and her green eyes twinkled as she stared at him. "Will you be my girlfriend? My proper one? No more of this fake business. I'll fight anyone you want, although I know you can do it yourself, because you're my warrior."

Gabi beamed. "Yes, Lucas. Yes." He kissed her hard on the mouth. She panted as she pulled away. "Now take me home so I can give you a special dance."

Chapter Forty-Nine

GABI

With Lucas watching her, his pupils dilated and a slow smirk turning up his lips, her mouth was drier than if she were waking from a tequila bender. Her heart thudded, and she licked her lips slowly.

She squeezed a perfume miniature against her neck. A drop of the clear liquid ran down her throat and collarbone. Lucas tracked its journey, thumbing his lower lip. He moaned as it slid beneath her corset.

Her neck tingled from his hungry stare as he sat in his kitchen chair.

Her eyes dipped to his throbbing cock. There was no hiding the way it tented his joggers. In those grey sweats, he was the perfect meal. *My meal.*

My boyfriend.

"Did you miss me?" Gabi asked as butterflies thronged in her heart.

He nodded as he opened his thighs wider. His cock bobbed. He couldn't get enough of her. The revelation drove lust through her body and gave her the sass she needed to perform for him.

Through the kitchen speaker, she played the Selena Gomez song from their sensual painting class.

She stepped closer to his chair. His body quivered. He turned his finger like he had when she'd worn his rugby shirt. She shook her

head, denying him his request, instead pulling his hand to her open mouth and sucking his finger like she sucked his cock.

"Fuck," he grunted.

She pulled it out with a pop, winked, and turned so her back was to him. She swayed her hips to the music as he groaned. She'd never given a guy a lap dance before, and now she was doing it for her boyfriend. They still had things to discuss, but there would be time for that tomorrow once the match was over and she'd seen the head.

Lucas's murmurs gave her confidence. "So fucking sexy. I want to do the filthiest things to you."

Gabi bent over and winked at him over her shoulder. He grabbed his cock through his joggers and rubbed it as his stare travelled her bare legs and stopped at her arse, where her skirt rode up.

"Are those Wonder Woman knickers, princess?" he drawled.

Gabi turned and rested her knee on the chair between his thighs. She teased his cheekbones with her fingertips. "If you're good, I'll let you find out for yourself."

She licked his ear, and he groaned.

"You like that?" she said, her voice hoarse.

He nodded. "So fucking much. I love everything about you."

"All night, I was needy for you. When we danced at the club, I imagined you were dancing with me. I imagined us making out on one of the sofas."

She pulled her skirt up to her waist and straddled him. His wide rugby player hands rested on her naked thighs.

"What else did you imagine?"

She ground against his erection.

"You pushing my knickers to the side and sliding your cock inside me while people surrounded us, none of them aware we were fucking."

Lucas made a strangled sound. He gripped her thighs tighter.

"You're not allowed to touch the lap dancer. Or are you trying to get into trouble?" Gabi lifted her neck, and Lucas kissed her throat, sucking her skin. At her shaky breath, he drew his nails up her thighs, marking her. She writhed against him, holding his head against her.

"You're so fucking sexy, Gabs." His lips vibrated against her throat.

"Because of you." Gabi slid off his lap and opened his thighs before getting on her knees. His eyes widened as she stared at him from below. She pulled his joggers down past his groin and wrapped her hand around his cock. Pre-cum leaked from the head, and she thumbed it, dragging the liquid down his cock and stroking it.

"You're not meant to do that during a lap dance, either." His voice was deep enough to thrum through her skin.

She locked him with her stare and winked. "I won't tell if you don't. I can't resist you. You're glorious and all fucking mine."

She slid up his body before turning and grinding against him. He gripped her thighs, and she leaned back. "I love it when you give me that dirty mouth," he growled.

She whimpered.

He kissed her neck, and his thumb brushed her knickers, now stretched across her clit. She ground against his touch.

"Fuck. You're so wet."

She hummed as he continued to stroke her clit. His fingers briefly slid underneath the material and inside her. She owned her sexuality and revelled in his attention.

"Not yet, baby." She climbed off him and undid her zipper. She slid her skirt down her legs, revealing her wet superhero knickers. His body shook, and sweat beaded his forehead.

She swayed as he stared at where her knickers pressed against her wet pussy. "Fuuuuuck, keep dancing like that. I love that you're so sweet in public, but you're my naughty brat in private."

"All yours," she rasped.

"My beautiful and sexy warrior. My girlfriend."

He mumbled expletives as she continued to dance for him. He pushed down his joggers and kicked them off. He stroked his thick cock as he watched her. She licked her lips.

"Do you want to see my tits, Lucas?" The temptation to climb on him and ride him until they both came was a fight she wasn't sure she'd win, but as he nodded in desperation, she reached around and unzipped her bodice.

"I fucking adore every part of you, but I love your nipples and the way your chest pinks. It makes you look sweet, but I know you're my dirty girl."

She held the bodice against her as the edges fell to her sides.

"Please show me," he begged.

The corset slipped down her front, and she continued dancing, moving her hips and pressing her chest forward. His mouth dropped as he stared. She felt every bit of the intensity in his stare licking against her skin.

She straddled him and ground against him. Now, in just her knickers, she felt like every naughty name he called her. She grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head.

Gabi kissed him hard on the mouth, and she pressed his palm to her body, holding him there. He thumbed her clit again through her knickers, and she whimpered into his mouth at the friction of the material. It was time. She couldn't wait any longer.

She climbed off him and slipped off her knickers, tossing them at him. Lucas wrapped them around his cock and gave it a couple of pumps. His loud groans echoed off the kitchen tiles.

"I want to fuck you so bad, Lucas."

"Get me a condom from my joggers," he demanded. "I need that sweet, wet pussy on my dick as you scream my name."

She grabbed one and handed it to him.

As he sheathed himself, he rasped, "Fuck me, my beautiful filthy girl."

She straddled him, her back against his chest. He wrapped his forearm around her waist and pulled her onto his dick. It slid in. He held her so her back was flush against his chest as she slunk down on him. His thumb rubbed her clit.

"Watching you dance for me made me so fucking hard. Your body is perfect. You're so responsive to my fingers, aren't you?"

She murmured her agreement.

"Say it," he demanded. "Tell me how much you want this."

He strummed her clit.

"I need you inside me. The whole time at the club, I wanted you inside me. I imagined you fucking me against the wall of the cut-through from after the painting class, your dick pushing deeper and deeper where people could catch us."

"Fuck, that's hot."

Her teeth tore at her lips as she tried to get the best angle to have him deep. His cock stretched her as she bounced. He used his forearm to pull her against his dick. Her bouncing sped up. He bit her neck and sucked her skin.

"I'm going to wear your mark like I wear your shirt. I want people to know I'm yours," she moaned.

"That's right. Mine. No one else gets this pussy or this heart." He flattened his broad palm against her chest. "You're mine, and I'm yours."

"Yes, Lucas."

"I'm close already," he growled in her ear. "You gotta come first. Always first."

His grunts turned her feral for him. She lifted herself and dropped down before riding him like she was obsessed.

His fingers played with her clit, and his lips on her neck pushed her higher. "Don't stop," she cried out as her body clenched. As he thrust into her one more time, she came apart. She scratched at his skin as her body thrashed against his.

"Fucking hell," he shouted, pained.

He roared into her as he came. She shook violently against his arms, which tightened around her. It was as if every nerve ending exploded as her orgasm hit. She tipped her head back and kissed him hard, her exhilaration expressed in loud noises. Eventually, her panting eased, but they didn't stop kissing.

"Gabs, knowing you're mine for real made fucking you so much sweeter."

She panted as she tried to speak. "You were perfect. Kitchen counter next time?"

"Right now. I want to lick your sweet cunt as we get ready for another round." He eased her to the ground and deposited his condom before turning her and lifting her onto the nearest counter.

Chapter Fifty

LUCAS

Lucas sighed as he took in the mess of shirts and shorts littering the changing room. Coach would lose it if he saw this, but his mind was elsewhere, with ten days until the wedding and one game left, albeit against the Giants.

Lucas remembered his discussion with Gabi the night before. They still needed to chat through the future, especially considering he might have to move. They'd planned to speak fully clothed and away from temptation when she finished meeting with the head.

"I think the fans still hate you," Max said as they sat in the changing rooms. The scent of sweat mixed with sugary sports drinks never left the room, no matter how well it was cleaned.

"Yep." The reverberations from the fans' shouts echoed through him, but their insults couldn't blast the memories of Gabi's promises. Would she want long-distance or to move with him?

"Is it anger from last week's European Championship loss, which wasn't your fault? Banjo needs to take responsibility for what happened. We're still top five in the premiership, but it's another reason the fans hate you when they shouldn't." Max shoved him. "Lucas?"

The sweat still saturating his clothes turned cold, and he shivered. His conversation with Gabi should include a discussion about babies and infertility, too. It would help to understand her

thoughts, because it would affect him long-term. "Sorry. I've got a lot in my head."

"Are you debating which club to move to? This team needs you. I need you. But you've got to go to somewhere you're appreciated and where you can excel. You deserve that."

"I do." Lucas slapped his back. "This town will never accept me. I don't know what to do about it, but I want to stay for my family and for Gabi. I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with her." His shoulders dropped.

Max jumped up. "That's incredible. Does she know?"

"Kind of. She's my real girlfriend now. There's nothing fake about us. But we still need to talk about things properly."

Lucas's phone buzzed. It was Gabi. He crossed his fingers that Pam was gone and her stress would ease. That morning before he'd left, she'd paced her kitchen, pushing her hair from her face and staring at him with panic-filled eyes. The confident woman who'd danced for him had disappeared.

Her sobs hit him as soon as he answered, tearing at his heart. "What happened? Gabs, are you okay?"

"She fired me," she answered, gasping for breath. "She actually fired me. She made out it was my fault."

"What?" Lucas snapped. "Did you only meet with the head?"

"Yes. She said Pam was never the problem." Her volume increased.

Lucas smacked the wall. "But everyone knows what she does, including the head."

Max busied himself in his bag on the other side of the room, giving him space. Lucas slumped and counted to five. "Tell me what exactly the head said."

Gabi's sigh was long and pained. "She saw the Instagram photo Sandra took when we were on the boat after the hospital. She said it was obvious I've been dodging lessons all year rather than returning to school straight after my appointments. But I couldn't fit it all in with getting the train, which I always did, and if there was time, which there never was, those appointments always left me in a bad place." Her voice sped up as anxiety crashed with her rant.

"You've been through so much, and some of that treatment was traumatic."

"She called me a liar to my face and said unless I showed her the letters from the medical team, the ones with summary notes about the appointments and what happened and discussions about my condition, then she wouldn't believe me."

"But she saw the letters showing you had an appointment."

"Every time. And I showed her the one from the week. But she said it wasn't enough. As my appointment was mid-morning, there was no reason for me to be out all day. The consultant's letter with the summary of what happens at my appointments would reveal how involved those days are, but I shouldn't have to share that. And Pam found out about my syndrome through her. It's private. My syndrome and all I've experienced are private."

Lucas's head was in his hands.

"She said my absenteeism was gross misconduct."

"What the hell?"

She sobbed again. "She kicked off when I said I wouldn't show her the letters. But I don't have to tell her details about my treatment, right? Surely that can stay private?"

Lucas paced. Max looked over, his eyebrows raised, but Lucas shook his head. "You don't have to show her those letters. Could you ask your consultant to send a letter explaining what happens at your appointment?"

"But it's no one's business but my own," Gabi shouted. "You know how I feel about that."

He wanted to say the right thing, but he fumbled for a way to calm Gabi. "I'll pick you up. We'll speak to your union and get you your job back."

Her crying stopped, but her anguished sigh that filled the receiver was enough to convince him her pain remained. "There's no point. I don't want to be at the school after this. Maybe this is how it will always be. I'll always be ashamed and have to hide part of myself."

"No. There is hope. Where are you? I can miss the after-game briefing. Max will tell Coach I've had a family emergency." Max looked up at his name.

"I don't want to be around anyone." His chest tightened. He wanted to be there for her. "I'll come by yours later, okay?"

"Okay."

She hung up. Lucas's shoulders hunched.

"I'll let Dad know you've got to go. She needs you," Max said.

"She wants to process alone. I can't believe they fired her." He cradled his head in his hands.

"Why was she fired?"

Lucas sighed as if that one action would push all the stress and strain from his body. "You know I had an appointment in Birmingham on Tuesday?"

Max nodded. "With your old club?"

"It was also to take Gabs to the hospital. I can't talk about it, but I've had it all inside me, and I want to know how best to help her. She has this syndrome and—" He smacked the bench. "No, I shouldn't be talking about it. She hates it when I share her stuff. But it's in my head, especially because Gabi and I could have a real future. I haven't spoken to anyone, but it's really not about me." He stumbled over his words.

