

# Chapter One

Mission “Get Laid” in progress.

From a booth in a dark corner of the Panther’s Lair, Sydney Chase scanned the crowded dance floor, searching for any male who captured her attention. The plan was simple. Locate and engage. Hopefully in a night of raw fucking.

She smiled to herself. She’d actually sounded convincing. If she kept thinking along those lines, maybe, just maybe, she’d be able to go through with this tonight. A coworker had mentioned this club a couple of weeks ago, claiming the dark yet classy atmosphere made for a fun night. Sydney could see why. As soon as she’d walked through the front door, she’d been captivated by the decor. Black walls weren’t normally her preference, but something about them combined with purple leather booths and numerous chandeliers gave off a Count Dracula vibe. Pretty cool, really.

Pop music boomed from the speakers as colorful rays of light flashed across the couples gyrating against each other. Pelvis to pelvis, dick to ass and so many other variations of sexual positions kept her focused on her objective—finding a man for a one-night stand.

“You’ve got men staring at your boobs from across the dance floor, Syd.” Her best friend, Paige, plopped down in front of her and pushed a mixed drink into Sydney’s hands.

She winked at Paige. “That’s the point, isn’t it?”

“Lean a little more forward and they might get a peek at your nipple.”

Prowling wasn't something Sydney had ever done before, which Paige knew and wasn't about to let her forget, and one reason Sydney had bought a white dress with all the sex-vibe essentials. Something to make her feel sexy, ready for seduction, and it worked. The formfitting halter top plunged low between her breasts and left her back bare. A cinched waist accentuated her tiny middle, then flared into a flirty skirt that reached midthigh. A pair of red strappy come-and-fuck-me heels topped off the look.

“You sure about this?” Paige asked.

“Sure am.”

Months had passed since she'd had sex. Of course, she'd been in a couple of relationships; she was *always* in a relationship. The end result was the same each and every damn time: a broken heart. She was sick of putting her heart on the line.

Feelings and love no longer interested her. Men thought with their dicks; why couldn't she think with her pussy? No strings, no emotions, just sex. Sounded pretty good to her.

“I really don't like this,” Paige said.

Sydney stirred her drink with the thin red straw. “Listen, hon, I completely get you have to do the worried-best-friend thing, but don't, okay? Men suck. But they are still good for one thing.”

“Men don't suck, Syd. You just suck at picking them.”

*Ouch. But so totally true.*

“My methods sucked. I'd meet a guy, and my brain would get clouded with romantic, gooey thoughts. The

clouds have cleared. Men don't care about romance. They want one thing: sex. I can play that game too."

"You think so, huh? Sorry to inform you, but you're not the casual-sex type."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Just keeping it real." Paige took a sip of her drink. "One question, though. Why a nightclub?"

"Meeting them the old-fashioned way sure as hell hasn't worked, now has it?"

Paige grimaced. "Ugh, no."

"At least here I know exactly what the guy wants. I'm not getting some watered-down version I met in a library."

"All right. I hear ya. You've had it rough the last few months."

Sydney quirked an eyebrow at her friend, who blew out an annoyed breath and admitted, "Fine. The man mart has been crappy for the last few years. I just want you to be careful. You've never had a one-night stand before, Syd."

"What's to know? Get drunk, screw, then go home." See, she could sound like she knew what she was doing.

Paige averted her eyes, pursing her lips.

Sydney sighed. "Just say it."

"Say what?"

"Come on, Paige. We've been friends for ten years. You only do the pursed-lip thing when you want to say something but you're biting your tongue."

Her friend grimaced. "Fine. What if you meet another John?"

"Bringing out the big guns, aren't you?" Sydney asked, sitting up straight.

"It's something to consider."

“You think I haven’t?” God, *had* she considered it. “I refuse to cower from life just because of one asshole.”

“I’m not saying you should.”

Sydney reached across the table and squeezed her best friend’s hand. “John was a mistake.”

“That’s putting it lightly.”

“He hasn’t bothered me since the restraining order. I think he’s realized I’m not a woman he can control, and has moved on.”

