

## Chapter One

“Don’t give me that look—you’re coming out tonight. It’s your birthday, Meg, and there’s only one proper way to turn twenty-three. It’s not home alone, stressing about things you can’t control.”

Meg Sanders finished restocking the beer fridge and pushed to her feet. After a twelve-hour shift of bartending, everything hurt from her worn-out tennis shoes to her shoulders. Even if she wasn’t exhausted, she’d still be looking for an excuse to say no. Just like she always did when Cara tried to convince her to go out after their shift.

She loved her friend, but Cara couldn’t seem to get it through her big, beautiful brain that Meg was *broke*. The combination of no money and aching feet wasn’t one that motivated her to go dancing. When she’d first landed in New York, she’d racked up more than her fair share of credit card bills living beyond her means, the freedom of answering to no one going straight to her head. She couldn’t afford to make those same mistakes again—even for a night. “I have to work tomorrow.”

Cara mimicked a buzzer noise. “You don’t work until three tomorrow. Try again.”

Meg leaned against the bar and cast a look over the room. Despite being a Saturday night, they were in the magic hour between rushes. Too late for those pre-gaming it before hitting the clubs. Too early for those same people stumbling in for the Satellite’s fabled breakfast and Bloody Mary’s to get their hangover started right. “We’re in a bar. I spend all my time dolling out alcohol to drunk people. The last thing I want to do right now is go out and be around *more* drunk people.”

“Honey.” Cara grabbed her arm and towed her through the doorway and into the short hallway that led back to the kitchen. She frowned, her big brown eyes serious for once. “I know

you're broke and stressed and worried about fall tuition, but if you don't take some time to cut loose, you're going to explode into a Meg-shaped puddle of anxiety and brains."

Meg made a face. "You say the nicest things."

"I say the truest things." Cara yanked her mass of blond hair out of her ponytail and ran her fingers through it. "Come out with me tonight and we'll celebrate your birthday right—just for a little bit. The bouncer at Bliss owes me a favor, so you don't have to worry about cover and if you let me pick your outfit, you won't buy a drink all night." She held up a hand, forestalling Meg's refusal. "Even if that drink is ginger ale. I'm not saying you need to get shit-housed. I'm saying you need to put the stress on the backburner for a few hours. All your problems will still be there in the morning."

*The only thing I want is to go to bed and sleep for twelve hours.* She opened her mouth to say exactly that...but it was a lie. If left to her own devices, Meg would go home, reread the letter for the thousandth time. It would say the exact same thing it had from the moment she opened that red-stamped letter—her financial aid had run dry. Spending hours trying to make the math work in a way that didn't spell the end of her dreams, just like she had every night this week, wouldn't make a damn bit of difference.

Spoiler alert—the math didn't work.

Maybe Cara was right. Maybe she just needed some time away from reality. Meg knew from years of experience that if she couldn't find a way around a problem, sometimes the best thing to do was to check out completely and let her brain work on the solution in the background. A night of dancing might be just the thing to shock the solution loose.

Hopefully.

If it wasn't, she didn't know what she was going to do. Every plan Meg had for her future hinged on her ability to get this degree and leverage it into her dream job—a dream job that paid the bills. Being an accountant wasn't glamorous and likely wouldn't make her rich, but it was steady work that would never go away. Taxes and death were the only certainties in life, just like old Ben Franklin had said.

She would have happily broken dozens of laws as a child to have a reliable income that paid the bills. Nothing—*nothing*—would stop her from carving out the kind of safe space that financial security created.

But not tonight.

Nothing would happen tonight but more stress and worry and plotting half a dozen contingency plans that made her sick to her stomach to even think about.

Meg sighed. “Two hours—tops.”

Cara let loose a squeal to shake the windows and pulled Meg in for a tight hug. “You won't regret it, I promise. It will be fun.” She bounced back. “Let's get the hell out of here, run by my place to change, and go dance our asses off.”

Her friend's enthusiasm spread through her until she managed a smile of her own. “Sounds like a plan.”

An hour later, wearing the smallest dress known to mankind, Meg wondered what the hell she'd been thinking. She tugged at the hem again. “You sure you didn't have something with more yardage?”

“Oh, hush, you look amazing and you know it.” Cara nudged her toward the front of the line of people that snaked down the block. “Besides, you used to own a dozen just like it.”