"You okay?"

Lucas shrugged. "Yeah. It's not my secret to share. I shouldn't have said anything. Don't tell anyone what I said."

Max patted Lucas on the back. "You barely said anything, and it's safe with me. Have you asked Gabi if you can confide in someone? It would help if you could...."

Evie stood on the edge of the doorway, her face red and her strawberry blond hair wild.

"What's wrong with Gabi?" Evie shook. "Why hasn't she told me any of this?"

Lucas jumped up. "Evie," he said, his hands in the air like he was trying to placate a wolf. "It's not my place to tell you anything. This is Gabi's private information."

"Tell me right now, or I'll go straight to her. I need to know." Evie rubbed her arms and stepped closer. "I'll make your life impossible if you don't tell me."

Lucas stared her down. "I don't care what you do to me. I'm not telling you."

"Evie, leave it," Max said. "Lucas is protecting Gabi's business like she asked him to do."

"This is my sister, and this is my business." Evie paced the locker room. Her fingers trembled, and a tear slipped down her cheek, streaking her mascara. "Why didn't she tell me? Syndromes don't happen by accident. Gabi must have known about this for years."

Lucas reached for Evie's arms, but she flinched away.

"And she told you." Evie's voice cracked. "I care about her so much, more than anyone, so why has she hidden it from me? I need to speak to her."

"Evie," Lucas said softly, "in time, if you're patient and stop telling her your opinions about her life and how she should live it, she'll probably tell you, but if you go to her like this, she won't tell you, and it'll make everything worse."

But it was too late. Evie swiped at her phone with shaky fingers and turned on the speakerphone.

"Hello?" The pain in Gabi's voice ripped Lucas's heart.

"What syndrome have you got, and why haven't you told me about it?"

"Evie," Max huffed.

Lucas's shoulders folded in. It was too late. "Gabi doesn't need this right now."

"Is that Lucas and Max?" Her voice was tight with worry. "Did you tell her, Lucas? Why would you do that, especially now?"

"Gabi, wait," Lucas cried out.

"You knew how important this secret was to me. I can't trust you. I can't trust anyone. We're over, Lucas."

The phone went dead.

Lucas slumped to the floor.

Chapter Fifty-One

GABI

Gabi's feet thudded against the asphalt. Music blasted through her earbuds. She was halfway through a club classic when her ringtone kicked in. She checked the screen.

Lucas again.

She muted her calls and turned her notifications off. It didn't matter how many times he called or how many messages Evie sent. She wouldn't speak to them.

There was a message from Rose.

Rose: Your sister came round to ask about your syndrome. I didn't tell her anything, but I think it's time you spoke to her.

Gabi stopped and bent double as tears slipped down her cheeks. The headteacher had made her feel less than nothing, and now Evie demanded her secrets. No one had a right to a piece of her, and no one got to tell her what she should share.

She pulled the ends of her hoodie to tighten it.

Sun spilt through the trees in the park, and Gabi slumped to the ground. A child's laughter carried on the breeze as she stared at the sky. She glanced to her side, where a toddler held up his hands and danced across the grass.

Before she met Lucas, whenever she'd felt this vulnerable, she'd have curled into herself at the sight of a happy dancing child while

reflecting on everything she didn't have. But as he chased bubbles, Gabi smiled.

I have options. I have a choice.

What had been taken away from her by her fucked-up body didn't have to stop her having the things she wanted in life.

But what did she want?

Before, her whole world was sadness, and then she was hyper-focused on dilation, desperate to do anything to have sex. As she got in the lift the night she'd met Lucas, she was sure that, as much as she wanted to go home with someone, it wouldn't happen, because her fear eclipsed everything. Before that night, before Lucas, it was as if she was swimming in the sea, reaching for a tennis ball, and every time she went for it, another wave would push it farther away.

And then she fell for a guy who was everything she'd needed.

The bubbles drifted closer, and the child followed them. She was like that child, but the bubbles were her choices. Her future was so open that she didn't know which bubble to aim for. Tears slid down her cheeks as she lay on the grass.

"What do I want?" she mumbled.

The white line of a condensation trail from a plane slowly disappeared. Maybe she should get on a plane and disappear. She'd been scared when she was younger, but she didn't need to be afraid anymore. She'd conquered many of her fears over the last two months.

If she left the country, Evie wouldn't find her, and she'd never need to tell anyone about her syndrome.

Or you could go home.

Her parents' village in the middle of nowhere was safe from those who knew her secrets. She could return to who she was without anyone expecting more than conformity from her.

She considered Lucas but shook her head to try to rid herself of the sadness stabbing at her heart when she recalled that dirty blond hair and that smile that gave her life. He'd done the one thing there was no coming back from. She was falling in love with him, but she couldn't be with him if she couldn't trust him.

She sat up and waved at the toddler. He waved back. The shame of her syndrome was going to get worse if she didn't deal with it. Pam's bullying, the head's judgement, and Evie's tone snapped at

her. She wasn't a freak, yet as her confidence sunk into the soil, she couldn't stop hearing the taunts of her teenage boyfriend.

Tears fell down her cheeks.

The squidgy-faced toddler sat in front of her. He cocked his head and frowned. He held his hand to her face.

"Patrick," a familiar voice called. "I'm so sorry. He's always trying to make friends."

Gabi looked into Sophia's eyes.

"Gabi? Are you okay?" Sophia rummaged through her pockets and pulled out a tissue.

Gabi took it and dabbed her eyes. Maybe it was fate or luck, but as she stared at the tissue now rumpled in her hand, she knew talking to someone who didn't know her or expect anything from her might help.

"I'm going through some stuff," Gabi stuttered. "I'm surprised you remember me after that one class. You must meet loads of people."

Sophia scooped up Patrick and sat on the grass, pulling him onto her lap.

"I was hoping you'd call or I'd bump into you." Sophia's joy was tangible. "Do you want to get the coffee I mentioned sometime? I'd do it now, but..." Patrick wriggled in Sophia's lap and pointed at her pot of bubbles. "It's someone's bedtime."

Gabi smiled at Patrick, who glowered at the bubbles out of his reach.

"Are you free tomorrow?" Sophia asked as she tickled Patrick.

Gabi pulled on her hoodie strings. She needed to chat with someone who wasn't her therapist, someone who wouldn't reflect all her questions back at her and knew Lucas and Evie. If she wasn't careful, she might run away from this new identity she'd fought for.

She stared at the ground until Patrick poked her in the head. "Bubbles."

Sophia slung the toddler over her shoulder.

Gabi smiled. "Yes. I'm free."

"As much as I adore my little bruiser, Patrick is at his nana's tomorrow, so he won't disturb us." Her laugh tinkled. "Come to the gallery. I'll be there all afternoon. We're turning it into Charlie and Rose's wedding reception venue. We've not hosted a wedding reception before, so we've given ourselves a week to plan."

“Okay.”

“Great. I can’t wait. See you tomorrow.” Sophia heralded Patrick back to the other side of the park.

When she was sure Sophia was out of sight, Gabi jumped up and down to rid herself of adrenaline, but that wasn’t what energised her.

It was hope.

Chapter Fifty-Two

GABI

Gabi gripped the card she'd found on her doorstep attached to a bunch of rainbow lilies as she stood outside the art gallery.

I'm sorry for telling Max you had a syndrome. I didn't tell him anything about it, not even its name. I stopped myself immediately because I knew it wasn't my place. I shouldn't have even said what I said, but I've struggled with everything I've learnt about you and MRKH. I didn't know how best to support you, especially for our future—if we have one. I needed to talk to someone, but that's no excuse. I should've asked you before I spoke to anyone. I want to tell you that you have nothing to be ashamed of. I'm proud you're in my life. Take all the space you need. I'm here for you. Always thinking of you. Lucas xx

She slid it into her pocket.

After her run, she'd messaged Lucas and Evie with a request for space, then spent the evening at bargain basement shops before hiding in late-night coffee shops to avoid potential worriers loitering on her doorstep.

She'd returned home with a gnome for a garden she didn't have, three new notebooks, and a massive collection of chocolate. The chocolate didn't last the night.

She lingered on Lucas's card. *Our future*. Before she left the house, she stroked the ocean-blue dress he'd given her. She should return it. She wasn't attending the awards ceremony with him after his last game against the Giants next Saturday. Even if she trusted him again, she couldn't celebrate her fucked-up body like he wanted her to.

Gabi stared at the gallery doors. Hopefully, Sophia's insight would help her make sense of her thoughts. Then, Gabi could decipher how she felt about the rest of Lucas's message.

Always thinking of you.

She swallowed the itch in her throat that hinted at tears and pushed the door.

Gabi breathed in the scent of coffee as she looked around.

The space was a mess of art, sculptures, and flowers. She smiled at a painting of Josh on the far wall. It held the twinkling grin that grew whenever Evie was near. Josh gave Evie a space to be soft when she needed it. Before their dad kicked her out, she was a mixture of chaos and rebellion. Those teenage years when she was trying to find her identity while their dad attempted to control her was filled with painful memories. They must have been agony for Evie.

Gabi remembered hiding behind a tree as she watched Evie at their grandma's grave the day of the funeral over a year ago. That was the day she'd decided to move to this town. Gabi's parents had tried to limit her search for her identity. Evie had done that to some extent, too, but Gabi had blocked her sister's opportunities to get to know her.

Another painting caught her eye. It was of Lucas. Aidan recreated his dashing smile and beautiful blond hair perfectly. It looked soft enough to touch. She stared at his sparkling blue eyes. They seemed to meet hers, reminding her of her most intimate life-changing moments. They'd also stared at her in adoration when

she'd rescued him on the climbing wall and when they'd laughed as he bobbed in the water after falling off his paddleboard. She was falling in love with the badass, vulnerable bastard. But was that enough?

"He's even cheeky in a painting," Sophia said from beside her. Gabi started. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump."

Gabi laughed it off. "Aidan's an exceptional artist. It's weird that, months ago, fans badmouthed Lucas because they'd decided he and Aidan hated each other. Only someone who likes Lucas could have painted this."

"Those bloody fans. They used to insult Aidan, but as soon as he left, he was the greatest player and irreplaceable. There's never been a rivalry between Lucas and Aidan. Lucas's comments in the interview were taken out of context. It's clear to anyone who loves the Bulls like we do that Lucas is an enthusiastic player making his mark."

Gabi sighed. Even the painted version of him made her legs weak.

"Besides," Sophia continued, "the day after that interview, Lucas apologised to Aidan about what he'd said in the interview. Then he played with Patrick for hours. Patrick adores him, and I trust his opinion more than fans with short memories."

"The gallery is nice." Gabi pulled herself away from Lucas's cheeky grin to stare at the room. Strewn material covered most of the furniture and space.

Sophia laughed. "You're too polite. It's chaos. Rose and Charlie are coming tomorrow to explain how they want it. We've closed the gallery for a week to tidy the space and give it a bit of love. Are you coming to the wedding?"

Gabi nodded. "I'm a bridesmaid but a bit anxious about it. My life is about to change, and the wedding ends a significant chapter."

"Is that related to your tears in the park yesterday?"

"Yeah." Gabi slouched.

"I've got the coffee pot on. Let's chat about as much or as little as you like." Gabi lifted her head. A soft smile spread across Sophia's face. She nodded in the direction of the seats in the corner. "I've got double chocolate cookies, too."

Gabi followed Sophia into the corner and dropped into a chair.

"I'll keep what you tell me confidential. When I'm not here, I work for a charity with Max's fiancé, and my job is to listen. I'm not here to be your counsellor. I might give my opinion, but tell me to shut up if you want. I won't take offence." Sophia offered Gabi a cookie.

Over the next half hour, Gabi shared everything, from her reason for moving to town, her difficult relationship with her sister, getting fired, and most of what had happened between her and Lucas from the moment they met in the bar to the present day.

"You've been through so much. And you've not spoken to many people about it?"

Gabi shook her head as she popped another biscuit in her mouth. Sharing all her secrets left her trembling, like she'd experienced a high-intensity exercise class.

Sophia sat back. "Let's start with the job part. What sort of job do you want?"

Gabi shrugged.

"What did you love about your job?" Sophia asked patiently. No one had asked her that before. She'd never considered it. Her parents said teaching was the obvious choice, and she'd had no reason to disagree.

Gabi stared off to the side as Aidan knocked on the wall. "Can I get a coffee?"

Sophia looked at Gabi with raised eyebrows, and when Gabi nodded, Sophia called out, "Of course you can, honey."

Aidan was tall and broad like Lucas, but with darker hair. Gabi glanced at the couple as Aidan kissed Sophia and whispered in her ear. As Sophia beamed, Gabi experienced an unexpected flush in her heart. This was love. Her parents liked each other, but she'd never witnessed everyday intimacy between them. Sophia and Aidan were like Josh and Evie, although her sister and Josh had added angst. Although Evie was rarely soft, she let Josh hold her and comfort her. Sometimes, Gabi caught Evie whispering sweet praise to him or finding ways to relax or empower him, especially before big games, and he was always there for her.