“To some other poor, unsuspecting woman.”

Silence descended between them. Paige’s words weighed heavily in the air. Sydney hoped another woman wouldn’t fall for her ex-boyfriend John’s charm. His innocent-boy looks had hidden a devil, but she hadn’t realized until they’d gotten into an argument and he’d slapped the words right out of her mouth. She’d left his apartment immediately, but her departure hadn’t fazed him. He’d harassed her for weeks. Good-ole-boy John couldn’t handle not being able to control a woman. Too bad for him. She hadn’t looked back since their breakup a month ago. First time ever she’d been the one to end a relationship, and yet another notch on the Sydney-sure-knows-how-to-pick-’em belt.

Trying to put playfulness back into the night, Sydney pointed to a guy leaning against the wall. “What about him?”

Paige looked in that direction and curled her nose. “Ew. No.”

“Why not?”

“Since when does emo appeal to you?”

“Never.” Sydney laughed. “But my suggestion wiped the worried look off your face.”

One side of her friend's mouth lifted. "You're really serious about doing this."

"Yep."

"All right, then. I've said my piece. Let's find you a man."

"I don't want a man. I want a dick."

"I've been corrected," Paige said, holding up her hands, then turned her attention to the crowd. "Any preference?"

"Tall, dark and handsome."

"Let's see what we can find."

Pickings were slim, so all of Paige's worrying looked to be unfounded. Sydney might be horny for some male companionship, but that didn't mean she was desperate. If she ended the night with her SnugglePuss vibrator, then so be it. As of right now, that outcome was looking more and more likely.

Sydney scowled. The men who were alone, were alone for a reason.

Candidate number one: a frumpy, short man whose nose crinkled into a snout when he laughed.

*Moving on.*

Candidate number two: completely wasted, dancing like a moron, sloshing beer everywhere.

*Yeah, no.*

Candidate number three—Sydney started. Well, he wasn't drunk, short or frumpy, but his leering made her insides scream *hell no*.

"Anything?" Paige asked.

Sydney glanced at her friend. "Not a thing."

The plan might be a bust. Damn. *Might as well get busy on the buzz.* She took a sip of the fruity beverage.

Fire burned her throat, and she gagged. “Bartender was friendly tonight,” she rasped.

Paige laughed. “They are a little strong, aren’t they?”

Sydney took another tentative sip, then shook her head in disgust. If she wanted to drink straight liquor, she’d do shots. “I’m not drinking this. I’m rather fond of my insides, and this is setting them on fire.”

“You’re such a wuss,” Paige said, then took another sip of hers.

“No. I just believe in enjoying my drinks. *This* is not enjoyable.”

Sydney hopped out of the booth, made her way to the bar and stifled a groan at the sight of the mad crowd hovering around the counter. Wedging between the wall and another woman, Sydney waved at the bartender, who ignored her.

*Great. Just freaking fantastic.* A female bartender. Flashing her cleavage wouldn’t help with speedy service.

The woman leaned toward a stocky man, *her* cleavage almost spilling out of her low-cut white tee and onto the counter. “What can I get for you, sugar?”

“Two beers,” he said, eyeing the boobs she proudly displayed.

“And you, sweet cheeks?” she asked, turning to another man, flashing him a sexy, you-are-the-only-man-who-has-my-attention smile.

“Beer also.”

“What the devil is this? Have dicks, will serve?” Sydney muttered as the bartender grabbed three bottled beers from the cooler and popped off the tops with a flick of her wrist before handing them to the men.

The woman standing beside her chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve been standing here for ten minutes without a glance.”

“To hell with that. Hey!” Sydney waved at the bartender, who sent her an annoyed look, then turned to another man. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

All she wanted was a drink that tasted good. Not much to ask for, especially with the outrageous prices. Mission “Get Laid” was turning out to be a complete waste of time. No good-looking men, no good drinks and a man-hungry bartender. The music sucked too. Maybe she should just call it a night and go home.

“Where’ve you been all my life?” a masculine voice whispered in her ear.

