
Chapter 1

"I've never had a one night stand."

Her soft—and somehow sweet, too—confession surprised him, although he controlled his reaction carefully. He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable about whatever choices she'd made in life that had led her to be what he roughly estimated to be nearly forty and having managed not to have what had become a quintessential experience for most people.

But it fit her, somehow, fit what he was only just beginning to realize about her. She wasn't like everyone else, and that was a big plus in his book.

He'd been watching her since he'd come into what was essentially just a step above a dive bar, and his eyes had been drawn to her immediately. She was sitting at the bar, looking incredibly uncomfortable and out of place, checking her phone compulsively and sipping—not on the ubiquitous white wine or fruity drink, but what looked to be some kind of whiskey or bourbon on the rocks.

Although he'd walked by her—within about five feet—and they were the only ones in the place, she never looked at him. He

was invisible to her, and he relished that rare commodity as he took a seat at the back of the bar.

"What can I getcha?" The burly barkeep nodded at him.

"Whatever you have on tap is fine."

It appeared in front of him a minute later, and as he took a sip and was surprised by how good it was, his eyes flitted to her so often that he had to remind himself not to stare. But it was damned hard not to.

"Jesus fucking Christ." She sounded royally pissed, dropping her phone—which had apparently provided her with highly annoying information—on the bar with a sigh. She seized the drink in front of her and downed its contents in one gulp, pushing the glass toward the bartender. "Can I have another, please and thank you? Make it a double?"

From the back of the bar, she heard a deep, male voice ask, "May I buy you that drink?"

She started, confirming his hypothesis that she had no idea he was even in the bar with her, turning around on the stool to see him for the first time.

He was not her type at all, but then, her husband hadn't been, either—not that that was a good comparison, considering that she was no longer married.

The phrase "whipcord lean" came to mind as she noticed how he was man-spreading those annoyingly long legs in a way that belied his obviously expensive suit. Wavy, black, shoulder length hair—she preferred short—and startlingly green eyes amidst an angular face that looked like its expressions more than occasionally bordered on cruel didn't detract from his looks—if you liked that kind of thing—in the least.

Nope. Not her type at all. She did like tall men, loving an almost cartoonish difference in heights between herself and her

partner. But she also liked them broad and Y-shaped and didn't mind at all if they needed to lose twenty pounds or so. Her type was big and teddy-bearish, and the man offering to pay for her drink was closer to Jack Skellington without the Goth elements.

But his voice was a saving grace, the low but obviously powerful British accent insinuating itself into her brain and relaxing her against her will.

As she was looking at him, he was doing the same thing, drinking in his fill of her, not that he hadn't already done that. He could tell that she didn't recognize him, even now. Anonymity had fallen by the wayside long ago for him, and it was oddly refreshing that she wasn't running toward him with her phone up, asking—expecting—sometimes downright demanding, which he always refused—to take a selfie. More points for her. A lot more points.

One of the most startling things about her was that when he felt her eyes settle on him, she might as well have reached out and cupped his genitals. He became instantly hard, closing his legs even though it was uncomfortable to do so, and unfurling a napkin over his lap in a way he hoped didn't broadcast his reason for doing so.

Those bright eyes remained on his for a long moment. Her face was slightly rounded and makeup free, he noticed, which was another point in her favor. Her cheeks were flushed a pretty pink from the alcohol. She wasn't his usual type at all, but he thought she looked stunning, and he was hoping harder than he'd had to in a long time that she would let him do as he asked.

"You don't have to do that, but thank you."

"I know I don't," he replied smoothly. "But please allow me to anyway. There are no strings attached in the least. I would love to have your company at my table, but my offer implies no obliga-

tion on your part to do so whatsoever. I just felt like buying everyone in the bar a drink."

Her wry grin at that deliberately facetious statement gave him a warm, largely unfamiliar feeling north of the parts that were causing him a problem at the moment. She really wasn't technically pretty, but when she smiled, she was a knockout.

The snark just fell out of her mouth automatically. "Such unbridled generosity, since," she looked around her at the empty bar, "we're the only two in here."

"Barkeep, please pour one for yourself, too," he announced without looking away from her. "And there is no implied obligation to you, either."

"Thanks, dude."

"Dude" was a word she would never have associated with him.

"Wow—your generosity knows no bounds!" she teased.