Gabi wanted what both couples had.

"Back to the things you loved about your job," Sophia said as Aidan busied himself at the coffee pot.

Gabi considered the last year in her role. "I loved working with the children and the sports and craft activities we did. They open up in those activities, and I love their faces when you spend time helping them. There's nothing like that moment when they achieve something they've never done before or conquer something that made them anxious. And I may have loved making shapes out of wax or playing silly games more than them." Gabi laughed as she recalled a child dragging her from the craft table after school.

"What didn't you like?"

"That's easy. I disliked the school politics, the endless paperwork, and trying to teach things to a strict timetable based around achievement when, sometimes, kids just need someone to listen and care. I liked supporting them. While doing my degree, I volunteered with a charity for children and teenagers who support ill family members. Many of the children were struggling."

"Have you considered a paid job with a charity? We could use someone like you at the foundation."

Gabi slid her hands under her thighs. She thought teaching would be her long-term career, but everything she wanted from work, she had at the charity where she volunteered. "Are you sure I have enough experience?"

"You have what we need. We've won funding for a new children's worker, but it doesn't start until September. You'd need to interview for it, but the closing date for applications is in three days, and we've not received many. If you're at a loose end this week, volunteer with us, see what we do, and decide if it's for you. How does that sound?"

Gabi's heart beat faster, and she sucked in a breath. "Seriously?"

Sophia's smile was warm enough to melt the ice caps. "Yes. Come by tomorrow lunchtime once I've spoken to my boss. Bring your child safety paperwork, and you can shadow me."

"Your boss will be okay with that?"

"Tasha? She's been a pussy cat since she started dating Gavin."

"Evie's ex?"

Sophia nodded. "He was an arsehole to your sister, and I couldn't stand him, but he's changed. Tasha too. Besides, any skilled volunteer is worth gold in the charity sector." Relief covered Gabi like a shroud. "And based on the medical stuff you've told me, your life experience will help you. I'm not saying it's the same as what the

children have experienced or something you'd have to share, but my struggles gave me insight into suffering and grief, and I suspect yours will, too."

"Okay. I'll be in tomorrow."

Gabi glanced warily at Aidan, who sipped his coffee in the corner. Had he heard Sophia's references to her private life?

"Speaking of medical experiences, you should speak to my husband." Gabi trembled at the prospect, but Sophia touched her hand lightly. "Aidan has a different background from yours, but he knows what it means to have an overwhelming medical secret. It limited his interactions for years. His perspective might offer you something I can't. You don't have to speak to him, but if you want to, I'll stay with you."

Gabi's gaze flitted between Aidan and Sophia. Gabi swallowed several times, dragging saliva into her mouth. Sophia created a safe space, and Gabi wanted to share her secrets to new people. She'd hidden for so long. Nothing from their conversation made her wary. Sophia was wonderful. She needed to trust good people, or she might as well lock herself in her childhood bedroom and never have a friend again. "Okay," she said quietly.

"Come here, honey, and let Gabi explain something." Aidan's mouth twisted in confusion as his eyebrows squished together. Maybe he was used to this from Sophia, because, after a beat, he joined them on the chairs.

Sophia held Gabi's hand as Gabi told her story again. Aidan nodded and asked for clarification in places. Her arms trembled, and her jaw shook, but it wasn't as severe as before. Every time she told someone new, it was easier.

"Can I tell you about me?" Aidan asked, and Gabi nodded. "I grew up thinking I had the hereditary illness my dad had. I watched him get sick and die when I was a child. I spent my life waiting for my death sentence. For years, I pushed people away, lived a life where I didn't care about anyone, and did what I wanted while hurting myself and others."

"What changed?"

"Sophia. She came into my life and didn't put up with my shit. This woman is an angel."

Sophia rolled her eyes, but her face glowed. "You weren't that bad, and I'm not that good. Aidan also had professional help. Over

time, his doctor helped him open up."

Aidan chuckled. "True, but I wouldn't be here now with a beautiful family and doing what I love without you."

Gabi sighed a jagged breath. Their love surrounded her, and as much as she felt blessed to watch it, she couldn't believe it could be her experience.

"Those medical issues were mine to own. It was my decision who and where to share them. It took a long time for me to tell Sophia. I wish I'd told her sooner, but shame held me back, and I feared the consequences if I did." He rubbed the stubble framing his jawline. "What's stopped you from telling people, Gabi?"

"Shame," Gabi admitted with her head low.

"As much as I can tell you that you've nothing to be ashamed of, that's something you need to decide for yourself. No one is entitled to learn about your life, including your medical history, but it's part of who you are and impacts your choices and the paths you've taken in life."

Gabi bit the inside of her mouth. Aidan was right. If she hadn't been ashamed of her syndrome, she would have embraced her identity sooner. She wouldn't have repeatedly pushed Evie away.

"And I'm guessing you've inadvertently gained skills, like resilience and determination, to help you with the children you've made a difference to because of it."

"I'm not an inspiration," she snapped.

"I didn't say you were, although I expect others believe you are."

Gabi nodded. Lucas and Rose called her that. "But I didn't choose to be this person or have these medical problems."

"But you got them anyway, and instead of letting it destroy you, like I did for a while, you fought back. You didn't choose to inspire people. If they're inspired because of you, you don't have to own that." Gabi pursed her lips. Aidan made good points, but no one had spoken to her like this before. "And they don't get to own your experience. That's all yours, whether you decide to tell people or not. And more than that, people don't get to shame you. You've nothing to feel ashamed about. Anyone who makes you feel that way doesn't deserve to breathe your air."

Aidan finished with a bang of his fist on the table. "Sorry. I get on my soapbox about some stuff. It took me a long time to see things like I do now."

"Who else have you told about your medical background?" Sophia asked.

"Hospital people. And Rose and Lucas know most of it. I told the head, and she let slip to the teacher who bullied me."

Aidan growled.

"Down, boy," Sophia said, raising her hand. "It's not your fight. How was Lucas about it?"

Gabi pinched her lower lip. "He was okay, very accepting and asked questions. But we're not talking because he shared something with Max, and my sister found out. But he barely said anything." A voicemail from her sister confirmed she'd overheard them. "Lucas suggested he was struggling with what he'd learned and needed to talk about it."

"Just like you, honey," Aidan said to Sophia. He turned to Gabi. "I'm guessing you've spent time working through the impact of your syndrome?"

Gabi crossed her arms. "A while."

"But Lucas had to get on board quickly, and even though you've dealt with a lot, he's probably never experienced anything like this. It's probably something he'd never heard of before." Gabi nodded. "And he was trying to be everything you needed. As much as he wants to keep it secret, he needs to let it out and share feelings and worries that maybe he can't with you for fear of upsetting you."

"Stop making good points," Gabi replied with a sour laugh.

Aidan chuckled. "Did you hear that, Soph? I made good points."

"Well done, honey." Sophia smiled.

"I usually spend more time causing problems than solving them." Sophia rolled her eyes, and he kissed her quickly. "Back to Lucas. I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but consider it from his side. It's still your experience to own. I stand by that, but it's impacted him."

Gabi mulled over Aidan's explanation. If it had been the other way around, she would've needed to talk to someone, especially as they were leaning towards the long-term.

"You said you haven't told your sister. How come?" Sophia asked. Gabi rubbed her eyes and sighed. There were lots of reasons, some selfless and others about protecting herself. As Gabi stared at the couple who'd weathered their own difficult situation, she

admitted to herself it was time Evie knew, not from whisperings or half-truths, but from her.

"The longer I sit here, the less I'm sure." She sighed. "Is it okay if I head off? You two have given me a lot to consider. I'll call her."

Gabi stood, and Sophia and Aidan enveloped her in a hug.

"Sorry if it got too heavy," Sophia whispered in her ear, but Gabi shook her head.

"If you'd said any of those things to me a couple of months ago, I'd have bolted and never come back, but I was ready. I hoped coming here would help, and it did more than you know. You've both helped me." Gabi gave them another hug. "But next time, we need to eat more cookies and cover fewer life stories."

"Deal." Sophia chuckled. She ran to the coffee station and grabbed her business card and a Jameson Foundation leaflet. "Don't forget to come to the charity tomorrow. You can read a bit about it. The address is on both. No matter what happens next, you will do great things, Gabi. I'm certain. The student from your school that you referred talks highly of you."

Gabi smiled as she took the card and headed out of the gallery.

Chapter Fifty-Three

GABI

Gabi sat on the bench near her nana's grave as Evie strolled towards her.

Evie placed a rose next to Gabi's in front of the headstone before sitting next to her. Neither spoke as the breeze tousled their hair and birds sang from the trees. Pink and yellow flowers rested at each grave with notes from families and little teddy bears.

Gabi never really knew her dad's mum. She'd visited once when Gabi was young and caused chaos. Gabi's dad told her never to visit again. When their dad banished Evie, she'd moved in with her. From the many stories she'd shared since Gabi moved to town, she was certain she'd missed out on knowing a great woman.

"I still miss her," Evie whispered. "Every day, I wish I could sit with her and tell her about my life. She'd have loved you." The breeze took her words as soon as they left her mouth.

"What would you tell her if she sat with us now?"

"That I love my baby sister, and I'm terrified I'm going to lose her when I barely know her."

Gabi turned to find Evie's head down. "You're not going to lose me."

"You're not dying?" Evie looked up, and Gabi's heart stopped when she saw tears brimming in her eyes.

Evie was a hard arse because she'd had to be. She didn't cry easily.

"What did you overhear between Lucas and Max?"

Evie's eyebrows twisted. "Lucas told Max you had a syndrome and that he'd driven you to the hospital in Birmingham. When I demanded more information, he wouldn't say. I threatened him and was a bit of a dick—"

"Nothing new," Gabi teased.

"Watch it. I'm still your big sister." Gabi hugged her. "Lucas refused to say more. He's a good one, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

Evie shrugged. "You know what I mean. I was wrong about him. I don't like being wrong. But if I had to be mistaken about anything, I'm glad it's your boyfriend." Her tears eased. "So you're not dying? You'd tell me if you were? I thought that was why you made me come here, so we could pick out where your body would go."

"For fuck's sake, Evie! That's dark, even for us." Gabi shoved her sister. There was a hint of the cheeky smile she remembered from when they were younger. "I'm not dying, and we're not picking out a hole for my body. You're such a drama queen."

Evie pulled Gabi into a hug. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Okay," Gabi replied. They both said goodbye to their nana and walked towards the local pub. Gabi's hand slipped into her sister's. It was like they were children walking to the park again. Everyone used to talk about the little Draper girls who weren't alike except for their green eyes but who giggled when they held hands.

As Gabi told the third person that day about her syndrome, her chest eased. It was easier the more she did it. In one day, she'd doubled the number of people she'd told. Each time she got a good response, it reduced her shame and gave her something else she couldn't put her finger on. There were tinges of acceptance wrapped in pride for getting through it, but it was more than that.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? I knew there was something, but I didn't imagine this," Evie said. Her comfort couldn't distract from the frustration in her voice.

"Because I was angry with you."

Evie stopped on the gravel path. "Me? Why were you angry with me?"

Gabi pulled her along as if stopping might restrict her from sharing. "Because you weren't there when I needed you. I didn't have periods, and I had no one to talk to about what should be

happening with my body. I couldn't speak to Mum and Dad. You were all I had, and you left. I know it's not that simple, and Dad kicked you out for something you didn't do, but at the time, I needed you, and you weren't there."

Gabi's throat itched. Ugly crying was coming. "If I'd known, I'd have been there in a heartbeat, no matter the consequences, and I'd have fucked up your boyfriend and everyone at your school. And don't get me started on the doctor who left you to suffer." Gabi fisted Evie's jumper as her tears streamed down her cheeks. "I'm always here for you, Gabi, even if I don't do it right. Were you ever going to tell me?"

"I couldn't. I had this fucked up syndrome no one knew about, but it changed my life forever. It started as a secret and became this shameful thing I was too scared to share in case people judged me or looked at me like I was a freak."

"You're not a freak. You're fucking amazing. I had Nan for the stuff I went through. You had no one."

"I would've said something sooner, but when I tell you things, like when I told you about Pam, you get overprotective. You tell me how I should live my life. You try to fix me or force your opinion about how I should do things."

Evie groaned. "Josh told me off for doing that, and *he* rarely tells me off for anything."

"That's because he's scared of you. We all are."

Evie pulled back and stared at Gabi and chuckled. "That's fair. You all should be." Gabi laughed as her sister winked. Her smile softened. "Lucas isn't scared of me. He didn't give away anything. When I heard him with Max, I got the impression he needed someone to chat with. That's the only reason he said anything."

"He's a good guy. I don't know what I would have done over the last couple of months without him."

"What will you do about him now?"

