

Living with Marcus
Chapter 1

Gabby let him know she was awake by stroking his back—her nimble fingers weaving their way down his body, dancing from one side of his spine to the other, the sensation of it sending a flood of warmth throughout his body. He responded by turning around and giving her a soft kiss.

“Are you seducing me, Miss Harding?” Marc asked. Aware of his own heartbeat, he edged closer to her with a hopeful expectation of what would soon follow.

She glanced at the bedside clock. “I started to, Mr. Nussbaum, but we need to get a move-on if we're going to make the opening in time.”

It was Saturday, and they were going to the opening of what she considered to be a very important photography exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Somewhat less than enthralled by the exhibit itself, Marc still looked forward to spending the day with Gabby. He looked forward to spending every weekend with her.

She was up and out of bed before he could persuade her it wouldn't matter if they walked into the exhibit an hour later than planned. As she sauntered over to his closet where she kept a few outfits for her weekend visits, he eyed her well-toned body—a stark reminder of the gym membership she'd given him for Christmas the previous month.

Marc prepared to shave while Gabby showered. After raising the shaver up to his face, he hesitated, admiring the designer stubble look on himself. No match for Bradley Cooper, he thought, still not bad. He would have preferred to leave it, but Gabby liked clean-shaven men—men with manicured nails who knew the difference between a Shiraz and a Merlot and wore a sport coat to dinner, things that he took to heart only after he had started going out with her.

After filling their travel mugs with coffee, they donned their winter coats, grabbed their overnight bags, and descended the two flights of outside stairs running down the back of Marc's three-flat brownstone. The cold crisp January air—the kind that would leave your skin numb if you stayed out in it too long—stung their faces as they walked to the garage. After Marc warmed up his year-old Range Rover for a few minutes, he pulled out onto Roscoe Street and began their northern journey to lower Wisconsin.

A sense of calm and ease fell upon him as he left his Chicago Lakeview neighborhood with his girlfriend by his side. He and Gabby had been dating for eighteen months, spending weekends together for the last six. At thirty, Marc was living the good life—single, successful landscaping business owner, completely unencumbered—and he didn't see himself settling down any time soon.

Spending weekends with Gabby meant giving up some things, like the Blackhawks home games Marc had faithfully attended since they'd won the 2010 Stanley Cup, something they hadn't achieved since the sixties. He still attended weekday games when he could, but weekends he kept open for her. Smart, fun, and pretty—even first thing in the morning with no makeup and mussed-up hair—Gabby's camaraderie easily beat out a bunch of rowdy hockey fans.

Relationships with women he'd dated in the past had never lasted very long. As soon as they mentioned “going to the next level,” which they always did, Marc felt like going in the opposite direction, and he usually did. But Gabby had never done that. She had her own separate interests and a promising career at CEDA, a public service organization dedicated to helping low-income families. Only twenty-eight years old, she was already making a name for herself, both career-wise and in local politics after she worked tirelessly for the campaigns of two elected

officials. And with family nearby and a wide circle of friends, she had her own life apart from him, which was how he preferred it.

“Thank you for coming with me today—I know it's not exactly your thing,” she told him. “But wait until you see the exhibit. You'll be surprised at the talent of these teenagers.” The exhibit they were attending included hundreds of photography entries in a local competition for which Gabby had been one of the judges. “Did you decide what you're going to do afterward while I'm at the judges luncheon?”

“I'll find something.” He had thought about going on one of Milwaukee's many brewery tours but didn't want to tell her that until afterward. She probably expected him to do something more cultural—more cultural by her definition anyway.

“Did I tell you Glen called me yesterday?” she asked. Glen was her brother, an Air Force master sergeant.

“No. What did he have to say?”

“He wanted to let me know that he approved of you.”

Marc has just met Glen for the first time, along with Gabby's parents, at Christmastime. They had all spent a few days at Mr. and Mrs. Harding's house on Lake Geneva. Marc had been nervous about meeting her family for the first time, but his fears had been quickly put to rest by her gracious parents and genial brother.

“Ha! That's a relief.” Glen had impressed Marc as being near-perfect—handsome, smart, well-traveled, and serving the country. “So he doesn't think of me as a lowly landscape worker like your mother?”

“She doesn't think that of you.”

“She did in the beginning.”

“Well, maybe. But she's come around.”

“She used to call me ‘lawn boy.’”

“One time.”

“What does she call me now behind my back?”

“Marc.”

“Mm-hm.”

They talked about the presents they had exchanged with her family, the trip the guys had made to pick out a Christmas tree, and the old-fashioned fun they'd had decorating it. Marc's fear of being the only outsider had been allayed almost as soon as he'd walked in their door. Contrary to his dysfunctional family, Gabby's was idealistic. Of course, just about anyone's family outshined his: a father who brought new meaning to the word “pathetic” and a sister who couldn't support herself let alone her two fatherless children.