He inclined his head toward her, daring to say, with no hint of irony, "You're welcome."

Her drink was untouched at the moment. She really didn't want to get into anything with this guy... she didn't think, anyway.

He was all hard lines, and she was bad divorce soft. She couldn't think that would be a good mix at all, or perhaps she thought they might mix entirely too well for her mental health. Since she and her husband—to whom she much less than affectionately referred to as "the idiot," in her mind, anyway—had split, she'd been alone, by choice.

Well, that wasn't really true. She was alone because she refused to put herself out there again. She'd wasted too many years of her life with a man she thought she loved, and who she thought loved her, but had proved, over and over again, that he

didn't. She was frankly ashamed that even his serial cheating wasn't enough to get her to call it quits.

When she'd been with him, she was afraid of being alone. And now that she was alone, she was afraid of being with anyone. She'd always been the self-confident type—with or without cause. But her judgment where men were concerned was obviously severely flawed, and she didn't feel as if she could trust herself to pick one now who wasn't going to subject her to such behavior. Or worse, what if she ended up with someone who physically abused her? Would she be strong enough to leave him, or would she just put up with it, like she had the endless stream of other women?

No. She had long since come to the conclusion that, for her own safety and peace of mind, she needed to be alone for a while. Perhaps permanently—she wasn't sure about that yet.

She did miss being a part of a couple, occasionally, but being a misanthrope had its advantages. She was rarely attracted to anyone—never anyone at first sight. Although the man behind her would probably have to be credited with breaking that streak, regardless of how unsuited he was to her usual tastes.

She took the drink and raised her glass to him. "Thank you."

His nod was imperious, but the slight grin worked to make it less offensive than it might have been.

He watched her turn her back to him again without a second thought and pursed his lips. That wasn't quite how he'd wanted it to go, but he would keep his word. A few moments later, he rose to use the facilities. And when he returned, she was sitting at his table.

He was very surprised to see her there but gave no sign of it. Instead, he strode up to her with a big, long-fingered hand extended toward her. "I'm Rad."

She stood but couldn't resist asking, "Really?"

He could feel himself blushing a little and heartily wished he wasn't. "Yes, I know. I sound full of myself. But it's short for Radames."

"What a great name! So, were your parents into opera or Egyptian history?"

"Both, I would say."

"Very cool."

"And yours is?"

"Very not cool." She wasn't sure why, but she steeled herself a little before putting her hand in his. "I'm Andrea. My friends call me Andy."

Rad kept his eyes on hers the entire time they were shaking hands, watching her cheeks color prettily as he did so. "It's very nice to meet you, Andrea. And although I would love to become your friend, I'm not going to call you Andy."

Oh dear God, he pronounced her name in what must have been the European fashion, accenting the middle syllable and making it sound so much better in that seductive tone of his! He could call her anything he wanted in that voice. She'd have to be on her toes with this one.

Why she found herself at his table was a mystery to her. She'd heard the scraping of the chair as he got up, and had turned—as slowly as she could make herself—suddenly alarmed for some unknown reason at the idea that he was leaving. He was just heading to the gents', but that made her wonder if she wouldn't come to regret it if she just let him walk out of the bar. He'd kept his word about the drink he'd bought her. He hadn't said anything to her since then, allowing her to enjoy it uninterrupted and unmolested, which was eons ahead of so many men.

And—even against her will—Andrea had to admit that she

found him attractive, in an unusual sort of way. So, while he was gone and couldn't watch her approaching him, she'd walked over and stood behind the seat opposite the one he'd vacated and waited nervously for him to return, debating with herself the entire time about whether she should dart back to her stool before he even knew she'd been there. But she'd stuck around, although she wasn't at all sure she should have.

"Please, sit down."

He let go of her hand, and Andrea realized that she'd been standing there like a dolt for Lord knew how long, just holding onto his hand and looking up into his eyes like some star struck idiot.

"Thank you." He held her chair for her—not going the full route of tucking it up against her, but he did touch the back of it as she sat, then took his own. "Unless I miss my guess," he began in that buttery soft voice of his, "you don't go to bars very often. So what brought you here this evening, Andrea?"

"Oh dear. Is it that painfully obvious?" she asked, poking fun at herself.

He gave her a barely-there smile. "You just seemed a bit uncomfortable is all."