Gabi shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'm falling in love with him. But I've hurt him. I need to work on things and decide my future, and I can't do that with other people's voices in my head. I might travel as soon as the wedding reception is over next week, or I might get a job here, or I don't know. But I don't want to stop his future, whether that's moving to a club where he'll be rightly adored or staying here.

He needs to make decisions for him and not because he feels he owes me or needs to save me."

"Go travelling? I'll get heart palpitations every day you're gone, especially if you travel alone, but I'll support you in whatever way you need. I have money, and if you get stuck in a foreign jail, I'll get you out. I know people."

"I've missed your random sense of humour." Gabi giggled.

"Who said I'm joking?" Evie grinned.

"Do you want me to warn Josh you might be neurotic while I'm gone?"

"Yes. That's why you're the wise sister and I'm the troublesome one."

Gabi grabbed her hand. "I'm a little troublesome these days, too. By the way, I'm volunteering at the charity Jack and Sophia work at next week. I'm nervous."

"They're lucky to have you. You're the most amazing person I know, and I know me."

Gabi laughed. Maybe she could cope with Evie's attitude if she got this version, too. They resumed their walk to the pub.

"I still owe Lucas," Gabi explained. "I have one more idea for making the fans love him, not that they deserve him. I'll need your help. Josh's, too. Do you want to hear the plan?"

"Of course. I want to know all your secrets from now on." Evie paused and turned. "Scrap that. Not all of them. Don't share the ways you've experimented in your new sex life."

"Deal," Gabi replied, "although did you know hot tubs are fantastic for foreplay?"

"Gabi," Evie warned loudly. "Don't forget I know all your ticklish areas. I'm sure that hasn't changed since we were kids."

"Noooooooo," Gabi shouted, running ahead as Evie chased her.

The sun beamed down on them as they ran all the way to the pub to set Gabi's plan in motion.

Chapter Fifty-Four

LUCAS

Lucas cradled his head as he sat on the locker room bench. Two days until the wedding, four offers from other clubs, and no Gabi.

A week wasn't a long time in the season usually, and yet it was a lifetime since he'd heard from her.

"How are you doing?" Max asked as he walked into the changing rooms.

Lucas sighed. "Two months ago, I was desperate to play in this match against the Giants, and now it barely registers except it will probably be my last match with the Bulls."

Max squeezed his shoulder. "Don't make any decisions until after today's match." Lucas side-eyed him. "Have you checked your socials recently?"

"No. Why? Who's insulted me now?"

Shouts sounded from the corridor. Evie ran into the changing rooms with Lexi at her feet. "Lucas, I've got something to tell you," she panted.

"Don't believe her," Lexi shouted.

"What's happening?" Charlie bellowed. His body filled the doorway to the changing rooms. "This is my haven, my place of tranquillity before a game. I'm getting married in two days, and I refuse to be anything other than calm as fuck." He scowled at Lexi.

"I told you that you weren't welcome here. And why are you here before the game, Evie? Josh isn't here."

"Lucas needs to hear this," Evie explained.

"Hear what?" Lucas replied with a furrowed brow.

Evie cleared her throat. "Over the last week, Gabi made it her mission to make you stay—"

"Gabi wants me to stay?"

Evie nodded. "Not the point. Not yet. She did a deep-dive of the people who have been trolling your social media posts over the last fortnight. She didn't go back further, as the tide has turned with some fans."

"I didn't know Gabi worked for MI5," Charlie grumbled.

Evie guffawed. "MI5 agents have nothing on women in their twenties when it comes to finding information about men online. Trust me." She pointed at the other players who ambled into the changing rooms. "Gabi met with some of those fans. She took Aidan or Josh with her. She also brought me and Sophia if they seemed particularly difficult. No one messes with my people."

Lucas cocked his eyebrow.

"I don't mean Gabi. I mean you." Evie gestured towards Lucas. "You're my people now. And no one messes with you. Which brings me to Lexi."

Lexi started to back out of the changing rooms as Josh walked in and stared at the group. With his massive body, he blocked Lexi's escape.

"Gabi noticed twenty of these accounts were new within the last six months and didn't have much profile information. They only commented on your posts and used the same phrases even though they were different people. They only followed each other and you, although they'd started following Gabi in the last six weeks."

"What are you saying, Evie?"

"Some of the trolls were genuine 'fans,' and Gabi gave them plenty of evidence about how incredible you were. It helped that my sister wasn't leaving until they listened and that old players and new shouted your praises." She beamed at Josh, who blushed. "But Gabi realised after a lot of internet stalking that Lexi was posting some of the nastiest comments via those twenty accounts, including comments insulting my sister." Evie pointed at Lexi. "Tell him, or I'll report you to the police and make your life a fucking nightmare."

Josh shuddered. "You don't mess with Evie."

"Lexi?" Lucas asked.

Evie tapped her foot and stared at Lexi, who cleared her throat. "Fine. It was me. I wanted you back with the Giants. I missed your attention and adoration. You're meant to be mine."

Lucas shook his head. "Can you give us a minute, everyone?"

Coach pushed everyone out. Lucas tapped Evie on the shoulder when she reached the door. "Why didn't Gabi tell me this herself? Is she coming to the game today?"

"She couldn't bear to look at Lexi after everything she'd done. She's also organising minibuses and things." Lucas's head hurt from the furrowing. "You'll see. Trust in her. Something will be waiting for you at half time."

Evie hugged him so tight he was glad he was bruise-free. How were the Draper sisters so strong? "I'm sorry for how I treated you. You've been everything my sister needed, though she didn't know it until you came into her life."

"She's perfect. She never needed me. I'm lucky she took me along for the journey."

"You were the journey."

Lucas wiped his hand down his face and turned to a pouting Lexi. "Nothing you say will fix this."

"You loved me once. I reckon you still do."

Lucas squeezed the bridge of his nose. "You were my girlfriend and the person I aspired to be good enough for, but over recent months, I've realised you weren't good enough for me. We don't have a friendship. I'm not your confidant or the person you can use to make your husband jealous. You've tried to ruin everything good in my life."

"Because you need me."

"Because *you* need attention to feel special." Lucas huffed. "If you're not happy with Claude, then leave him and be single. Meet people, use your skills to help others, or find what makes you happy. But I can't say this in any other way: stay out of my life."

"But—"

"No, Lexi. You need to live your life and let me live mine. I love Gabi, and whatever happens next won't change that. You tried to destroy everything about me that I love because you can't love yourself. No more." He stood to the side so she could leave. "And if

you hurt me or mine again, I'll set Evie and Gabi on you. Get out and never contact me again."

"I hope you lose today."

"I hope you sort your life out and stop hurting people."

As she stormed out, he collapsed onto the bench. Gabi had helped him love himself, and he'd hopefully done a little of the same for her. Evie was right. They'd journeyed together. He and Gabi fought like superheroes on the same side.

Bonded by fear.

He chuckled.

But where was she, and why hadn't she contacted him?

His teammates trooped back into the changing rooms. "Right, lads. Thirty minutes until the last game of the season. Let's crush those Giants," Charlie bellowed.

The team cheered as one, but Lucas's was half-hearted.

This would be his last game with the Bulls.

Chapter Fifty-Five

LUCAS

Lucas dragged his feet as his teammates ran onto the pitch. He gave a longing look as Josh, Max, Banjo, Gavin, and the rest of the team bounced to the roar of the crowd.

Max flipped his hand with a “join us” gesture.

Lucas shrugged and ran onto the pitch for the brief warm-up.

The volume of the crowd rose like thunder.

Lucas turned 360 degrees to check there wasn’t a fight. He glanced at the stack, the section where the noisiest local fans grouped, preparing for jeers and insults.

Sandra and her husband George were front and centre. Sandra waved a banner that said, *We’re so lucky. Come on, Lucky Lucas. You’re our star.*

He scanned the other stands, and familiar faces beamed back at him. But it couldn’t be true.

“Oi,” Coach shouted, although as Lucas met his gaze, he caught him smiling. “You’re meant to be warming up.”

Lucas held up his hand in apology and stretched between catching the balls his teammates threw to him.

Within minutes, the game started. Lucas ran the pitch like it was his last hurrah.

Josh tossed him the ball, and he jumped in the air. The crowd screamed “Lucky Lucas” so loud he nearly fumbled it. He pulled it to his chest and ran for the try line. The temptation to look into the

crowd to understand what was happening was like weights on his ankles as he ran, but he bolted down that pitch like the enemy was snapping at his heels.

He slammed the ball across the line, and his team barrelled into him.

The crowd sang a classic Britney Spears song.

"That's a new chant," he said as Max pulled him off the ground.

"Listen to the words."

They'd replaced the line about being so lucky from Britney's song "Lucky" with "We're" and added, "He's our star".

It echoed across the whole stadium. "Is that about me?"

Josh laughed and smacked him on the back. "Of course it is."

"Have I entered a parallel universe or something? What happened?"

"Gabi," Max said, smiling before running away to kick for the conversion.

Lucas sprinted to where Evie usually sat with Gabi, but Amy and Henry were there, grinning.

Once the ball sailed over the goalposts, he shouted, "Amy? It's your first game. Why are you here?"

"Gabi knew it would be safe and that you deserved a crowd," Henry answered for her. "Gabi arranged for Amy's school friends to come. They're dotted around the place. Many of your fans here today have wanted to get to a game."

"I made this poster!" Amy held up a piece of card that read, *Lucky Lucas is my Uncle Lucky.* "Gabi helped me."

A lump filled his throat, and he couldn't swallow it down.

"Get a try for me, Uncle Lucky."

"Anything for you, Amy Boo."

He ran to position, his gaze sweeping left and right. People he loved waved at him: his neighbour, Ruby Cloud and her family from the cookery school, Kalia and her family, and Jenks and his brood. Even the crew from the farm, instructors from the climbing centre, and Jools from paddleboarding were there.

But no matter how hard he searched, he couldn't find Gabi.

She'd be watching him, though. She had to be.

Maybe she was what would be waiting for him at halftime.

The game restarted with the chant praising him, and Lucas gave it everything.

* * *

As Lucas ran off the pitch for halftime, his stomach churned, and he couldn't decide if he was about to throw up or freeze.

Charlie collared him before he entered the changing rooms.

"You're doing well. I couldn't be more proud of you," Charlie said, grabbing Lucas by the back of the neck and pulling him forward so they were forehead to forehead. Lucas had watched Charlie do that to other players for the last two years, but he'd never felt the pride that came with a Charlie forehead press for himself. "A year ago, I pulled you off the pitch because of your attitude and abysmal playing. I haven't always given you a chance, and that's on me. You reminded me too much of myself at your age."

"Were you a dick, Coach?"

"The biggest. But you've shown Claude, the fans, and all your detractors how incredible you are. Thirty-nil. I'll laugh in that bastard's face if you carry on like this." Lucas beamed. "And thank you for what you did with Gabi. I couldn't want for a better friend and player."

Lucas choked back a tear.

Charlie eyeballed him. "Come for the team chat. But you don't need to listen. You've got something to read."

Charlie directed him to a bench, and Josh slammed a newspaper against his chest.

"I don't understand."

"Page sixteen," Josh said.

Lucas quickly leafed through the paper.

"It's all over the internet, too," Max whispered.

"Everyone else, eyes on me," Coach said.

Lucas gulped at the headline on page sixteen in bold black letters.

"This can't be real," he whispered.

He mumbled the headline, although it was nearly impossible to read. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

*"Lucas Knight Changed My Life, and He's Probably Changed Yours,"
by Gabi Draper.*

Time was ticking, and he'd probably read it a hundred more times later, but with a deep breath, he dived in.

I'm Gabi. You may have seen me in social media posts with Lucas Knight, where we visited the many activities in this fantastic town. You may have seen me in this paper after a disastrous first date or on gossip sites. If you have, you've probably formed an opinion on my life or my choices, but you don't know me.

I was born with a syndrome that you probably haven't heard of. MRKH is a rare disorder that affects approximately 1 in 4,500 people assigned female at birth. It impacts women in lots of physical ways, some more than others. For me, it means I was born without a womb and without a vagina, which I created through a physical therapy called dilation. I've never had a period. Some would call that lucky, but others might realise, like I have, that it means I'll never be able to conceive a child.

He leaned his head back. She'd shared her syndrome. This would help loads of people. She'd harnessed her power.

"My beautiful fucking warrior," he whispered.

There's a reason you probably haven't heard about it. Many of us with this syndrome don't talk about it. It can be because the anatomy is too much for people who don't even want to discuss periods, but it can feel humiliating to talk about infertility or a body that isn't like other women's. I was ashamed of how my body had failed me. My former colleague bullied me after she found out. She laughed at my pain and at what made me different. To her and those like her, I say you're lucky life hasn't hurt you or your body hasn't failed like I felt mine had. To all of you, be kind, educate yourself, and remember, many people struggle with the things they keep hidden. Treat others with dignity, because you never know what they're dealing with.

