

Chapter 2

GIDEON

One drink. I came to Brooklyn for *one drink*, and only because it's Rodrigo's birthday and he's my self-appointed "work husband."

After we finish the first round—paid for by me, as usual—I'm getting ready to leave. But then Rodrigo's boyfriend, Bailey, insists that everyone check out the party down the block at Dazzler, so off we go.

The two of them don't miss a beat. The second we arrive, they both strip to the waist. A random person smears body glitter on their bare chests, and now they're dancing under the strobe lights like happy disco balls. Me? I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here. I ditched my suit jacket, but I'm

The Holiday Hookup List

wearing a tie, for Chrissakes, while everyone else is dressed as anthropomorphic candy canes or whatever. I'm more of a leather-armchair-and-whiskey-neat sort of guy, and yes, I realize this makes me sound approximately sixty years old instead of twenty-seven.

Fuck this. One *more* drink, and then I'll wish Rodrigo a happy birthday, call for a car, and hit the treadmill in my building's fitness center for a quick and brutal run so I can actually sleep tonight.

But as I approach the bar, I realize "one more drink" is easier said than done. It's an absolute shit show. I peer over the festively attired masses, searching for a break in the crowd, when—

Holy fuck.

The club is loud, dark, and smells like bodies and beer, but everything fades away as my eyes land on the shapely brunette trying unsuccessfully to flag down a bartender.

The back of her red dress shows more smooth beige skin than it covers, and lights twinkle like fireflies around her upper body. Her ass is, frankly, out of this world, but that's not what consumes my attention. Not all of it, anyway.

Her black hair is pinned up, leaving her long, elegant neck exposed. My gaze fixates on the arch of her hairline where it meets her nape, and I'm gripped by the sudden and intense urge to taste her *right there*. My lips tingle as I imagine kissing

her skin, slow and deliberate, before closing my mouth over the column of her throat and dragging my tongue along her soft, warm—

Shit. Where the fuck did that come from? My pants are tight, just from staring at some unknown woman's neck. I haven't felt desire this strong in months. Not since . . .

Since my father died. Since I started therapy. Since I broke up with Christina. Take your pick.

I let out a shaky breath. Nothing like thoughts of your dead dad and your indifferent ex-girlfriend to make your sex drive slow to a crawl.

But it's still there. Like a craving. I haven't even seen this woman's face yet, but the way she's standing on tiptoe and waving her arm, trying desperately to order a drink, is kind of adorable.

I have to talk to her. She'll probably turn me down—either with scorn, laughter, or a polite, *Oh, honey, no.* Hell, she probably doesn't even like men. *We are* in a gay bar, after all. But if nothing else, Ralph will be proud of me for trying.

And I'm definitely not going to think about why I want to make my therapist proud. Or how it mirrors my relationship with my father. Nope, not thinking about any of that.

Focusing on *her* helps me ignore the sensory overload of the club as I move forward. Even in heels, she barely comes

The Holiday Hookup List

up to my shoulder, and she's having a tough time getting the attention of either of the two bartenders.

Stepping up behind her, I lower my voice. "Excuse me. Can I get you a drink?"

She plants her hands on her hips and makes a disgusted sound before she turns. "You're certainly welcome to try. I swear, I've been at this for a full five—*Noble?*"

Her dark brown eyes widen and her mouth hangs open in shock. At the sight of her familiar face, my mind goes blank.

It's Valencia Torres. My former classmate.

Former target.

Former *obsession*.

The corners of her lips tug upward in a disbelieving smile. "Gideon Noble, is that you?"

Kill me now. "I—yes."

Her pretty mouth twists as she crosses her arms. "Well, well, well. If it isn't my old archnemesis. What are you—" Realization dawns over her features. "Oh, my God. Were you *hitting* on me?"

"No. Of course not." I say it quickly. Too quickly.

She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

I want to kiss that sarcastic smirk off her face.

Fuck. Where is this *coming* from?

All right, I can admit it. Torres is fucking stunning. She's come a long way from the wild-haired suck-up with caterpillar

eyebrows I knew back when we were both students at Carlton, a private school on the Upper East Side. It's almost unfair how incredible she looks. But while the smirk on her red-painted lips is new, the knowing glint in her dark eyes is the same.

I clear my throat and try to dispel thoughts of kissing *Valencia Torres*. "It just seemed like you were struggling. To order a drink, I mean."

The smile drops from her face as she glances back to the bar. "They're totally slammed. I don't know how they're managing with only two bartenders on a Friday night."

She's turned away from me. This is my chance to sneak off and try to put this out of my head until my session with Ralph next week. God, he'll have a fucking field day with this.

Thinking of Ralph reminds me that I don't run away from things anymore, and I'm hit with a bolt of clarity.

What if, somehow, I'm being granted the opportunity to make up for all the bullshit I put Torres through back in middle school? What if this is my chance to interact with her the way I wanted to in high school if I hadn't been so fucking scared?

Before I can begin to imagine what that might look like, Torres spins around and grabs my forearm. Her eyes sparkle like obsidian in the flashing lights. "I love this song."

I'm instantly glad I didn't run away if it means I got to see her looking at me like this. Like she's okay with touching me. Like she doesn't hate me.

The Holiday Hookup List

But then her gaze turns appraising as it sweeps me from head to toe, taking in my hair, my face, my clothes.

Her perusal makes me sweat. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

She squints at my shoes. “I’m judging you.”

“And what’s the verdict?”

I expect a response like, *Guilty as charged*. Instead, she gives a decisive nod. “You’ll do.”

“As?”

“A warm body.” With a teasing grin, she tugs me away from the bar. “Dance with me, Gideon Noble.”

I go with her, because if this is our second chance, I’m not going to waste it.