"No, you're right; you're very right. I don't go to bars. I don't go out much in general. I don't watch TV, and I don't do much on social media, either. I'm a walking antisocial anachronism. But my friend Linda wanted to meet me here. She comes here often, and she's trying to get me to be more social after my divorce."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

It was an unusual statement, rarely heard outside of death.

It caught her by surprise, and her eyes found his. She saw nothing insincere in them at all. "Thank you. That's an excellent way to put it, by the way, although no one seems to say it."

"How long were you married, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Eight—no, nine years."

Rad nodded slowly. "Yes, it's definitely a loss—loss of companionship, lover, often financial security, just the loss of the presence of that person in your life. It must be very painful."

"It is." Andrea lowered her head as tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back.

"So your friend was trying to get you back into the dating world?"

"Yeah." She couldn't possibly have sounded less reluctant about it.

He grinned—really just a slash across his face. "Such enthusiasm!" he teased.

She laughed at herself. "Yeah, well. I'm not in any hurry to get into another relationship, Rad."

"Understandable. But then, it's 2020, and you can get what you want—what you need—without all of those entanglements."

"You mean a one night stand?"

"Netflix and chill. Booty call." He changed his voice to a dead on impression of a very old man, saying, "I don't know what the youngsters are calling it now."

That got her laughing, and he knew he had to hear more of those loud chuckles. She was so ingenuous, so real. Almost dangerously so, as if she had none of the walls most people had built around themselves by the time they were that age. Andrea was like a babe in the woods, and he found himself glad that she was so socially reticent. She could find herself badly hurt by some of the assholes out there, and that idea troubled him much more than he wanted it to.

Utterly without guile or intent on her part, she was inspiring protective feelings in him. They were so rare that he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt them. He'd always had them, but they weren't a part of him that he encouraged or cultivated,

as most women didn't seem to appreciate or need them. Regardless, they were definitely there, making him feel a bit discombobulated, which was another relatively alien emotion for him. Still, he was no less intrigued by her—in fact, he was much more so with every minute he spent with her.

"I've never had a one night stand," she confessed softly.

"Really? Too antisocial?"

Andrea shifted in her seat but didn't seem to him to be tense or upset by the topic they were discussing. In fact, she was smiling as she answered him. "Yeah, pretty much, I'd say."

"And yet you were married," he pointed out, taking a sip of his beer.

"I was. But I met Connor in high school, and we just kind of... drifted into marriage because that's what we thought we should do, you know?" Her brows came together over her glasses. "I didn't date much in high school, and I didn't date at all in college, because we were together, and then we got married two years after we graduated." She shrugged. "And I stopped dating when we got married." With a wry smile, she admitted, "Unfortunately, he didn't."

It was her turn to take a drink, and it was more of a gulp. Why had she said that to him? She'd never told another living soul why they'd divorced, although she thought most of her close friends could guess. It was a source of great shame to her. Why would she tell this perfect—imperfect—stranger that kind of intimate, embarrassing thing?

"I'm sorry for that, too."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for saying it."

He frowned. "Why?"

"I don't know. Just not polite conversation between two people who don't know each other, I guess."

"I would much rather hear things like that from you than talk about the weather or how bad the last season of *Game of Thrones* was." Rad reached over and patted her hand where it lay on the table, once, gently, then withdrew completely. "It's real and has meaning. I hate small talk. It's a waste of time."

She was smiling again, and it made him happier than it should have. "Be careful what you wish for—I'm not housebroken, and I have no filter. I tend to say exactly whatever's on my mind, much to my very proper mother's horror."

He raised his beer to her. "Good for you. More people ought to be like that. The world would be a better place."

She did the same with her drink. "I don't know about that, but you're forewarned, anyway."

There was a short companionable silence before he asked, "So... never a one night stand, huh?"

"Nope. Not a one. I don't even know if I could do one, really."

"Why's that?"

"Dunno. It's just... too much of an intimate experience to me, I think. I don't know if I could even get naked in front of someone I'd just met, much less do that with them." She looked up at him suddenly and began to apologize. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, though, of course. Each to his or her own—"

Rad put his hand up to stop the rapidly tumbling words that were falling out of her mouth. "That's enough." It was quietly, firmly said.

The man had an unmistakable air of elegant authority, and she closed her mouth immediately and without another thought.

"Relax. You'd have to try a lot harder than that to offend me."