But as the title says, Lucas Knight changed my life. I shared my secret syndrome with him, and he helped me. You don't need to know how, but Lucas is an exceptional man who gave me a future I'd told myself I didn't deserve. He gave me hope, and no matter what happens, I'll never be able to repay him. Lucas is incredible. Even his niece calls him Uncle Lucky. But anyone who's spent more than five minutes with Lucas will know we're the lucky ones.

Tears streamed down his face, hitting the paper with big drops.

Lucas Knight loves this town more than you can imagine. When you're wasting your time insulting him, moaning about his attitude, or taking an interview he's done out of context and using it as another reason you don't like him, he's helping the people of this town. You didn't know that? I'm not surprised. Lucas hides his altruism. He doesn't do it for glory but because

he loves your town and its people. He helps families and local businesses. Your growing bowling alley, thriving cookery school, successful dress shop, your happier neighbours, and knowledgeable children are partly a result of this great man.

More than this, Lucas plays like it's his last game every week. He scores tries, sets your team up for battle, and helps them climb the league. And how do you respond to his commitment and hard work? You boo and jeer him.

It was hard to read the print as tears blurred his eyes.

His family loves him, his team loves him, even your great former player, whom you used to insult, Aidan, loves him. And although it means nothing to you, I love him.

"She loves me," Lucas sobbed. He was a fucking mess, but he didn't care, because Gabriella Draper loved him, and he loved her, too.

"Keep reading," Max said.

The entire team stared at him with grins plastered across their faces.

"Shush," Coach grumbled. "Let him read."

Lucas reread the last line before continuing.

"She loves me."

So, if we all love him, maybe it's time you consider why you don't. The things you think you know about him aren't true. Yes, he can be a cocky bastard, but so was Aidan, so is Josh at times, and don't get me started on Gavin.

Lucas chuckled.

"He got to the bit about me," Gavin announced proudly.

The next time you watch him play, cheer him like you deserve him, not that you do. When the game ends, ask for a photo of him, get his autograph, and tell him how well he played. Even with how you've treated him in the past, he'll listen and smile and sign everything you give him because he loves his team. And if you're really lucky, he'll battle again for you next season. All this year, although you've left him broken, he kept choosing you —your team and the town you love. The town he loves. It's time you got over your baseless attitudes and thanked him.

Lucas Knight changed all our lives, and maybe one day, you'll love him as much as I do.

Lucas dropped the newspaper before grabbing it again and holding it against his chest.

"Shit," he whispered. Goose pimples rose on his arms, and his mouth was painfully dry.

"She's amazing, isn't she?" Max said with a smile.

"She's my beautiful warrior princess."

"Eh?" Banjo said.

"One day, you'll fall in love, and you'll get it," Josh said, elbowing him.

"No one's done anything like this for me before. And she wrote about her syndrome." Pride swelled in his heart. He was glad she saw him as great, because it was the least she deserved in a boyfriend. She was his Wonder Woman.

He turned to Josh. "She's definitely at the game?" Josh nodded. "Then I need to do something when the match finishes, and I need all your help. Call Evie, Josh."

The team jumped up and down as Gavin said, "He's going to do a grand gesture."

"Let's do this," Max shouted with a fist pump.

Coach huffed. "Can we finish the game first? We can make Claude cry if we play as well as the first half."

As his team walked out of the changing room, he read the last words of the article again. Gabi loved him, and she'd done all of this for him. It was time to show her how much he loved her, too.

Chapter Fifty-Six

GABI

Gabi watched the last minutes of play with a swelling heart. The crowd were united in their adoration of Lucas. And he was his beautiful, arrogant self as he slammed a ball past the line, and the team bowled him over.

Seventy-two to nil.

If he had any haters left, they ate every insult they'd made and sunk under a tide of love for the great man.

She stared at the darkening sky as she pulled at the sleeves of her Bulls hoodie. She'd be up there on a plane flying somewhere new in three days.

She gave the sky a second look. A summer storm was forecasted. Tonight was the big awards ceremony. Her dress, the gift from Lucas, hung on the back of her bedroom door, a vision of hope that he still wanted her to accompany him.

"Are you okay?" Evie asked.

Gabi nodded.

"I'm really proud of you. You've packed so much in this week and been offered a job. You're a real-life superhero." Evie wrapped her arm around her as the crowd cheered Lucas in the dying minutes of the game.

"Supergirl." She chuckled, referencing the costume hidden under her hoodie for her grand gesture.

"Have you told Sophia's boss you're taking the job?"

Gabi shook her head as the team ran a lap of the pitch, waving at fans and thanking them. Gabi crouched. She wasn't ready for her big reveal yet. "Something is holding me back. The interview was easier than I expected and made me realise I was capable of the job, and I'd enjoy it. But..."

"You want to talk to Lucas first?"

"He might have accepted other offers this week, and if he wants me to go with him to a new club, I will, although he might not want me like that after the way I ignored him this week."

"Look at that man," Evie demanded.

Gabi beamed as Lucas danced around the pitch.

"He's searching for you. He loves you, Gabi."

"You don't know that."

"Trust me when I say I do."

Gabi eyed her suspiciously. "Where did you disappear to before the second half?"

"You'll find out."

The crowd chanted the Britney Spears line again. It was out of tune and painfully done, but as the camera projected Lucas onto the screen, his face full of wonder and a tear sliding down his cheek, Gabi's nose itched with emotion. After a lot of nudging, Lucas took a shy bow.

The crowd rushed to the barriers to get his autograph. Children bounced, and Sandra pushed men out of the way.

"Is it time?" Evie asked.

"I'll go when he's finished," she said. "I want him to enjoy his moment."

Drizzle began to fall, but the crowds continued jostling for Lucas. The fans finally saw Lucas for who he was. He had to stay in town now.

"Thank you for organising a minibus for us," Kalia, the dress shop owner, said from the row in front.

"It was my pleasure. I'm glad you got to watch Lucas play."

"He's amazing, isn't he?" Kalia's husband said.

"Exceptional," Gabi breathed.

Kalia hugged her. "And thank you for your piece in the paper. One of my foster children is struggling with something similar. She's carried her struggles like a burden. Since reading your piece, she's asked if she can attend therapy."

Tears brimmed Gabi's eyes. As the family waved goodbye, a familiar voice hissed behind her.

"Look who it is," Pam snapped. "I can't believe you shared that private stuff in the paper. I'm embarrassed for you."

Gabi glared.

"You've got this," Evie whispered in her ear and grabbed her hand.

"Who hurt you, Pam?" Gabi asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, someone must have hurt you to make you such a spiteful bitch."

She held up her hand. "Hold on—"

"No, you hold on. For a year I've done your work while you've insulted mine and my life, and I'm not taking it anymore. Yes, I have a syndrome, but so the hell what? I was born with this, and yet you must have worked hard to be such a nasty cow," Gabi snapped. "I'm not ashamed of who I am and what I've dealt with. And it's given me something you'll never have."

Pam tilted her head and shoved a hand on her hip. "And what's that?"

"Resilience. Based on your attitude and the things you've said, you've led a charmed life. When your life gets shit, because it will at some point, you won't cope, and you'll have no one to help you because you've treated everyone like crap. Our students are more mature than you. They're funny and kind, and yes, they have issues with each other, but it was our job to nurture them, not talk about them like they're problems."

"That's my sister," Evie said.

Gabi squeezed her hand. "The next time you bad-mouth a student, remember they're learning how to be in the world. In fact, maybe you shouldn't be in teaching, because if you rubbed off on them, the world would be full of nasty people bereft of compassion. I wasn't going to my union about you, but you've learned nothing. I'm coming for you and your auntie."

Pam's eyes narrowed. "Whatever."

As she walked away, Evie hugged her. "Are you okay? I could let her tyres down or—"

"Miss Draper." Amy appeared, cutting off Evie's threats.

"You can call me Gabi now."

"I'm sorry you left the school, Gabi."

"She didn't leave. They fired her," Evie said to Amy.

"Evie," Gabi warned.

"It's true," Henry said. "Gabi wasn't fired because she did something wrong, though. She was set up."

"Were you just talking to Miss Fester? Did she set you up?" Amy asked.

Before Gabi jumped in, Henry said, "Yes, and the head. They were unfair to Gabi because of her syndrome."

Gabi listened as Henry gave some of the information from her article, albeit in a language suitable for Amy. Instead of hiding herself and feeling the familiar bubble of shame, her chest opened up. Her syndrome was never her secret shame. It was part of her.

"I'll sort this," Amy announced.

"I've got plans, too. We'll talk, kid," Evie replied.

"I'm not sure that's wise," Gabi replied as Evie and Amy gave each other conspiratorial grins.

"I'll make sure it's all above board. You're one of us now, Gabi." Henry's words warmed her heart.

As the drizzle turned to rain, crowds slowly dispersed.

"I'll see you another time, okay? We're going to get out of the rain. But come for dinner sometime," Henry said as Amy hugged her.

She waved her goodbyes.

Gabi looked up again, but Lucas had gone.

The rest of the Bulls milled around on the pitch. The rain was quickly turning into a summer storm. Heavy drops hit Gabi's eyelashes.

"Where is Lucas?"

"I'll take you to him," Evie said. She waved at Josh.

"Has something happened? Is Lucas okay?" Her breath carried through the growing mist.

Somewhere in the distance, lightning crackled in the sky.

"Yes, he's fine. It's just...I need to blindfold you."

"What?" Gabi shouted, stepping back.

Thunder rumbled.

"It will all make sense in about a minute."

Gabi massaged her temples. "I don't understand."

"I don't fully understand either, but this is what he wanted."

Gabi huffed as Evie covered her eyes with a blindfold.

"I still don't know why you're wearing a Supergirl costume, but I've come to realise there's very little I understand about you and your fake boyfriend, who, it turns out, isn't a fake boyfriend."

"So this *is* about Lucas?"

The rain hit her cheeks. Her hoodie would be soaked through within minutes, and that meant her costume would get wet, too. She'd wanted to make a grand gesture when she told Lucas face-to-face she loved him.

Evie pulled her. With the blindfold over her eyes, she couldn't decipher their direction. The scent of hotdogs made her stomach rumble. She was so busy getting Lucas's friends to the game that she hadn't eaten.

The ground softened. "Am I on the pitch?"

She glimpsed green grass through the tiny gap where the blindfold met her cheeks.

Metal scraped metal, and Gabi stepped back.

Men's voices argued, and Lucas hissed, "Be careful."

"It's raining. I'm being as careful as I can," Josh explained.

"This was more fun in theory," Gavin grumbled.

"When you're done pissing about," Evie replied, "some of us are getting drenched."

"I think you're ready," Max said.

"Josh, hold still," Lucas grunted. "Evie, remove Gabi's blindfold."

Evie whipped the blindfold off to reveal an upside-down Lucas in a Spider-Man costume. He hung from the horizontal goal post bar by his knees as Josh, Gavin, Banjo, and Max held him in place from the top of makeshift steps.

She squealed as he said, "You told me once I should fight for you and give you the Spider-Man kiss."

Although the mask muffled his voice, she understood every word. "But you're scared of heights."

"I know. But it was worth it for you."

"And you organised the rain, too."

Gavin grumbled, "Fucking rain."

"Evie found me the costume, and the mascot helped with the steps so the team could keep me in place." The man in the bull costume waved. "We made up."

"Do the kiss before we get old," Charlie grunted, leading her up makeshift steps to Lucas.

"Fuck, sorry."

"No swearing when I'm like this, princess. You know what that does to me."

Gabi giggled as Evie huffed, "Everyone look away."

"Wait, my costume!"

Gabi yanked off her hoodie, to the surprise of the group.

"There really is someone for everyone, eh?" Charlie said, elbowing Banjo. "Maybe someone will love your dickhead ass one day."

"You dressed as Supergirl for me?" Lucas exclaimed.

Gabi shuffled on her feet. "I was torn between her and Wonder Woman. Did I do good?"

"You did perfect. Now kiss me."

Gabi peeled Lucas's mask to reveal his lips. Even the bodies holding him in place couldn't distract her. Raindrops hit her cheeks as she bent forward. She pressed her lips to his as she held him against her.

"My warrior," he murmured.

His tongue massaged hers. He tasted of rain and sweat, but nothing deterred her as she sucked on his upper lip.

"We can't hold you all night," Josh moaned.

"Josh, my sister is getting gross with the man she loves. Can you let them have their weird superhero moment?"

Gabi laughed against Lucas.

"Help me off, lads. My vision is blurry. It wasn't quite the same as in the movies."

"It was perfect," Gabi replied, beaming.

When they had him down, everyone but Lucas and Gabi sloped off the pitch. The team carried the steps down the tunnel.

"See you at the ceremony," Max said, patting Lucas on the back.

"I'm proud of you, Gabi." Evie hugged her. "See you tonight."