Easy to spot on the shore of Lake Michigan, the graceful sculpture of the art museum was artwork in itself with its huge movable steel louvers on either side that opened and closed twice daily simulating the wings of a bird. They pulled into the parking lot soon after the museum opened its doors. After Gabby checked in at the registration table for the judges, she led the way to the exhibit area.

Gabby was right—the photography was extraordinary. Hundreds of entries—action shots, still lifes, landscapes, portraits—as impressive as any Marc had ever seen. She proudly talked about the ones she had juried as though they had been created by her own children.

After they had seen the entire exhibit, they parted ways—she to her luncheon and he to the historic Lakefront Brewery where he hoped to enjoy an interesting tour followed by a beer or two. But as soon as Marc pulled into the crowded parking lot, his cell phone rang.

"I need a place to stay. Can you pick me up?"

He hadn't heard from Meinhard in months, and the piteous sound of his father's voice brought back painful memories of the past.

"I'm in Milwaukee. What's wrong?"

"I just said, I need a place to stay."

"I know what you said. What happened at wherever you were staying that you can't stay there anymore?" Meinhard had a history of flitting from one place to another—often running away from past-due rent or other debts.

"Doesn't matter, Markus, are you going to help me or not?"

Meinhard was the only one who still called him Markus. In an effort to distance himself from his father and his old world German mentality, he'd become *Marc* as soon as he'd turned eighteen. Meinhard had never accepted the change claiming *Marc*, spelled with a c, seemed too French—Meinhard hated the French.

"I can't do it, Dad. I'm not even coming home tonight."

"Let's not forget whose house you're living in."

Shortly after he'd arrived in the United States from East Germany in the late seventies, Meinhard had purchased a three-flat in a neighborhood that had once been a mecca for German-speaking immigrants. A few years later, his wife joined him, and they raised Marc and his sister Zenzi in the garden apartment, with tenants in the second- and third-floor apartments. Now Marc lived on the third floor by himself and had tenants on the other two.

"Let's not forget who's been paying the bills for the last twelve years," Marc said.

"I haven't asked you for a dime in—"

"Three months. Last October I gave you enough for the first and last month's rent for that flophouse you wanted to move into. What happened to that?"

"Never mind. That's what families do, you know. They help each other out when they need it."

"And the time before that I gave you six hundred dollars to pay off a debt you owed so the loan sharks wouldn't come after you."

"So I got into a little—"

"Let's see, and then the time before that—"

"Go to hell," Meinhard snapped and hung up.

Marc stared at the phone for several seconds. Even though he had told himself after the last bailout that he wasn't going to let Meinhard guilt him into another one, the thickness he felt in his throat caused him to question the way he had just treated his father. Poised to call him back, he looked at the last number in the call history. UNAVAILABLE. That meant something had happened to the cell phone he had given him.

Suddenly, going on the brewery tour didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. Instead, Marc drove back to the museum and wandered around the exhibits until it was time to meet Gabby. As much as he tried to concentrate on the artwork, his mind kept going back to Meinhard. Determined not to let this latest encounter with him ruin his day, he sat down on a bench in the museum's lobby and tried to calm down while waiting for her.

"Hey, handsome."

The sound of her voice pulled him into a happier place.

"Ready?"

"Let's go."

They headed for Milwaukee's arts and fashion district where they had planned to spend the afternoon in a variety of boutiques and galleries. Later, they would stay the night at the Pfister Hotel after attending the photography competition award dinner, at which time the three contest finalists in each category would find out which one would go on to compete nationally.

"Everything okay?" she asked him in the car.

"Sure. Why?"

"I don't know. You seem kind of quiet. What did you end up doing for the last two hours?"

"Nothing much. Went on one of those brewery tours and then came back here and looked at the other exhibits." He didn't like lying to her, but telling her about Meinhard's phone call seemed unnecessary and would only lead to a discussion about his father that he didn't want to have.

He parked near the Historic Third Ward where there were ample galleries and shops to keep them occupied until the banquet. In one of the galleries, he bought Gabby a silk scarf he'd found her admiring, and she in turn bought him a cashmere one that matched his good wool coat.

On the way to the hotel, his cell phone rang.

"Don't you want to get that?" she asked.

"I'll see who it is later," he said, thinking it was probably Meinhard.

After the short ride to the Pfister, Marc and Gabby walked arm-in-arm through its grand lobby admiring the hotel's vast collection of Victorian artwork. After checking into their room and changing into dinner clothes, they entered the Imperial Ballroom where they picked up a glass of wine at the bar and found their seats.

The program went on a little long for Marc's liking, but when two of the entries Gabby had designated as finalists made it to go on to the national competition, the pride and joy she exuded made it all worthwhile.

After the awards dinner, when Marc turned his cell phone back on, he saw that he had a message. He glanced at it and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

"Do you need to answer that?" she asked.

"It can wait."

"You sure? I can go on to the room myself." She smiled. "I'm a big girl."

He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Nope. I'm all yours."

"That kind of language can get you into trouble, you know."

"I certainly hope so," he said as they headed toward their room.