They were quiet for a moment again, before his eyes caught hers. "So you could never envision being interested in a one night

stand with anyone?" He watched her swallow hard and thought that was probably a good sign.

Her eyes slid from his as she whispered, "No, I couldn't."

Rad drew a deep breath at that.

Then she continued baldly, "At least, not until tonight."

A black eyebrow rose, and she rushed to continue, "And I'm not sure about tonight, either, not that you've asked."

He leaned back a little in his chair. "And if I were to ask?"

She bit her lip tentatively. "I don't know. Like I said, I'm not sure. It's not something I would take lightly—which is probably why I haven't done it already—and I'm not even sure that I could do it. So I wouldn't want to become involved in something and then not be able to go through with it."

He inclined his head in acknowledgement of her desire not to promise something she couldn't deliver. "I appreciate that."

"Especially with a man I don't know, and I'm sorry, but it's true, one I don't trust."

"Don't be sorry about that. It's smart not to trust anyone immediately."

One side of Andrea's mouth rose a little. "That's not a very good argument for one night stands."

Rad agreed. "That is, however, the sad reality of the situation."

"So why does it happen so many times a day to so many people?"

"There is a certain thrilling element to fucking someone new. A lot of people crave it."

"I don't think I have that gene."

"You don't really know, though, do you? You might find that you enjoy yourself immensely. I know I would personally see to it that you did."

That got him a full on smile. "No ego in your family—you got it all!" she joked, barely believing that she was sitting there calmly discussing the possibility of having sex with a man she'd

met seventeen seconds ago. It was so unlike her; it would almost be worth the potential danger just to be able to tell her friends—especially Linda—that she'd done it.

They wouldn't believe her. They all thought she was terribly staid and boring in that department, and they weren't necessarily wrong. Still, she'd enjoy rubbing their noses in it.

She'd have to steal something as proof, or she knew they would just think she was talking big and hadn't really done it—although she had no idea what she would take.

He was grinning unrepentantly at her, pinning her with his intense gaze.

"I don't need to brag. I like women, and I've spent a considerable amount of time honing my skills." Rad leaned forward, whispering, "I have several, but I have one very specific fetish that encourages me to know how to please a woman."

"Oh?" There was a world she hadn't really delved into at all. Her sex life with Connor was pretty mundane. From the beginning, sometimes she enjoyed it, sometimes she didn't, and even those times that she did were less than spectacular. If she hadn't had a reasonably good relationship with her own body, she wouldn't have known what she was missing. Connor had never run very hot. He wasn't particularly sexually driven—at least not with her, which also contributed to her feelings of inadequacy, since he seemed to feel that way toward other women quite a bit—and long before they broke up, sex had dwindled down to nothing.

But she couldn't imagine the man who was sitting in front of her ever being disinterested in sex. Although it was well restrained, his inherent sexuality shone through in everything he did—even doing something as boring as sitting in a bar and drinking a beer all by himself.

"I have to admit to being pretty boring sexually, and I've never indulged in any fetishes at all."

His eyebrows rose again. "None? Ever?"

Andrea smiled. "None. Ever."

"I have to confess that I'm more surprised to hear about that than I was about the not having had a one night stand."

"Why?"

He looked away for a moment then back at her. "Because I felt you were quite a sensual creature the moment I saw you, and it's hard to reconcile that idea with what you've just told me."

"Oh."

He couldn't tell if she was embarrassed or not by what he'd just said, but he hoped she wasn't. "My fetish probably isn't like anything else you've ever heard of in regard to them."

"I haven't heard much," she replied, knowing she was telling him a little white lie, but she wasn't at all willing to reveal too much to him. She wasn't sure she ever would, even if they did get together.

"It involves the need to satisfy my partner. Giving my partner an orgasm is almost as good as having one myself. And, since most women are multi-orgasmic, it's almost like I am, too."

Andrea was giving Rad a bit of a skeptical look, which made him smile.

"You don't believe me."

"No, I don't." Her eyes darted to his. "Sorry."

"Don't be." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned them on the table in front of him. "There's really only one way for you to find out if I'm lying, you know."

She was blushing again, and he liked it. He liked it a lot, wondering if that little bit of embarrassment was getting her wet. She was more fidgety now than she had been when she sat down, so he thought it was probably a reasonable assumption.