Chapter Fifty-Seven

LUCAS

Lucas stared at Gabi. He'd removed the mask, but the soaking costume clung to him. As Gabi eye-fucked his body, he smiled. "What a week."

"What a two months," Gabi replied, meeting his gaze.
The rain slowed to a drizzle again.

His pulse was rapid, thrumming in his chest. He cleared his throat and held out his hands to the woman he'd fallen in love with. She took them gleefully.

"Your article was incredible. The way you talked about your syndrome, even though it must have scared you, was everything. I cried when I read what you said about me. I'm not sure I deserved all your praise..."

"You do, Lucas. And more. The paper cut some stuff. Apparently, I went on too much, but I can show you the original version sometime." She dragged her top lip between her teeth.

He took a deep breath. Her tropical fragrance added to his spiralling emotions.

"My feelings haven't changed since I told you I wanted to be your boyfriend. I've been attracted to you since we met in that lift. The more I learnt about you, the more I wanted to be more than a fake boyfriend to you until I was smitten. I fell in love with your spirit, your unrelenting determination, and your secret sassy attitude. I'm still all yours," he repeated.

"And I'm yours." Gabi smiled, and he pulled her against his chest. "Over the last two months, you've challenged me every step."

"Bonded by fear."

"Bonded by fear," she confirmed, "and sex and experience and everything else the world threw at us, both before we met and over the last two months."

"I fucking love you, Gabs." He pressed her palm against his lips.

"I love you, too." She pushed her fringe from her eyes. It would always be a tic, but that was okay, because it helped him read her. "I'm sorry for not trusting that you hadn't shared my secret. I should have said it was okay for you to chat to Max or someone else about me. I didn't think about your needs because I was too busy being ashamed."

"It's okay."

"I've learnt from the experience, and you should talk to someone."

"Maybe a therapist?"

"Good idea." She took a breath, and he willed himself not to panic. "Are you moving clubs? Wherever you go, I'll be in the stands, wearing your name on my back and ready to use my nunchucks on anyone who insults you."

"It's more covert if you don't use them on people while wearing my shirt." He walked her to the seats where she had sat with Evie two months earlier and he'd winked at her. Their knees touched as he stared into her bright green eyes. "But I'm staying here, so I expect you in these seats at every game."

"Unless I have to work."

His head tilted. "On a Saturday?"

"Sometimes, at the Jameson Foundation, where I'll be starting in September, I might have to work Saturdays."

He hugged her and kissed her hair. "You're working for the foundation? You're going to change lives like you changed mine."

"You helped me see what I was capable of."

He swiped her compliment away with his hand, but his broad smile didn't go as quickly. "You brought me back from a closed heart with your light, beauty, and love. Yes, it's cheesy, but you did that to me, too. You helped me realise I'm enough."

"You're more than enough. You're everything. You're perfect."

He kissed her hard on the mouth, but she pulled back.

"But before I start the job," she said tentatively, "I'm going travelling."

He gripped her hands tighter. "For real?"

She nodded. "As soon as the wedding reception ends, I'm flying to Europe for three months. I'm not returning until September."

Lucas forced a smile. His warrior embraced everything that scared her. "I'll message and call you every day."

Gabi scraped her teeth across her bitten lips. She dropped her head, took a breath, and met his gaze. "Do you want to join me?" She pulled at the material of his skintight costume.

"You want me with you? Hell yes. I have no plans in the off-season. If you asked, I'd run over hot coals with a truck tied to my waist. I love you so fucking much."

"I expect to have sex in every country we visit."

"That's a given. At least three times."

"And do the fifth date I never got to do."

He tilted his head. "Not more paddleboarding or climbing?"

"Better than that. Skydiving in Spain."

"Whoa, I'm not sure—"

"Hot coals and truck, remember?" she said. "Stick with me, Lucas. I'll get you doing things you never imagined."

He laughed until she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him to her lips.

"I'm going to do the same for you, my beautiful warrior princess," he growled between sweeping kisses. "You're stunning, a fiend and—"

"Shut up and kiss me properly," she replied. "And then fuck me somewhere in this stadium."

Lucas kissed her hard as he imagined precisely where he'd ruin her Supergirl costume.

Epilogue

GABI (THREE MONTHS LATER)

As they climbed out of the taxi, Lucas whispered in Gabi's ear, "When I get you back to my house, I'm giving you everything I promised." His breath tickled her skin and brought heat between her thighs.

Gabi pushed him away as the driver pulled their rucksacks from the boot. "A cuddle under the duvet as you eat a 'proper English crisp sandwich'?" she teased.

"I've loved travelling Europe with you, but there's something to be said for snuggling under a duvet as the rain falls with the woman of your dreams," he whispered against her hair. She sighed against his chest as he got his phone out to pay the driver.

"It's on the house. Welcome home, Lucky Lucas," the taxi driver replied. "I can't wait to see you play this season. You're my mum's hero. She still talks about the piggyback you gave her."

"You're Sandra's son? How is she?"

"She's better than ever, and she's dragging us all to the opening game in a couple of weeks, so you'd better be at your best," the guy said.

Lucas saluted him. "Lucky Lucas reporting for duty and home in time for training tomorrow. I look forward to seeing you all at the game."

The driver saluted as he eased into the taxi and away from Aidan and Sophia's gallery.

"Can you remind me again why we're here rather than at home, christening our return with more than a crisp sandwich?" Lucas winked. "I want my last night together with you before we return to some kind of normal."

The gallery was shrouded in darkness.

"Are you sure it's open?"

"It should be. Sophia asked me to pick up my ID badge before my first day at the charity tomorrow, and then she'll give us and our rucksacks a lift home with some shopping."

He moved her so her back was against the gallery door and leaned closer, bracketing her. Lucas swept his thumb across her lip. She moaned as he kissed her hard on the mouth. He smelt of suntan lotion and tasted of the German beer they'd consumed on the last stop of their European tour.

"I can't wait," he murmured as his hand slid beneath her denim shorts. Her back bowed as his fingertips pushed her bikini bottoms to the side, and he brushed her clit. "Promise me you'll always keep this string bikini on under your clothes."

Suddenly, the door opened. Lucas sucked his fingers and gave her his trademark wink. Gabi shivered as they crept into the dark room, ditching their bags inside the door. "Are you sure she said to meet here? There's no one around."

"We should make the most of the space," Gabi replied, her laugh echoing in the darkness.

As Lucas fumbled with the light switch, a familiar giggle made him pause.

"Shush, Amy."

"Amy? Henry?"

Something flashed, bathing the space and the occupants in light.

"Surprise," a group of people shouted.

Amy ran and jumped on Lucas.

"Welcome home," Evie shouted before embracing Gabi in a massive hug. Soon, they were joined by Josh, Banjo, Max, Jack, and others from the rugby club.

Aidan and Sophia stood with Rose and Charlie, laughing at the side of the room.

"You tricked me," Gabi said, pointing at a grinning Sophia.

"Surely not. I'm too innocent." Sophia laughed

"Don't believe her. She set this up when we found out you'd be home tonight." Aidan shook his head and hugged her as she professed her innocence.

"How?"

"Gabi, you let slip who you were flying with in that call last week," Evie said.

"Lucas told me what time you were landing," Max explained, "and you were oblivious when I tried to get the day out of you."

"Not that oblivious. I was using my best acting skills," Lucas replied. "The same ones I used when I pretended I was a badass, when really, I'm just a sweet superhero."

Gabi rolled her eyes and giggled.

"Anyway," Josh continued, dragging out the word, "me and Max conferred with Sophia about what day you were due to start at the charity, and boom, we had a party."

"Thank you. It's amazing. We're very lucky to have such an awesome group of friends." Gabi beamed, and Lucas nodded.

"I'm sad you're not coming back to school, though," Amy said as she jumped around.

"I was invited back by the governors, but I'm staying with the charity," Gabi explained. "The governors heard about everything after a situation on the playground. Did you have anything to do with that?"

Amy grinned in the devilish way that reminded Gabi of Lucas. "I staged a revolt and got all the students involved. We did a sit-in—well, a sit-out—on the playground. We refused to attend class until we spoke to the governors."

"Seriously?"

Amy nodded smugly. "I had help with the idea." She high-fived Evie and Henry. "I showed the governors your article, and after meetings that they wouldn't let me join, Miss Fester and the head didn't return to the school for this year."

"I bloody love you, Amy," Lucas said, scooping and carrying her on his shoulders. "You're going to change the world."

"Just like my Uncle Lucky and Gabi have. Maybe you'll be Auntie Lucky one day."

Gabi grinned. She hoped so, too.

"They've got mozzarella dippers at the back of the table. Let me down. I want one."

Lucas lowered Amy to the ground, and she ran to the buffet.

"You'll have to come for dinner soon and tell us everything," Henry said, chasing Amy.

Tasha, Evie's new boss, and Gavin joined them. "I'm excited to welcome you to the team tomorrow."

"I still can't believe you two are together," Josh grumbled as a boisterous Evie pushed into the group.

"They're perfect for each other. I'm gutted we didn't set them up," Evie commented.

"Come on, my cuddle muffin. We've got a buffet to attack, and then I'm jumping on you," Tasha said to Gavin before turning to Gabi. "See you tomorrow."

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," Gabi said. "My life is unrecognisable from the one I left behind eighteen months ago when I moved to town."

Evie gripped her hand. "Are you okay with that?"

"Yes. Before, I wasn't living at all, but now, every day is an adventure. Thank you for being my big sister."

"I've missed you," Evie replied. "Promise me you're not going away anytime soon. The days aren't the same without you. You too, Lucas. The lads aren't as fun without you."

"Nothing is fun without Lucas."

He gave a sheepish smile. It gave Gabi the glow she always felt around him.

"Josh and I finally set a date for the wedding, too."

"Yes!" Gabi danced giddily, looking at Evie and Josh. "For when?"

"Next June. You need to help me plan it."

"We have news, too," Charlie announced as he joined the group. He held Rose tightly. "The most important thing first. We weren't sure when to do this, but our closest friends and family are here..."

Max wore a wary gaze, his arm draped over his fiancé.

Rose took Josh's hand. "You're going to have a little half-brother or sister. You too, Max."

Max clapped his hand over his mouth.

Josh dropped a cocktail sausage that proceeded to roll across the gallery floor. Gavin dived for it before side-eying Tasha, who slapped it out of his hand without looking at him.

"And this is my last year with the team," Coach announced. Everyone gasped.

"But you're only in your early fifties," Banjo said.

"I'm forty-five, you cheeky bastard. I'm not retiring. I'm moving clubs." Coach glared at Banjo. "I've done all I can here. I'm proud of everything my Bulls boys have achieved, but I'm ready for a new challenge. Most of you are settled and happy here, but if anyone wants to come with me to the Wild Boars, you've nine months to decide."

Conversation about the baby and Coach's move filled the room.

Sophia crept up to Gabi and Lucas. "If I were you, I'd sneak off while everyone's busy."

"Didn't you organise this party?" Gabi whispered.

"I thought if you said hello to everyone at once, it would stop them coming to your door. Get home so you two can enjoy your last night together. Your bags and food shopping are in Aidan's car, and he can take you now or later. Whatever you prefer." Aidan edged towards the door. "You'll be back to normal tomorrow, but make the most of your last night together. I'll keep Max and Jack here so you have the house to yourselves."

"You think of everything," Lucas said with a smile. He kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you."

"I know the struggle of a shared house. I'll see you tomorrow, Gabi. I can't wait to work with you."

Gabi hugged her. Lucas took Gabi's hand, and they sneaked to the door.

They gave their friends and family one last look.

Gabi whispered, "If I'd dreamed my future while sitting in the hospital waiting room, I wouldn't have imagined this. This is more than my hopes could've conceived."

"I feel the same when I look at you. You've given me more than I could have wished for. I love you, Gabriella Draper."

"I love you, too, Lucky Lucas. Who knew falling over in a lift and showing you my Wonder Woman knickers would end like this?"

"End? This is the beginning. Let's get home. If you're a good girl, I'll get you back in the hot tub and make you scream, but you have to parade the new Batgirl knickers I bought you at the airport first."

"Only if you promise to do a catwalk in the Superman pants I bought for you."

"I'm too much of a badass to be Superman." He lowered his voice. "I'm Batman."

"If I win, you have to wear them," Gabi replied.

"Win?"

"First one to car," Gabi shouted and starting running.

Lucas grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder.

"That's my girl."

There is More

I hope you enjoyed the third and final novel in The Bulls Rugby series. There will be more rugby romances in a new series starting in 2027. And don't worry that you'll never learn what happens to Henry and Amy, because they will feature in my Cloud Family Series in the future.

Sign up for my newsletter to get updates on future book releases and access to giveaways and exclusive bonus content, including a bonus scene between Gabi and Lucas, free to everyone who signs up.

You can sign up [here](#).

Or via my [website](#).

