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Episode One

Maeve

It's an hour till closing and Trouble has just walked into my bar.

You could set your clock by it—if a customer is going to be a problem, expect it to be one of the last customers of the night.

I eye the tall guy sporting a long ponytail, leaning against my precious jukebox. He runs a finger down the list of song choices, clicks a button, then glances over at me.

Or, more specifically, at my boobs.

I roll my eyes, then grab a dishrag from the shelf behind me to clean the pint glasses while “Pour Some Sugar On Me” blasts over the speakers.

“I think you have an admirer,” Cat says as she grabs a clean glass and pours a beer. She's my right hand at the bar along with Billy, my new mixologist. Sure, I still miss Dean, my old business partner at The Magpie—but these two make life here fun.

“He's definitely checking you out,” Cat says, tipping her head toward Ponytail. “And he's kinda cute.”

Oh, sweet girl. “Tip from one woman to another—stay away from guys like that. Guys like that are trouble.”

“What do you mean, trouble?” She tilts her head to the side as she hands the customer his beer then chalks the drink up to his tab.

I raise one hand, count off the list. “One: he's been making eyes at my chest ever since he walked in.”

“Well, empirically speaking, your boobs are great.” Cat shrugs.

“Even if I had a porn-star worthy rack, my face is up here, and a little eye contact wouldn't go astray.” I hold up a second finger.

“Reason number two: he's been here five minutes, and he's already asked Billy to send a drink to that woman over there”—I point to a lady in red standing with another woman in one corner of the bar—“and

that one there.” This time, I point to a woman in a “bride-to-be” sash.

“Ugh.” Cat rolls her green eyes.

“Double ugh,” I agree. “And reason number three: his pickup line. It’s sure to be atrocious.”

“How do you know?” she asks.

“Call it a special skill,” I say as I place a glass on the rack. “When you’ve worked the bar for as long as I have, sometimes you just have a feeling when a man has absolutely no game in the pickup line department.”

“I’ve never met a pickup line I’ve liked,” Cat laments, then darts her eyes to the jukebox. “Here he comes. Need me to run interference?”

“It’s fine. I’ve got this,” I reply, and Cat moves away to serve another customer as Ponytail approaches the bar.

I turn to face him, flashing my most professional smile. “What can I get you?”

“I was hoping for something real . . .” His eyes dance to my chest again. “. . . tasty, if you know what I mean.”

Aaaand we have a winner, ladies and gents.

Cat hides a smile behind her hand, disguising it with a cough, and I heave a deep breath.

“We have many tasty options here on our menu.” I gesture to the folder on the bar. After all, there’s no need to be rude. “But if that was a terrible pickup line and you were hoping to perhaps order some of this?” I gesture to my chest. “I am most definitely not for sale.”

Ponytail shrugs and taps the bar with a too-long nail. “Your loss, lady.”

“Sure it is.” I gesture to Billy as he walks closer. “If you’d like to order an actual drink for yourself—not for another one of our patrons—Billy can help you out. If not, he’d be happy to order you a taxi and you can head on home.”

Ponytail gapes, a la goldfish.

I don’t wait for his reply. Instead, I turn and walk to the other end

of the bar to prep the bottles of booze I'll need for an industry trade show tomorrow, adrenaline pumping through me. It's not the first time I've been hit on here, and it won't be the last. Something about being a bartender—I guess people figure I'm easy prey.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

I look up, searching for the slow-clapper.

And there he is.

Sam.

My old business partner's close friend.

And the subject of some of my wildest dreams.

Not that I gave him a second thought until recently. When I first met him a few years ago, Sam was married, which placed him firmly in the "just mates" column.

As Dean's friends, we always found ourselves at the same parties and events. Sam was the incredibly hot, incredibly unavailable guy with the best dirty jokes.

It was just a shame I hadn't seen him much since Dean had moved to the States.

"You handled that well," Sam says, tipping his head toward Ponytail as he lopez out of the bar. "That could have been a challenging situation."

