

## Chapter One

Andrew took a long drink from his lager and gazed around the club from his seat at the bar. Okay, so it was only eight in the evening, and the place had just opened, but the strip club was dead. Large TV screens displayed images of gorgeous, hot guys and what looked like a vintage porn film. There was one lone customer, sitting at a table near the stage nursing a pint and casting the odd glance at the dancer who was performing. *And the less said about him, the better....*

The mirrors around the back of the stage didn't enhance his performance either. His dancing could have been more polished, in Andrew's opinion, but it wasn't that which was putting him off. "Barry" was far too "in your face." There was no subtlety to his act whatsoever. This was only the first of his three songs, and already he had his dick out, waving it at his one and only patron. *Yeah, about as subtle as a train wreck.*

"You don't seem that impressed by our Barry."

Andrew turned from his perusal of the stage to look at the barman, and then he smiled. The guy behind the bar sure was cute. Petite, with big eyes and a sexy smile.

"Sorry if I gave that impression," Andrew said carefully. The direction his thoughts were going in right now, he wanted to keep on the right side of the staff. It might prove useful. "His act is... interesting."

The barman snorted. "That's one word for it."

Andrew's smile widened. "Look, I was trying to be polite, all right?"

His confidant grinned. "Appreciated." He tilted his head. "Are you from the States?"

Andrew groaned. Not *another* person who could hear that damned inflection. One of his Facebook friends, Kathy, who lived in Dorset, had told him the first time they'd Skyped that he definitely had this American twang to his accent. He hadn't heard it. But then a week later, during a conference call to London, someone else had told him the same thing.

"I'm originally from Bristol," he said with a quick smile, "but I've been living in the States for quite a few years. I've just moved back here from Atlanta."

The barman frowned. "Why on earth would you want to leave Atlanta to come to *Manchester*, of all places? I mean, I hear they have this huge gay community over there." He looked around the club with a smirk. "And there had to be better strip clubs than this."

Andrew laughed. “Well, now that you mention it...”

The barman extended his hand. “The name’s Kurt, by the way.”

Andrew shook it. “Andrew Barrett.”

Kurt’s eyes gleamed appreciatively as he looked Andrew up and down. “*Very* pleased to meet you, babe.” Andrew arched his eyebrows, and Kurt reddened. “Okay, so you’re easy on the eye. Sue me, as they say over there,” he said gruffly. Andrew chuckled. “How long have you been in Manchester?”

“Two weeks.” Two long, dull weeks. It had been primarily boredom that had driven Andrew from his flat. A week into the new job, and things were going well. The McCann Manchester branch was going to be a challenge but nothing Andrew couldn’t handle. Right now he was feeling antsy, and the discovery of a strip club on Canal Street in the heart of Manchester’s gay village was too great an opportunity to pass up. His gaze went back to Barry, who had by now removed his long shorts and T-shirt and was swinging from the pole, center stage.

“God, he needs to work on using the music better,” Andrew muttered to himself. Movement behind the bar dragged his attention back to Kurt, who was staring at him.

“You’re a stripper.” It wasn’t a question.

Andrew was impressed. “How did you know?”

Kurt shrugged. “Just a feeling. And besides, I work with enough of them. You get a feel for the good ones.” There was that deliberate inspection again. “And I get the feeling you’re *very* good at what you do.” He winked.

Andrew grinned. “You never know, you might get to see me in action one of these days.” Kurt’s eyes lit up. Andrew took another drink from his lager and gave Kurt his full attention. He cleared his throat. “So tell me, is Canal Street a good place to work?”

Kurt nodded. “It’s quieter during the week, but Fridays and Saturdays can get pretty manic. There are loads of clubs and bars, but so far, we’re the only strip club. If you like dancing, I can recommend Babel. They get a good crowd, and it’s always lively in there, no matter what day it is.”

Andrew filed that tidbit away for future reference. He studied his glass before posing his next question. “What do you know of a club called Collars & Cuffs?” He kept his manner nonchalant.

Kurt became still. “Oh, honey. Is that what you’re into?” Andrew said nothing. Kurt shrugged once more. “I’ve never been there—although I have been tempted, on occasion—but I know it’s a fairly exclusive BDSM club, gay men only.”

“That much I picked up online,” Andrew admitted. “Does it have a good reputation? If I believe what I read, then yes. But I want to know from someone who lives here, works here.”