*Oh, puh-lease. This was all she needed.* Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms under her breasts, pasted on a “do I look like I waste my time?” glare and whirled around.

Totally Sinful slapped her in the face, and her mouth dropped open as she stared into mischievous silver eyes twinkling under dark, lowered lashes. Dressed in a black suit, the man oozed raw sex. Her nipples puckered into painful peaks; her pussy dripped *mine, mine, mine*.

No way had the cheesy line come out of *his* mouth. She glanced around, trying to find the speaker of the words. No one else. Just a bunch of frustrated women wanting a drink. So he *had* to have said it. Oh well. She could play the cheese card too. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, she cringed. Oh, for Pete’s sake, had she really said that? He leaned his elbow against the bar, bringing his face inches from hers. Tacky pick-up line or not, this man was the epitome of the word *man*. With a strong, stubble-covered jaw and disheveled black hair hanging so very sexy across his

brow, he reminded her of Dr. Luka Kovac from *ER*. She'd been hot for the TV doc, as well.

Awareness raced throughout her body, accelerating her heart rate, making her pussy throb. A smile tugged at her lips. She'd been waiting to experience this reaction. Her body screamed for her to fuck like the wind.

He wrapped one of her red curls around his finger, then drew the digit down her cheek. "*Ma beauté aux cheveux rouge.*"

Oh, she was *so* screwed. The thick French accent went straight from her ears to her clit. "What does that mean?"

His lips twitched in a restrained smile. "We men must keep our secrets."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" As his fingertip caressed her bottom lip, she resisted the urge to bite it.

"We all have our secrets. The fun comes in revealing them at precisely the right moment."

He scooted closer. The material of his black shirt brushed her arm, and goose bumps scurried over her skin. Good gracious, he'd barely touched her and she was ready to throw herself on the floor in front of everyone and demand he fuck her now.

Where had this inner slut come from? But she couldn't deny the vixen. She throbbed. Her panties were soaked, and visions of him doing naughty things to her with his tongue kept popping into her head.

"Tell me your name."

"Sydney."

"Ah. Sydney." He spoke her name with the same softness he'd used as he caressed her cheek. Add in the heavy accent, and her knees turned to complete mush. He was potent.

“Might I have yours?” she asked.

He flashed a bright smile as he wrapped his warm fingers around hers and raised her hand to his lips, then kissed her knuckles. A thrill raced up her arm from the gentlemanly gesture. “Raimond Decoudreau.”

Even his name sounded exotic. “It’s nice to meet you...Raimond.” She liked the way his name sounded as it rolled off her tongue. It made *her* feel exotic and just a bit wild.

“Likewise.”

He took the drink from her hand. Without breaking eye contact, he drew his lips between his teeth. A sharp whistle pierced the air.

“Listen, you have to wait...” The bartender’s annoyed voice trailed off as she faced Raimond, who glared at her with censure. “Ohmygod! So sorry, Mr. Decoudreau. I didn’t see you there.”

The bartender snatched the glass and looked questioningly at the large man. Sydney watched in awe as Raimond lazily turned back to face her. “What would be to your liking, sweet Sydney?”

“Hmm...sex on the beach?”

A devilish grin spread over his face. “As the lady wishes.”

The hidden promise in those words made her almost cream her panties. Before she could come up with a sexy comeback, a new glass appeared before her. She stirred the drink, then took a tentative sip. So good. “Do all women jump to your beck and call?”

He chuckled. “Only the ones whose paychecks I sign.”

She paused to study him. “Do you mean—” Nah. Her luck wasn’t that good.

“I own this club.”

“Do you now?”

Woo-hoo! She'd struck pay dirt. As the owner, he had to have a flavor for every night of the week, redhead being tonight's. The last thing he would be looking for was a serious relationship. Perfect. Exactly what she was looking for.

“Would you like to come back to my office? We could...talk.” He focused on her lips, and she swallowed.