Yeah, she had. Before she'd gotten in over her head with credit card debt and sold every piece of clothing that wasn't vital—and clubwear didn't make the list.

“It's been a while.” It took four years to undo six months' worth of damage, and she was never, ever going down that road again. Meg smoothed down her dress again and pushed the old thoughts from her mind. Tonight was about letting go. She could let go. She used to be able to compartmentalize with the best of them.

She was just out of practice.

Though she'd pushed a magnificent red dress on Meg, Cara had picked something similar in black that showcased her mile-long legs and pressed her boobs to gravity-defying heights. She grinned. “You look amazing. Own that shit.”

Meg forced herself to straighten her shoulders as they approached the bouncers. She might be an inch away from indecent exposure on both her chest and ass, but she'd be damned before she let anyone know exactly how uncomfortable she was. There had been a time in her life when dresses like these were the rule instead of the exception, but that was a small lifetime ago. She was out of practice with that, too.

Cara sidled up to the giant of a bouncer and went onto her tiptoes in her sky-high heels. Whatever she said worked, because he nodded, gave her ass a playful smack, and unclipped the velvet rope to let them in. He winked at Meg as she passed, but thankfully kept his hands to himself.

Inside, it was just another flavor of every other club in NYC. A bass she could feel in her bones, low lights, and a packed dance floor. Meg stepped to the side as she walked through the door, trying to get her bearings. The DJ booth overlooked the dance floor that took up most of the main floor, and the bar stretched across the wall opposite in front of a truly impressive

display of bottles. Stairs curved up to a second floor with what looked like booths and plenty of spaces to watch the dancers—the VIP lounge.

She checked out the people near the railing out of sheer habit—when one was a bartender, it paid to know one’s patrons. The woman in the tiny jumper with the cut-outs likely hadn’t paid for a drink all night and, even if she had, she wouldn’t tip. Two other women seemed more focused on each other than they were on their view. They didn’t touch, despite standing close enough to mingle their exhales—they were on their first date, maybe second, and it would get hot and heavy after they left the club. A few feet from them, two men leaned against the railing. One had his back to the dance floor, his attention focused on his friend. The other...

The other was staring straight at *her*.

Meg froze, her breath a trapped thing in her throat. Even across the distance, those blue eyes pinned her in place and stoked a heat inside her that had no business existing. His face was all angles that should have been too sharp for beauty, but was painfully attractive all the same. Dark hair cut tight against the side of his head and left slightly longer on top, begging for someone’s fingers to sift through it. He wore jeans and a T-shirt that should have downplayed his presence, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a man who was at home in expensive suits as he was in the clothing he currently wore.

*Trouble.*

He said something to his friend, and the man turned to face her. Where the first guy was almost pretty—if a woman was willing to cut herself to pieces on his beauty—this one was rough and unfinished and screamed danger in a way that made her nipples go tight.

*Holy shit, what is wrong with me?*

She tore her gaze from them and searched the crowd for Cara. *I should have known the red dress was too loud. Black would have been better.* There were bartenders who were loud and put themselves out there, drawing people in and making bank off the tips that invariably followed. Meg didn't number among them. She blended. She was damn good at it, too.

It was so much easier to move through a crowd when no one was paying attention to her, and there wasn't a more attention-grabbing color than fire engine red.

Since Cara didn't materialize in front of her, Meg headed for the bar. She'd bet her next paycheck Cara had already charmed a drink out of some guy. She drew in men the way honey drew bees, though she never seemed to go home with any of them. Meg had her own theories about that, but Cara was her friend so she tried not to psychoanalyze her.

*Speak of the devil.*

Cara peered out from behind a guy in a cheap suit and waved at Meg. She grinned at Meg's raised eyebrows and gave an unrepentant shrug, a drink in each hand. A few seconds later, Cara was at her side, having brushed off the guy. "What?"

"One of these days that is going to backfire."

"Without a doubt." She held up the drinks. "Cranberry-vodka or Crown and Coke?"

Meg rolled her eyes and motioned to the darker drink. "You already know the answer to that." They had to lean close and yell to be heard, which didn't make for ideal conversation, but it was just as well.

Meg sipped the drink and took her first full breath in what felt like weeks. Her shoulders relaxed a little and she took another sip, letting the music drive the tension from her body. Cara was right—it would still be there tomorrow. She could take tonight and enjoy herself.