In the meantime, keep reading for the Fake a Chance on Me playlist and information about my previous books. There are also hints about my 2026 books. Here's a peek of Start Your Engines, a brother's best friend F1 romance and the first book in my Coulter Racing Team series.

If you like spicy romance with bad boy undercover cinnamon roll book boyfriends who are full of banter and who fall first, you must meet Connor.

Start Your Engines

CHAPTER ONE - SENNA

"I am a strong, confident woman. I am qualified. I am knowledgeable. I am enough," I mouth to the mirror for the umpteenth time.

Under the fluorescent lights in the office toilets, I resemble a panda waking up from a year-long bender. The bags under my brown eyes are no match for the foundation I attempt to reapply with fumbling fingers as my dad's voice plays through my phone's speaker.

"You can do this, Senna. You're not my first choice to run my team," he grits, "but your brother ditched us to find himself."

"Find himself" is said with a bitterness that's an increasingly large part of my dad's personality.

It's not my fault the great Jim Coulter retired from managing the Coulter Racing team. A heart attack brought on by bad choices and overwork was the final straw. I sink my teeth into my tongue. The last time I mumbled the words, he wouldn't speak to me for a day.

Dad barrels on like he's browbeating one of his engineers instead of his only daughter. "You will lead the team acceptably until he returns. Don't forget you were named after Ayrton Senna."

As if I could forget. I tap the tiles, sighing inwardly. "Sorry you didn't get two sons, Dad."

"Senna," he cautions.

I swipe mango lip balm over my lips. "Dad, Niki needed to work out who he is and what he wants because of his accident. An accident that nearly killed him, remember?" I reply, managing my tone.

"I am well aware. He was going to send my team into the stratosphere this season."

My heart races faster than a car on soft tyres. We've had this argument several times over the last week. Niki should be standing here, ready to speak to the board and drivers in preparation for the new season. He wouldn't be staring into the bathroom mirror, limbs trembling, while Dad lectures him.

"And before you ask," I add, trying to redirect the conversation, "I don't know where he is. He's not checked in since he told me I'm

the new boss of Coulter Racing as he left the country several days ago."

"He knew that crashing is a part of racing. He should've manned up and taken on the team. Now it's up to you," Dad grumbles.

I rub the scar on my hand from when my car slammed into a wall in a British Formula Three race when I was a teenager. The silver thread warns me never to race again, and that if I'm to achieve, I have to do it alone. Trusting the wrong person nearly ended my life that day.

The bathroom entrance bangs open, and my best friend Jackie's, aka Jacs, boots smack against the tiled floor. Her mechanic's uniform hangs open. A glare clouds her freckly face and makes her red eyebrows dive together as if they're squaring up to each other.

"Dad, I've got to go. I'll update you."

"That's right, Jumps. Get in there and ensure we win the Constructor's Championship this year. It's all on *you*." His finger is probably pointing at the mobile while my mum is telling him to calm down. "It was a travesty when we lost it by one point twenty years ago."

"Bye, Dad." I sigh. It's all I can do to keep from asking him for the umpteenth time not to use the nickname he gave me when I started karting and I'd accidentally jump the lights at the start.

He doesn't need to remind me of the story he's repeated every season since I was five, either. He hangs up as I'm visited by the haunting image of tears rolling down his cheeks as he told me how he'd be the greatest F1 boss one day.

I hold a fist to my lips as Jacs taps her foot against the floor. She strides to me, grips my shoulders, and forces me to confront my face in the mirror. "Who is this?"

I try to shrug her off, but she's got the grip of a racing driver competing for first place. "What do you mean?"

"Who is this?" Her Scottish accent makes her words punchier. Her green eyes pierce mine in the glass.

"A woman who could do with a makeover, especially a new haircut and a change in style, but doesn't have the time because she's too busy failing at everything she does."

My average body with hints of curves gives away my passion for running and secret love of doughnuts. My blond hair falls limply to the middle of my back, and my lips are too thin, although I won't get

fillers. With my luck, they'd go wrong, and I'd be called Ducky for the rest of my life instead of Crash. Another nickname that's more about my failures than my achievements.

"For fuck's sake, Senna." Her grunt echoes off the marble sinks. "This is the new boss of Coulter Racing. This is a woman who—"

One of the administrative assistants from the marketing and communications department bustles into the toilets, causing Jacs to roar. The assistant squeals as she turns and runs back out.

"Jacs, don't shout at my team."

Jacs strides over to the bathroom door and locks it. "She's not your team, because you're not the marketing and communications department director anymore. You're the boss of the entire company." Technically, that makes her still part of my team, but there's no point arguing. There's a reason why Jacs hit the glass ceiling of the mechanics team and kept going. "And why are you in these toilets and not in the ones attached to the big boss's office? You have a private bathroom now."

"But—"

"But nothing," she replies. She walks back to me at the mirror and makes me face it again. Her five-foot height means I tower above her at five six, but her power obliterates mine in that second. This time, she says in a softer voice. "You are Senna Coulter. Who knows more about cars than any other person in this place, aside from me?"

"Me," I mumble.

"Who knows more about this team than anyone in this building?"

"Me," I say a little louder.

"Who worked every hour that existed while all the men wagged their little dicks, pretending they knew what they were doing but never coming close to your skill or achievements?"

"Me." I smile at our reflections.

"And who is a businesswoman, driver, mechanic, and ball buster who can bring greatness to this team? Something her brother recognised years ago yet her dad is too foolish to realise because, like so many men in this place, he's decided women don't compare? Shout it loud!"

"Me!"

"Yes, Coult. Exactly." The nickname those closest to me use gives me an instant lift. "And if not for the stupid racing driver who shall not be named—Connor fucking Dane—you'd be the greatest racing driver this world has ever seen and better than him, too."

Mentioning Connor Dane makes me snarl, which is precisely what she intended.

"It's going to be harder to avoid him now," I say. Connor was the guy who'd caused me to crash into a wall, effectively ending my racing career when I was a teenager. I've done a brilliant job of avoiding my brother's best friend for ten years. "What if I see him on the track? Did you hear the latest? Apparently, he was caught with his last trainer in his boss's car."

She pushes my worry away with a flip of her hand. "You're going to lead a record-breaking team—"

"We're floundering at the bottom," I cut in.

She glares back. "While he'll slum it at Vessa—"

"Who are the best in the championship—"

"I'm trying to big you up!"

"Fine. This is our season because, hopefully," I reply, whispering the last word and earning a glare from Jacs anyway, "our two drivers this season, Antoine and Dax, will change that, although neither care about the team. In some ways, I'm taking on a failure—"

"Senna," she barks.

"But this team means the world to me, so I won't compare our crappy performances to anyone else's for at least ten minutes," I say to her reflection. Her smirk makes me wrinkle my nose in amusement.

I pull back my shoulders, and wrestle my hair into a low bun.

"Take a breath, listen to your empowering song," Jacs says, finding Fleetwood Mac's "The Chain" on my phone. The song has a bridge that every old-school fan of racing loves. "Ignore that your dad is still the owner, and tell your directors and drivers you will rule this team and make it excellent."

I smile at her as the music plays. Adrenaline floods my limbs, and as the bridge hits, I bounce up and down and ready myself for a fight. I am the motherfucking boss now, and the team will listen.

"Thank you," I whisper, pulling her to me.

We step out of the toilets and stride through the corridors. Photos of Formula One racing greats adorn the walls, including Senna, who

I'm named after, and Niki Lauda, who my brother is named after. My steps falter slightly as the pressure builds in my chest.

Jacs's scent, a mixture of plum and rose, combines with the stench of oil that often lingers around her overalls. I breathe it in an attempt to centre myself. Trophies, including Niki's from the races he's won, glint in the cabinets outside the boardroom.

I stare at the last Constructor's Championship trophy we won. It's been a decade. I squeeze my eyes and sense the wrinkles sinking into the skin of my forehead.

"We won't get any of those this year," I mumble.

"Senna," Jacs says. "Don't forget you have trophies in there, too."

I open my eyes to see the couple of trophies from my years as an F3 driver. "I was good. I could have been the best if not for the accident."

"I didn't mean those trophies." She points to the shiniest award in the cabinet. "I meant the one I sneaked in after your dad retired."

I stare at the Best Communications Sports Team award from last year's British Sports ceremony.

"Your hard work won that, and your determination will make you successful this year. With the guys in there," she says, nodding to the boardroom, "you need to be a bitch boss at all times, or they'll take everything. Don't show anxiety for a second. It's you against them. Now, shoulders back and sass on. You've got an audience."

I turn to find my new assistant, Jimmy, staring at me with raised eyebrows, tablet in hand.

"Morning, Jimmy," I say with a nod, giving Jacs's shoulder a quick squeeze of thanks before heading to the boardroom. "Are my board, Antoine, and Dax ready for me?"

Jimmy holds out a handful of notes, which I pocket.

"Everyone but Dax is there. Your brother left a message letting you know he'd changed something before he left. You have a new driver," he calls out as I walk into the boardroom.

The words register slowly as I scan the pinched-lip faces of the suited men staring back at me, several of whom are struggling to hide their belief that they're more qualified to run the team than me, a twenty-seven-year-old woman. Maybe some of them are still expecting Niki.

I bite the inside of my mouth as I search for the new driver Jimmy mentioned.

I glance at Antoine, who is frowning at the man to his side. My so-called new driver, the man my brother has replaced Dax with without consulting me, looks up from his phone. Our branded clothing covers his lean body. His black hair, beautiful blue eyes, and full lips will probably give me an ulcer. As his eyes lock on mine, he drops his phone and glares.

Connor fucking Dane despises me.

Suddenly, all my plans go straight to hell.

Start Your Engines

CHAPTER TWO - CONNOR

Senna Coulter stares at me like I'm a piece of shit on the bottom of her shoe.

With her hands on her hips and the man I thought was Niki's assistant behind her, she looks every inch the big boss.

I cock my head to the side in a show of ambivalence, but my hands itch to call my best friend—former best friend as of this second—to find out what the hell he's done now.

The woman in front of me reminds me of the Senna I knew, the feisty driver who was once one of my closest friends.

The memory of the last thing she said to me weeks after she was released from the hospital slams into me, making my chest vibrate. *I hope one day you know what it's like to have your life ruined like you've ruined mine. I hate your guts. You're dead to me, Connor Dane.*

I can't forget the angry tears in seventeen-year-old Senna's eyes as I desperately tried to explain that the crash wasn't my fault. She has no idea what that crash was truly about, and I'll never reveal the truth.

A sour taste fills my mouth. I expected to bump into her as she is—was—the comms director, but this changes everything.

"Are you fucking telling me you're the boss now, Jumps?" I blurt.

Her eyes twitch. She used to hate the nickname because it highlighted her early failures. I grind my teeth. I've used it since I was eighteen in an attempt to remove my feelings for her and turn her into a faceless enemy.

She rubs the scar from where she smashed her hand because of me. Bile rises from my gut as I stare at the action. I could destroy the lives of everyone I know and still not hate myself as much as I do now.

"Yes. Niki is gone, and I'm in charge of Coulter Racing." She pulls her rosy lips into her mouth. Her perfect cheekbones catch my eye, and her eyes sparkle. She's fucking gorgeous, she always has been, and aside from a wedding I sneaked into last year, this is the closest I've been to her in years. *Get a grip.*

There's a grunt from Antoine. He despises the idea that a woman is his boss. I hate that guy.

The way her eyes pinch reminds me of how she took down the male drivers during our teenage races. There is a quiver in those eyes, though. I know that movement. I saw it when we were younger and she'd tried to act aggressively around the male drivers to prove she was as good as them. She's anxious as hell.

"I'm more than the boss," she says, looking at me and Antoine.

"Yeah?" I ask, standing.

"If you're on my team, I own you for the season."

The room remains silent as eyes dart back and forth between us.

I scowl at her, but she doesn't flinch.

I take a breath. "Hold—"

"Own you," she repeats before silencing my comeback with a hand.

She turns to the board members, who stare with their furrowed brows. "Everybody out. I want you back in here for a strategy meeting in thirty minutes." I move slowly to the door, but her eyes flash as she swivels back to me. "Not you. I'm not done with you. Sit."

I fold my arms, staring her down. She rolls her eyes.

As the board departs, I reposition myself nearer the wall. My nostrils flare as I square my shoulders, and I clench my teeth so hard my jaw hurts.

"You're the new driver Niki has saddled me with." Her shoulders are tight, and her left eye twitches.

I hold up my hands. "Saddled? I didn't sign up to be 'owned' by you, but don't forget that I'm one of the best drivers on the circuit." Or I was.

"And one of the biggest liabilities, when you're not seducing everything in sight."

The stench of vomit fills my nostrils, and I tighten my lips. She doesn't know exactly how much of a liability I am or why. Maybe this is a chance to get out of my contract. If I was in a better mental state, I'd consider this is fate telling me to recompense her for what I did to her.