The first tentacles of hesitation snaked in, damn them. Not one iota of reluctance had entered her mind since she'd made up her mind to look for a fuck buddy. But she'd actually hooked one, and her conscience was being a asshole with what-if scenarios. What in the world was she doing? Then he smiled. Her heart stuttered as desire crashed over her, removing the doubt. She wanted this. Wanted him.

“I just need to tell my friend where I'm going.”

“I'll wait here,” he said, his gaze connecting with hers.

Mesmerized, she couldn't look away. The longer they stared at each other, the more it felt as if he burrowed deep inside her and saw her deepest secrets. The feeling was just as unnerving as it was exciting. He blinked, and the moment passed. She laughed nervously and held up a shaky finger. “I'll be right back.”

As she pushed her way to Paige, she wondered what drew her to Raimond Decoudreau. There was something more to him than a typical man. An aura, a secret. Why had she reacted to him the way she did? Was she feeding off the mystery? She didn't know, but she did know her body responded to him like it had for no other man. And that worried her.

“Girl, what’s the matter with you?” Paige’s voice broke into her musing.

“What?”

“You were totally in la-la land. What’s up?” Paige rose from the table and came to stand beside her.

“Oh. Sorry. Just thinking. Um. I met a guy.”

“Who?” Paige craned her neck to look around.

“The guy dressed in all black at the bar.”

“Wowie.” Paige whistled. “No wonder you look struck dumb.”

“Thanks,” Sydney said sarcastically, then added, “He’s delicious, though, isn’t he?”

Her friend nodded. “Your picking is definitely improving. Maybe one-night stands suit you. I wouldn’t mind getting ahold of him myself.”

“Paige!”

“What? I wouldn’t.” Paige paused. “Got protection?”

Sydney patted her purse. “Never depend on the guy.”

“That’s my girl.” Her friend smiled and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll leave you to him. Just be careful.”

“I will.”

“Text me when you get home.” After another quick hug, Paige left the club.

Sydney turned to find Raimond watching her closely. Nervous anticipation coiled inside her as she walked toward him. So tall, so dark, so handsome—the three criteria she’d requested, but it wasn’t those things drawing her. An underlying current of something she couldn’t name beckoned her. She inhaled, calming the flutters in her stomach.

*You’re doing it again. Adding romance into something supposed to be anything but. There’s no*

*mystery or secret. He's just a man who wants to fuck. Nothing more.*

When she reached his side and he placed his palm on the small of her back, desire seared straight to between her legs. How could such a simple gesture cause such an intense reaction?

*You just want him. Badly.*

*Like no other man before.*

*Shut up!*

He led her down a dark hall and opened a door. As she stepped through, she glanced around. The large room screamed *male*. A black leather sofa sat against a wall, facing a stone-encased fireplace with a flat-screen television above it. Slate tile covered the floor. In the far corner, a mahogany desk loaded with paperwork dominated the area. Raimond stepped around her and moved to a bar. Lifting a bottle of wine in the air, he asked, "Would you like to trade your drink for something more enticing?"

She nodded. Wine fit this room much better than a mixed drink.

He poured the deep red wine into two flutes, picked up a remote control, hit a button that made a fire jump to life in the fireplace, then another that made soft music float into the room.

Oh, he was a pro at this. Completely out of her league. Both glasses in hand, he sauntered over until he stood before her and offered her a glass. After she accepted it, he took the mixed drink from her, then placed it on a nearby side table, never once taking his gaze off her.

"What is it about you?" he asked in a soft voice.

He seemed to be asking himself, so she kept silent, but she didn't fail to notice the similarities in their thinking process. How odd they both could wonder the same thing.

Raimond stepped closer. "May I kiss you?"

He asked? Holy hell. No man had ever asked if he could kiss her; they just did it. She liked this change. It gave her a sense of control and made her feel like he cared if she wanted his affections.

*Whoa, girl! There you go again.*

This was more than likely his game. The way he made a woman relax. She could see why he used it: the method worked.

"Yes."