Against her better judgment, she glanced up to the two men she'd seen at the bar.

The spot where they'd stood was empty.

Irrational disappointment surged her. She tried to shake it off, the same way she'd shaken off her day. They were strangers who probably had half a dozen women ready to jump them at the slightest crook of a finger. Or they were gay. Given how her luck had been going lately, it was probably the later. Either way, neither one of them were the least bit interested in *her*.

Determined to put it out of her mind, she downed her drink and set it on a nearby table. "Let's dance!" She waited for Cara to finish her drink and then towed her friend into the crowd. They carved out a neat little spot for themselves and started moving with the beat. Before long, a guy had grabbed Cara's attention and she was happily grinding on him, stroking his biceps as she spoke in his ear. Meg's laugh was eaten by the music. On her own again, she lifted her arms over her head, tilted her face back and let the strobing lights wash over her.

It was going great until a rough hand closed around her hip and jerked her back into a hard body.

She barely had a chance to register that someone had grabbed her when both hand and body were gone. The absence left her unbalanced and her ankle turned, sending her tipping to the side—right into a large male chest. The stranger caught her easily, his hands cupping her elbows as she found her balance again. Meg looked up...and kept looking up until a pair of devastating blue eyes stole her breath much the same way they had earlier.

The pretty guy from the VIP lounge.

She looked over her shoulder in time to see the other half of the pair dragging a drunk dude through the crowd and toward the exit. *Oh*. One hand released her elbow and gentle fingers clasped her chin, drawing her attention back to her apparent savior.

*Not that I needed saving...*

He gave a tight smile and mouthed. *You okay?*

How was that even a question? Women got grabbed in clubs all the time. It wasn't okay, but it was hardly worth this level of reaction. Still, it was kind of nice and he was seriously attractive and she found herself nodding slowly.

The second guy returned a few moments later, and Blue Eyes grinned. The expression lit up his face, giving him a playful edge that had her rocking back in her high heels. He leaned down, giving her plenty of time to react, and spoke in her ear. "Dance with us?"

*Wait a minute—us?*

She angled back enough to look at both of them, at this smiling stranger and his much more serious partner. The vibes coming off the two were so damn strange, Meg didn't know what to do with them, but she found herself nodding as if it was every day that two gorgeous dudes wanted to dance with her at the same time. As if they were a pair and she was...

She didn't know what she was if they were a pair.

*They're probably gay, right? This doesn't make sense otherwise.*

Straight guys did not share a dance partner the way these two did. They moved seamlessly, transitioning her between them as if they done this a thousand times before. They always seemed to know where the other was, and both kept a careful distance between them and her, touching her only on her hips and nowhere else.

It was so freaking sexy, she could barely stand it.

By the second song, she already had good idea of their personalities. Blue Eyes seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, always ready with a grin that lit up his expression even as the heat in his gaze damn near melted her panties right off. This one was the kind of guy who threw

himself full-tilt into life and to hell with the consequences. His sinful lips promised one hell of a good time and the way he stared at her mouth had her fighting not to lick *her* lips in response.

Dark and Broody was his perfect counterpart. He was bigger than Blue Eyes, his broad shoulders practically blocking out her view of the club. His short black hair was cut serviceably in a way that was just shy of military, and his short beard gave the impression of forgetfulness, rather than following any hipster trend. He wore a plain black T-shirt and jeans, and she would have thought he was just going through the motions except for the fact that he matched his hips to hers with an effortlessness that left her whole body tight. She had no business imagining how he'd use that particular skill in bed and yet...

And yet there was the way he watched her, as if he already knew what she'd taste like and savored the flavor on his tongue like his favorite kind of candy.

The song changed, shifting to one that was on every radio that month and the dance floor surged as people abandoned their drinks and crowded in. The space between Meg and her partners disappeared and she found herself sandwiched between the men. Dark and Broody had his hands on her hips, and she was braced on Blue Eyes's chest. Dark and Broody acted as a wall at her back, keeping the worst of the crowd off them. Blue eyes lifted her hair away from her neck and his lips brushed her ear. "Have a drink with us."

There it was again. That word, ripe with meaning. *Us*.

As if they were a unit and she could take them as one or reject them as one.