"Thanks." I shrug, like it's no big deal. "This isn't my first rodeo."

"I bet. I'm sure you get hit on a lot."

"I wouldn't say a lot." I make a face. "But enough. I definitely get hit on enough."

"What constitutes 'enough' bar pickups?" he asks, playfulness in his tone. "Is there some kind of national standard?"

"You tell me," I reply, since Sam's a bar owner himself and sometimes he stops by mine. "What's your limit?"

"It's not a question of quantity for me, but rather quality." Sam's dark eyes fix on mine, and is that a hint of flirtation in his sexy American accent?

Heat fizzes inside me. "I feel the same way."

He smiles, and oh, that sexy, crooked smile—it's like champagne, sending tiny frissons of excitement through my body.

“Scuse me, love? A refill?” someone calls from the other end of the bar.

I hold up one finger to Sam, *be right back*, and head over to grab the gentleman his drink.

As I pour the beer, I covertly check out Sam once again. His dark eyes are on his phone, his gorgeous smile the perfect pair to them, like gin and vermouth. He runs a hand over that sexy jawline, and my fingers itch, wanting in on a piece of that action too.

What if he stayed until close and we shared a drink? If we talked until late in the night, and then talking led to me touching that jaw? If he leaned in close as he kissed me goodnight, what would he smell like?

How would he taste?

Get a grip, Maeve.

He's just a man.

A recently available man.

Who happens to be incredibly handsome.

But there's a reason I don't date.

I've made too many bad choices. Plenty of guys seem good on paper and then turn out to be total wastes of time.

Take Jeremy, the best and worst of them. Went to Cambridge, nabbed a fancy law degree, dressed like James Bond. He took me to museums and cooked for me. He wrote poetry on the side and would read it to me while we sat on the balcony.

It was perfect. Until I found out Jeremy was doing private poetry readings for some other woman at the same time.

But that's all in the past, because I've found the perfect relationship. I pour my soul into this one, and in return, it just gets better and better. It's a lot of work, but The Magpie will never let me down.

She's *my* bar.

God, I love how that sounds.

And that's why I don't need to focus on what-ifs with men like Sam, even if he makes me smile, and is easy to talk to, and looks like sex on a stick.

I hand the beer to the customer then return to the man in question, who's settled in at a bar stool. "What can I get you? I'd have thought you'd be working."

"I took the night off. I'm at the industry trade show tomorrow and wanted time to get my ducks in a row. Are you going—?"

"Yes," I rush the word almost like he's asked me out, which is ridiculous, because it's a trade show, not dinner and a movie, and he's a mate, not a date.

"Ah, good. I was hoping I could ask you something," he says, and my body wants to say *yes, yes, yes*, even before it knows the question.

It's been a few months since Sam's divorce. Perhaps Sam is feeling these same stirrings of potential between us as I am. Perhaps he's *seeing* me, not as Dean's mate, not as a friend of a friend, but as a woman.

An interested woman.

"Shoot," I reply cool, calm, and collected.

"I'm making a Buck's fizz for an event tomorrow and I'm fresh out of orange for our garnish, and the only stores open this late aren't exactly purveyors of quality produce." He makes an apologetic face. "Do you happen to have any oranges I could borrow?"

Oranges.

He doesn't want to see me.

He wants to see my . . . oranges.

"Sure," I reply evenly.

"Thank you. You are truly a goddess of the bar world," Sam says. "Now I'll have time to dehydrate them overnight. And I'll have more sent to your bar tomorrow as soon as the grocer opens."

"No need." I wave a hand, dismissing the notion. "Our fruit guy often delivers extra."

"So it's fate then. You had some in my time of need." His eyes

smolder, that hint of flirtation back again.

But this time, I douse the bubbles of hope in my stomach before they can fully develop. He's not here for me, and that's fine. We're just friends, and that's okay.

Billy, Cat, and I close the bar, and he's one of the last patrons to leave, a bag of oranges slung over his shoulder.

Yes, the last patrons of the night sure are trouble.

Only this time, I didn't see it coming.