"Come home with me." It wasn't a question. In fact, it flirted

with sounding like an order, but said in that seductive accent of his, its edge was blunted somewhat.

That brought up another question for her. To whose house should they go, ideally? She didn't really want to take him to her house—the one she'd gotten in the divorce. Then he'd know where she lived.

But going to his house was just as iffy, as far as she was concerned. What if he tried to keep her there against her will? She knew she was being paranoid, and that was yet another reason why she'd really never considered doing this.

But he was way ahead of her, being well-practiced in situations such as this.

"You drive yourself, Andrea, and then you'll have your car there, and you can leave any time you like. You're not dependent on me—not that I'm not trustworthy, but I can see that you're apprehensive, and none of my reassurances about the fact that I'm not a serial killer really mean anything to you at this point."

He stood, putting his hand out to her again. "I would love the honor of being your first one night stand. I find the idea very tantalizing. You're practically virginal."

She snorted at that. "No, I'm not."

"But you're still very innocent sexually, and I'm definitely interested in corrupting you as much as possible, if you'll let me." The sentence was delivered in a thoroughly indecent growl that instantly peaked her nipples.

His hand hadn't waivered, and he stood there patiently while she thought it over.

Eventually, when she hadn't made up her mind, he began to speak, low and slow, his tone at least as seductive as his words as he leaned over—not too close, but close enough—to whisper huskily, "I promise you won't regret it, my dear. I will make you

come so hard, you'll think you're going to faint from it, and you'll definitely see stars."

He was so confident in his abilities—it was almost obscene. But she didn't really doubt him, either.

He'd almost given up on her when she finally stood slowly, placing her hand in his. He squeezed it gently, noting how cold and clammy her fingers were against the warmth of his.

Andrea reclaimed her hand—which he reluctantly allowed—and made as if to go.

"Wait."

She turned back to him.

Rad said firmly, "While we're here, call someone and let them know that you're going home with someone and you'll text them when you leave to let them know you're okay."

Andrea frowned. That was exactly what she didn't want to do!

He was at the bar, paying the bill, and when he came back, she was still staring at her phone.

"Did you call?" He seemed to have some kind of hyper awareness of her, and he'd noted that he hadn't heard her talking to anyone while he was with the bartender.

"No. I don't know who to call who isn't going to razz me over it."

His smile was gentle, but his voice was no-nonsense. "Pick someone, Andrea, so we can go."

In the end, she called her favorite aunt, who lived across the country and didn't know any of her friends, so she knew she wouldn't be spending the rest of the evening gossiping about her and wondering what kind of guy had managed to get her into bed.

Her aunt—who was the loud-mouthed black sheep of the family, and after whom she took—was a little surprised by the call, but she thanked her for being security conscious. Andrea

was laughing so hard by the time she ended the call that he was staring down at her quizzically.

She could summon a reasonable impression of her aunt and did so for him, in between cracking up. "My Great Aunt Biddy said, and I quote, 'It's about damned time you got back on the horse, girl! And I hope, for your sake, he's hung like one. You tell that young man to take care of you. Make sure you have an orgasm—or twelve! Don't let him off the hook until you're satisfied.'"

"Something tells me I would really like your Great Aunt Biddy."

"Well, if you like me, you'll like her. We're very much alike, much to our family's disgust."

"Not everyone's favorite, is she?"

"Neither of us is, but that's okay."

He walked her to her car and gave her his address to put into her GPS.

"I drive a white Lincoln, and if I'm not there by the time you get there, go to the door around back. There's a key hidden on the deck post behind the spirea on the right side. It's on a nail at the back of the post."

She wasn't really listening to him at this point, which was probably good since she had no idea what a spirea was. Andrea had already wandered away from him and was standing at the driver's door, just waiting for him to stop talking. She was already halfway to deciding not to go, in the harsh light of reality.

"Andrea." He could tell she was drifting away from him—in every way possible—and he didn't want to lose her. He'd bet she hadn't heard a word he'd said to her.

His next "Andrea" wasn't really louder, but it was much more powerful. It shocked the glazed, frightened doe look off her face

Just One Night

that made him want to convince her to let him drive her, but he knew he shouldn't do that, for her own comfort and feelings of safety.

"Why don't you follow me and use the GPS if we get separated."

"Okay."

At least then he'd know if she decided against it during the drive. And he really hoped she didn't do that.