*Getting ahead of yourself, aren't you? He asked you to have a drink, not to...*

The crowd surged again, pressing them ever more tightly together and she froze. There was no mistaking the fact that they wanted her—that they *both* wanted her. Her fingers flexed on Blue Eyes's chest, kneading his pecs, and his hands dropped to her hips, just above where Dark

and Broody held her lightly. *His* hands shifted the slightest bit, his pinkies drawing across the bare skin of her thigh just below the hem of her dress. Just that. Nothing more.

But she felt branded right down to her soul.

“Meg!”

Cara appeared at her side, her dark eyes saucer-wide. She gave what barely passed as a polite smile to the men and then grabbed Meg’s wrist and towed her into the crowd and away from them. She didn’t stop or slow down until they burst through the door of the ladies’ room.

In there, the music was slightly less deafening, so Cara didn’t have to yell when she said, “Holy crap, are you okay? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to abandon you. I thought you were dancing alone and then I turned around and they had their dirty paws all over you and—”

“Cara.” Meg grabbed her hands and gave them a squeeze. “Cara, I’m good. They asked to dance. I said yes. It’s good.”

“They...” If anything, Cara’s eyes went wider. “Oh *shit*, I am the worst wingwoman in the history of wingwomen. You were getting busy, weren’t you? Look at you, you’re all flushed.” She laughed and leaned against the counter. “God, I thought you were freaked out and couldn’t escape and that’s why you looked like that. But it was *lust*.” She gave Meg a playful smack. “Get it, girl!”

Meg glanced at herself in the mirror and, sure enough, a flush of pink stained her chest and cheeks. Even more telling, her nipples pressed against the thin fabric of her low-cut dress. She cleared her throat and tucked her dark hair behind her ears. “It’s fine. I’m sure they’ll get another partner.”

“*They?*” Cara wagged her brows. “I know you don’t really hookup, but this might be the time to make an exception. If I had one guy—let alone *two*—looking at me the way they were looking at you, I’d consider breaking my rule about going home with strangers.”

Meg adjusted her dress, half sure she could still feel the imprint of their hands on her hips, could feel Blue Eyes’s chest under her hands, could *definitely* feel Dark and Broody’s fingers dragging over her skin. She cleared her throat. “How were they looking at me?”

“As if you don’t know. Come on, honey. I know you’re out of practice, but you’re not *that* rusty.” Cara laughed. “They were looking at you like they wanted to take turns eating you up.” She sobered a little. “But, for real, you should go for it. You’re only twenty-three once. And it’s your *birthday*. I couldn’t have come up with a better present for you if I’d tried.” She drew her short frame up and took Meg’s shoulders. “I give you permission to go home with them and do the kind of filthy things you’ll embarrass your grandchildren with stories about when you’re old and senile and drunk on red wine.”

Meg gave a nervous laugh even as her gaze skated to the bathroom door. “It’s okay, Cara. Like I said, I’m sure they found someone else to dance with. And dancing is *not* the same thing as them taking me home. If there’s even a *them*. They’re probably not into women. It’s probably some game they play before they go home with each other and...” She opened the door and stopped short, causing Cara to bump into her.

Blue Eyes and Dark and Broody leaned against the wall opposite, twin expressions of heat in their eyes. Meg swallowed hard. “Oh.”

“You were saying?” Cara laughed in her ear. The music should have covered up their words, but Meg couldn’t shake the feeling that both men knew every word of the conversation they’d just had. Cara squeezed Meg’s shoulder. “You sure you’re good with this? I fully support it if

you are, but if you need a save, I will hustle you out of here like you're the nuclear football and I'm the head of the Secret Service."

Meg licked her lips, and two pairs of eyes followed the movement. "It's just a drink."

"Sure, honey, whatever you have to tell yourself." Cara didn't release her. "If you change your mind, text me. Just don't leave the club until you're sure."

"Yeah, okay." That was smart. She took one step forward, and then another. Blue Eyes held out a hand, every move as imperial as a king. As if he already knew how this played out and every move she'd do before *she* knew.

It irritated her despite the lust beating a drum through her veins. She might want him—want both of them—but she wasn't a goddamn sure thing.

Meg cocked her eyebrow and met first Blue Eyes's gaze and then Dark and Broody's. And then she took off into the crowd.