He inched closer until his chest brushed her erect nipples. She inhaled sharply, suddenly aware of exactly how tall he was. Only reaching his shoulders, she had to tip her head back to look into his face. He stood so close but made no move to take her into his arms, just stared down at her with mesmerizing silver eyes. Their intensity made her swallow. He dipped his head and teased her lips with his. Tingles swept over her mouth. A draw like none other consumed her. His eyes flashed yellow before returning to their icy gray. Sydney blinked. *No way.*

A growl rumbled from Raimond's chest. "*Mon âme soeur.*"

The words struck a chord deep inside her, sparking it to life. Before she could ask what the phrase meant, he crushed his lips to hers. Hot and heavy. Wineglasses shattered on the floor. Cool liquid splashed her legs. Raimond ripped his mouth from hers, lifted her into his arms and carried her to the couch. With determination on his face, he laid her on the leather cushions and knelt at

the other end. He cradled her calf with warm fingers, bent and sampled the wine clinging to her skin. His mouth climbed up her leg, his tongue lapping away at the liquid. Inside, outside, behind her knee, circling around until he licked all the way to her inner thigh. Heart pounding, she stared at the dark head of hair against her pale skin. Such a contrast.

He slid his palm up her outer thigh, pushing her white skirt up to her hips. With his nose, he nuzzled the front of her lacy cream-colored panties and inhaled deeply. "I can smell your arousal, Sydney. It makes my mouth water for a taste. May I?"

Again he asked, and she loved that he did so. "God, please."

He backed away long enough to draw her panties down her legs. Once he'd thrown them to the floor, he hooked his hands behind her knees and spread them so one leg was on each side of his hips. She had a moment of shyness and tried to clamp her legs together, but he held firm, devouring her pussy with his eyes just as surely as he soon would with his mouth.

"Pink and wet. *Belle chatte.*"

Clit pulsing, Sydney gasped. If he continued to speak softly in French, she'd come without his even touching her. Raimond's grip on her knees loosened, and he moved forward. Hot breath warmed the skin of her thigh, and he inhaled again. "Your scent was made for me."

The first stroke of his tongue on her sex made her moan, her body wound so tight the light touch was almost painful. Threading her fingers through his hair, she held him close as his mouth sinfully mastered her. Swirling, sucking, licking. Soft rumbles came from Raimond,

vibrating into her. Each growl brought her closer to completion.

“Oh yes.” She lifted her pelvis, silently begging. He worked one hand between them and spread her labia with two fingers. With her clit vulnerable to his manipulations, he sucked the nub into his mouth. Pleasure ripped through her, and she arched her back off the couch. “Yes!”

He didn't pull back on his exquisite torture; his tongue dueled with her clit. The sensation deep inside twisted tighter, then tighter still. She whimpered, needing her release. “Please. Please.”

Once more he sucked, and everything splintered. The powerful waves of her orgasm flowed over her, and she moaned.

“That's it, *bébé*. Let it go.”

Another quake hit her, and her body jerked. A hiss came from Raimond. “*Oui*. Beautiful.”

Stretching, she smiled as Raimond climbed up her body, settled between her legs and propped up on his elbows. She brushed his hair back, then trailed her palm down his cheek. “Now that was something.”

He bent to kiss her. He covered her mouth with his, coating her mouth with her juices. Knowing how much he'd taken pleasure in her taste and smell, she savored the tangy sweetness. He pulled back and looked down at her. “You've only experienced a small sampling, sweet Sydney. By the end of the night, you will have had the orgasm of your life.”

“Promises, promises.”

“Not a promise, I assure you.”

The sincerity on his face made her realize this wasn't just sex talk. He believed he could give her the best orgasm of her life. Did he know some kind of kinky

position? Have a special toy? The thought was intriguing. “Then I guess you need to get to work.”

A wicked smile spread across his lips. “As you wish.”

He recaptured her mouth, taking slow and thorough time with each lap of his tongue. Need spread through her; something almost carnal, instinctive drove her. Blindly, she pushed her hands between them and fumbled with the top button of his shirt before it slipped through the hole. One by one, she made quick work of each fastening, until the shirt hung open.