"I'm not what you—"

She holds her hand up again and connects her phone to the conference room screen. I will bust a vein if she keeps doing that. I study her fingers as I count to ten. Several marks suggest she's not sitting in her office like a hands-off boss but continues working on

cars. The line of the scar has embedded itself in her skin. I fist my hands. If I could go back...

I shake my head. I can't go back.

Niki's face appears on the screen.

Senna gasps, "Your hair." But it's so quiet that he doesn't hear.

His head is completely shaved. The burns, still healing from his accident, make my *hello* freeze in my throat. It took mere seconds for the rescue crew to remove him from the car and extinguish the fire during his last race. I'm under no illusion that the damage could've been more than burns and broken ribs. The videos of him stretchered away haunt my Senna-free nightmares.

I close my eyes. This isn't the first time I've considered walking away from racing like he did. At twenty-eight, I'm not one of the young racers anymore. I could retire. Each time I get into my car, the adrenaline no longer fuels a desire to win. Instead, a desperation to stay alive controls my hands.

"What the hell, Niki?" Senna's grumble forces my eyes open.

I eyeball my best mate as he pops a cap on his head.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," I grunt.

The three of us haven't spoken like this since the day before Senna's accident when Niki was ill with the flu and told us he couldn't race. If he'd been there, Senna would have remained safe. I shake the memory away and sink my teeth into my lip again, desperate for pain.

Niki smiles. "Look at you two getting on. You're already agreeing about things."

I want to drag him through the screen and smack him, even though I love the guy.

"If you were here, I'd punch your beautiful face," Senna replies. She needs to stop speaking my thoughts. "Why is Dane the Dick here, and where's my other driver?"

"No 'how are you, bro'? 'Where are you?' I expected better of you, little sis," Niki says, although his smile falters. A plain white wall is behind him. His turquoise Coulter Racing team tee gives away nothing about where he is or what he's been doing.

"Niki," I snap. "Get to the point. I came here for you. You begged me to join the team." When I was about to walk away.

Senna glances at me with her big hazel eyes. When we were teenagers, I'd stare at her when she wasn't looking, just to decipher

the colours swirling through her eyes. She says they're brown, but I've stared at them long enough to know.

I check myself. This isn't the time to reminisce or open the box of emotions I closed when I saw her last year at the wedding. I meet her stare, and she looks away quickly. The room smells like every boardroom in this building: coffee and diesel with a hint of Old Spice as most of the directors are men over the age of fifty. But there's something else. I breathe in and get hints of orange blossom. I want to get close to her and find out if it's her fragrance.

I slam my palm against the wall.

Niki sighs. "Connor drives for us now. I've signed him for two years. It was the last thing I did before I left."

Senna stamps her foot, and I try not to laugh or focus on how her wide-legged trousers hide the long legs I recall from the split in her dress at the wedding. "But—"

"He can't get a contract anywhere else because he drove like a dickhead last season," Niki adds. "Vessa kicked him out, and no one wants him on their team."

She stares at me and mouths, "Liability."

I wink at her, and she glares back.

"Oi," Niki says, drawing us back to him. "Senna, you know that Connor is a great driver and could be excellent if he stopped being Dane the Dick."

"We both know why I'm called that, and it's not because of my driving," I banter, earning me a scowl from Senna. I grin and lift my eyebrows at her, the swirls hitting my belly again. "It's not the insult you want it to be, Senna, and many women will wax lyrical about my—"

"I can't work with this idiot. This playboy. He's going to ruin us," Senna gripes at the screen, although it's me she's sticking her middle finger up at.

"No, he's not. Connor will give us a chance to succeed, and he will be a very good boy, too."

"I'm no one's good boy." My eyes snap back to his and away from his sister, although I want to witness her reaction.

"Senna, please leave the boardroom. I need to talk to Connor alone."

She stamps her foot again, and a smile replaces the glare I've aimed at Niki.

"You can't order me out of my boardroom. I'm the boss now. You were the one who told me that before you left. My team need to see me as the boss if they're going to be on my side."

I want to comfort her. Even as a teenager, Senna fought for every ounce of respect from the team.

But I don't. I can't.

"Just this once. I promise. I need to have this chat, but then the room, Connor, and the whole team are yours. Okay?"

She side-eyes me with a loathing that would make me feel like crap if I wasn't certain she's secretly struggling with anxiety about everything forced upon her.

"Fine. You've got five minutes, and then I'll be back."

"All right, Princess," I tease, but she strides out of the room without a backward glance.

"Love you, Niki," she shouts as the door bangs behind her.

As I watch her go, I remember her destroying me before a race when we were teenagers. I'd commented there'd never be a female Formula One racing driver. She beat me that day and changed my mind, too. Something sparks in my chest that I must ignore.

"What the hell, man?" I grunt at the screen. "We had a deal."

"Open the door a second."

My brow furrows, but I walk to the door and yank it open. Senna falls against my chest. The scent of orange blossom with a hint of mango envelop me. My hands skim her hips before she pushes her arms against my chest, huffs, and retreats in the direction of the bathroom. I lick my lips slowly before remembering I'm meant to be angry with her brother.

I return to the boardroom screen.

"So?" I snap, my hands flexing from our brief touch. Fuck, I shouldn't be attracted to her like this, especially as I chat to her brother. "You told me you were signing me so we could realise our teenage dream and make this team the best in the world."

"Nothing has changed."

"Except we're not doing this together." My voice booms. "And your sister, who hates me, is my boss."

"She hates you because you haven't talked to her since you visited ours after her accident."

"Because she wouldn't talk to me."

"Because you didn't tell her what really happened," he replies softly, pulling the heat from my argument. "She still probably thinks you did it on purpose."

I drop my head and sigh. "This is the first time I've seen her close up in nearly ten years. She never came to award dinners or the other big events for drivers, and if we bumped into each other in the driver's paddock, she'd turn on her heel and walk away from me." I throw my head back and give the ceiling a silent roar. I also saw her at her Uncle Ralf's wedding, but she doesn't know, and I can't share that with Niki.

"Maybe it's time you told her what happened the day she crashed."

Niki's calm makes me slam my fist on the desk. "I'm not getting into this with you." My shoulders tighten. "This better not be your way of making us friends again, because me and your sister will never be friends."

Niki grins, and I nearly yank the screen off the wall. "Connor, please listen. You needed signing because no one else would take you—"

"I walked out of Vessa before they could push me. And I could walk out of this team, too."

"Our contract is watertight. I ensured it."

"My lawyers will review it." My head hurts from furrowing my brow. "How could you do this to me? We're meant to be best friends."

He smiles back at me, his hands open. "Mate, we are. Nothing changes that."

"Apart from you double-crossing me."

Niki sighs. Fresh lines display his weariness. The crash did a number on him. I dial back my anger.

"This team is my family," he says gently. "And you must stay, because it needs you. My dad made some crap decisions before his heart attack, and the team might get bought out. It won't belong to my family anymore, not that Senna knows, and you can't tell her."

"But—"

"And as much as she'll disagree, my sister needs you. And I need you to be there for her, as there will be knives in her back. She pretends she can cope, and I saw the way she was acting the big boss

just now. But Dad told me she's scared. He's not sure she can do this."

"But she's always been a fighter. Do you remember when we used to have to drag her away from the bullies because they targeted her as the only elite female racing driver? She took it all. She's stronger than you think." I swallow repeatedly. She took it all until the day I took the sport away from her.

"She needs protecting, Connor. Do this for me. You need to stay close to her. Even though she was a fighter, we still had to guard her when she raced because those guys tried to hurt her."

"And look what happened when I shielded her. I can't go there again, and she won't let me anyway. She could've died that day." I pace the room, my head in my hands. "Besides, your sister is big and ugly enough to guard herself." There's nothing ugly about Senna Coulter. I remember those hips, big hazel eyes, and kissable lips. She's so damn beautiful I have to sink my nails into my palms to stop thinking about her like that. "So I can't leave? Fine. I'll get myself fired."

Niki sits back. His eyes pinch like his sister's when she reaches her limit. When she does it, I get a secret thrill. With her brother, guilt spikes my skin. "Don't you dare."

I pout. "I can't return to those days when protecting your sister was my calling in life. She doesn't need me. She's always thought she could do everything on her own."

"Which is why you need to help her, protect her, without her knowing."

"Even if I could, she doesn't want me around. I can't work under her when she blames me for ruining her life."

"Get over yourself, Dane. It's time you thought about someone other than yourself and what you want." My mouth drops. "Besides, it's not just the people out there wanting to hurt her. You need to keep men away from her as well." He folds his arms and eyeballs me through the screen.

I roll my eyes. "She works in Formula One, which is seventy per cent men. How the hell do you envisage me doing that?"

"I don't care. Just do it. Loads of them will try to get with her now that she runs the company. They're either going to try and destroy her or date her. You must protect her for me because I can't do that from here."

I catch the weary look in his eyes and how his fingers tremble as he readjusts his cap. I don't doubt for a second that he'd be here to help Senna if he could be. Niki was the only one there for me when my dad left my family, and he stuck by me even when his dad told him I was worthless after Senna's accident. I owe him and, to some extent, his sister, too.

I slump in a chair. "Fine, whatever."

"One more thing," Niki says, pointing at me through the screen. "Although I trust you to protect her without her knowing, I know your reputation with women, Dane the Dick. The pact we made as teenagers when we fought over Antoine's sister still stands. Even though I had a chance with her, I walked away because of you." That's not what happened. Antoine's sister never wanted Niki, and I was crushing on Senna but couldn't tell him, like I can't say anything now. "We don't go after the same women, and you don't get with my sister, ever."

I laugh loudly until Niki's glares force me to stop.

"There's no danger of that. I can't stand her, but we're too old for teenage pacts," I explain.

"Not when it comes to Senna. This is the only way I can make you behave. Promise me on your life. I can't watch my sister get hurt like all your women have in the past. Your reputation is deserved."

I throw my hands in the air and rock back on my chair. "Niki, I've always been clear with women that I'm not the settling-down type."

"I don't care. Give me the promise we made as teenagers. Promise me you'll protect her and that you won't try anything with her."

The door opens, and Senna stares at me, her eyebrow cocked. "I heard Connor laughing. Are you two done? I've got balls to bust, and I'll be starting with yours, Connor fucking Dane."

Why does that sound so appealing?

"Promise me, Connor."

I look between the woman I have messy feelings for and her big brother. Senna hates me, and I can't let my thoughts about her own me again. This will be fine.

"Sure. Whatever," I say with a roll of my eyes. "But I'm not going to make this easy for anyone."

I glance at Senna, who says in a way that has me pressing those nails deeper into my hands as my belly coils, "You want trouble, Dane? Bring it on, because I'm all in."

Fake a Chance on Me Playlist

The Boys Are Back in Town – Thin Lizzy

*Let's Go Home Together – Ella Henderson, Tom
Grennan*

Dancing on My Own - Robyn

I Did Something Bad – Taylor Swift

Kiss You – One Direction

Kill the Director – The Wombats

Break the Rules – Charlie xcx

Titanium – Madilyn Bailey

Think of You – Whigfield

Never Felt Like This Before – Shaznay Lewis

The Scientist – Coldplay

Fade Into You – Mazzy Star

Let Go – Frou Frou

Good For You – Selena Gomez, A\$AP Rocky

What Was I Made For? – Billie Eilish

Lucky – Britney Spears

Superhero – Lauv

Somewhere Only We Know – Keane

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Books By Rebecca Chase

THE BULLS RUGBY SERIES

[Head Over Feels: An enemies to lovers steamy sports romance \(Book 1\)](#)
[Stalling in Love: A steamy opposites attract romance \(Book 2\)](#)

COULTER RACING TEAM SERIES

[Start Your Engines: A brother's best friend sports romance \(Book 1\)](#)

CLOSEST PROTECTION SERIES

[Regally Binding: An enemies to lovers bodyguard romance \(Book 1\)](#)

CLOUD FAMILY SERIES

[Go Cook Yourself: A grumpy sunshine workplace romance \(Book 1\)](#)

OTHERS

[Keep in Touch: A sweet coming-of-age love story](#)
[Occupational Hazard: An Anthology of Spicy Workplace Stories](#)

Coming Soon

Coulter Racing Team Series Book 2: Niki and Rosie. A single mum, age gap sports romance

Released: March 2026

Closest Protection Series Book 2: Strike and Millie. A second chance, friends to enemies to lovers bodyguard romance

Released: July 2026

Cloud Family Series Book 2: Flora and Max. An age gap, nanny, neurodivergent FMC sports romance.

About Rebecca Chase

Rebecca writes romance that's dirty, flirty and deliciously irresistible. She's a rugby, F1, bodyguard and small town romance author. She's an English rose and a pocket rocket with a taste for spice, drama, romance, and love. She's always looking for everyone's next book boyfriend. When it comes to her stories, you can guarantee there will be romance, angst, spice and, most of all, there will be love that lasts a lifetime.

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