Breaking the kiss, she looked down and groaned at the sight of tanned, ripped muscles of his chest. Raimond balanced on one elbow, giving her room to trace each groove of his six-pack, up around his defined pecs, then pinch his small nipples. He closed his eyes and hissed between clenched teeth. “*Mon âme soeur.*”

The words created another flare deep inside. She had no idea what they meant, but it had to be good if the bliss on his face was any indication. Either way, it didn't matter. She liked hearing him speak in his native tongue. Could go all night just listening to him talk.

His eyes snapped open, and again she was struck by their odd yellow tinge. He blinked, and it was gone. Before she could investigate further, a feral growl vibrated from him, the unmistakable sound of a mating tom, and he kissed her—savage, urgent.

Dear God, the man was a beast. And she wanted it. She pushed at his shirt and jacket. Ripping his mouth from hers, he yanked the material over his shoulders, then braced his hands on either side of her head and stared down at her. The sight of him shirtless, positioned above her, hair flowing into his face, eyes wild with lust, was

her undoing. Her hands flew to his belt buckle. He pushed them away and, with unbelievable speed, shed the remainder of their clothes.

Following the length of his body, she widened her eyes at the sight of his thick erection. She inhaled a shaky breath at the idea of *that* hammering into her.

He took one of her nipples into his wet mouth. Pleasure speared through her breast straight to her pulsing center. She gasped as he lightly nipped the perked bud. Encouraging him to drive forward, needing to have him fill her, she rubbed against the head of his cock. He lowered his body, his weight pushing her deeper into the leather. A tuft of hair fell into his eyes. "Are you ready, mon âme soeur?"

The spark those words created flared and spread into an all-out fire. She rubbed her aching pussy against him. "Please. I need you."

And she did, more than she'd ever needed anything. She didn't know why, but this had to happen. If it didn't, a part of her would be incomplete forever.

As he thrust deeply into her, he took her lips. Against his mouth, she gasped and tensed. His girth was more than she'd anticipated. Not painful. Just full. He paused, allowing her time to stretch to his demands. Second by second, her body relaxed.

Finally, he began to move. Slowly at first, his thrusts matching the rhythm of his tongue inside her mouth. She rolled her hips underneath him, widening her legs so he fit more snugly against her pussy. A satisfied groan rumbled in his chest; his thrusts became more urgent. He broke the kiss and buried his head in the crook of her neck. His grunts of exertion flowed in her ears, hard, fast. Over and over again, he hammered into her, his cock reaching

depths no other man had ever achieved. She grabbed on to his ass, helping him fuck her deeper. A profound need gripped her. As his pace became frantic, she yelled out, the tension unbearable. She wanted it to continue; she wanted it to stop. She needed something more but didn't know what.

“Oh God!”

Raimond's head snapped up, his teeth bared as he groaned his release. With a shudder, he pulled from her. A desperate gasp ripped from her. “No,” she said and reached for him. If he didn't fill this gaping hole, she'd never be complete again.

He ignored her plea. And tears burned her eyes at the thought he would leave her feeling like this. Then his gaze connected with hers. “Trust me.”

Again, he lowered his head between her thighs. The sight of his dark mane between her legs pushed her closer to the edge. She grabbed a fistful of his hair, keeping his head in place as she ground into his wicked tongue. Shards of pleasure surrounded her as her climax broke. A sharp pain pierced her leg as Raimond's teeth sank into the flesh of her thigh.

She stiffened. Intense burning started in her womb and spread throughout her body, inflaming her. The heat became almost intolerable, and she moaned. The hole he'd created gaped wider. A frantic need to close the outlet filled her. “I can't take it,” she gasped out.

He bit her other thigh, and she jerked violently. Fiery heat encased her body and poured into the chasm, overflowing with a blazing brilliance. With one last powerful flare that left her screaming in raw pleasure, the fire died to a white beating light. She lay panting on the couch, staring into Raimond's possessive eyes.

She felt as if she glowed. As if she had found something.

Almost...what? Bonded? As if this man belonged to her and no one else. She closed her eyes.

*Sydney Chase, you will never learn.*