Kurt gave a slow nod. “I’ve heard nothing but good stuff, to be honest. The two guys who own it apparently run a tight ship. I know fees are stiff, but they don’t let just anyone in. I know a few mates who’ve tried to get in and haven’t made it past their vetting procedures.”

That was music to Andrew’s ears and exactly what he’d hoped to hear. *Looks like a visit to Collars & Cuffs is on the cards, then.* “I did see a few other clubs for the Manchester area, but this one had the best ratings.”

Kurt met his gaze. “Yeah, well, one club shut down fairly recently. That was a bad business.” Andrew tilted his head, and Kurt scowled. “Just don’t ask. Those bastards needed to be shut down. That’s all you need to know.”

Before Andrew could say another word, he heard the sound of high heels clicking across the laminate flooring, followed by a low female voice beside him. “Is Barry still up there?” She sounded exasperated.

Kurt chuckled. “About to finish, he’s on his third number now.” He gave a nod toward Andrew. “Someone here I think you should meet, boss.”

Andrew quirked his eyebrows but turned on his chair to face the speaker. He came face to face with a tall woman in a gray suit, blond hair immaculately set and perfectly applied makeup. She was regarding him quizzically. “Oh, really?”

Andrew held out his hand. “Andrew Barrett, new arrival to these shores.”

She took his hand, her grip firm. “Always nice to meet a new customer.”

Kurt chuckled. “Ah, but this is no ordinary customer. Andrew’s a stripper.”

There was a definite look of interest in those cool blue eyes. "Indeed," she said, holding onto Andrew's hand. "DeeDee Walker. I own Bliss." She gave him a speculative look. "Where have you worked, Mr. Barrett?" She relinquished his hand.

"In a few different places. My last job was in a bar in Atlanta."

Oh, yeah, DeeDee *definitely* seemed interested. She squared her shoulders. "Do you need a job?"

Andrew laughed. "You don't mess around, do you?"

She shrugged. "Nope. Don't see the point." She narrowed her gaze. "Well, do you?"

Andrew thought about it. If he were being totally truthful, he'd wandered into the club with the faintest hope that he'd have just such an offer. Okay, so the money he earned as a copywriter was good, but having a little extra income wouldn't hurt. And of course, there was the fact that he loved stripping. And God, he'd missed it.

He met DeeDee's forthright gaze. "Yes. Yes, I do. Maybe just weekends, though." He could manage two nights a week without it taking over his life. He intended to pursue other... *interests* for another couple of nights.

DeeDee lifted her eyebrows. "Seems I'm not the only one who doesn't mess about." She glanced around the club. "Seeing as it's still quiet, why don't you get up there and show me what you've got?"

Well, he hadn't expected *that*. Andrew hid his surprise and got to his feet slowly, masking his excitement. "Okay, no problem."

DeeDee pointed to the booth at the back of the stage, where Andrew could just about make out the head of the club's DJ. "Give Jim your choice of songs. He's got a pretty eclectic mix back there, so I guarantee if you want something, he'll have it."

*If he has all three of what I have in mind, I'll be seriously impressed,* Andrew thought with a wry smile. He gave DeeDee a nod and went up onto the stage to talk to Jim. Barry had finished his set and had gone backstage, leaving the solitary customer watching the proceedings with interest. Apart from DeeDee, Kurt, and the lone guy, there was no one else in the club. *Strike that*, Andrew thought as he caught sight of a shadowy figure in the doorway which led into the club. A slim silhouette stood there, lit from behind so Andrew couldn't make out any features. He dragged himself back into the moment. Shadowy figure in a doorway be damned—he had a club owner to impress.

He leaned on the sill to talk to Jim, who turned out to be a *very* hot guy. Andrew smiled appreciatively as he gave his requests. Jim didn't bat an eyelid.

"Yeah, no problem. We got all those. Just give me a sec to set 'em up." He winked. "And then go dazzle DeeDee."

Andrew beamed. *God, I hope this comes off.* He got a good feeling about this place, and he liked DeeDee's no-nonsense air. As he waited for Jim to queue up his numbers, Andrew kicked off his boots, shucked off his jeans and T-shirt, and then replaced his Doc Martens, adorned in only them and his royal blue Andrew Christian briefs. *Good thing I was wearing some decent underwear.* He piled his clothing on the ornate throne which sat at the back of the stage. Over the arm was a towel. Andrew took it to wipe down the pole, making sure that he leaped up to the top and slid down slowly. Even cleaning the pole had an art to it. He straightened and looked out toward his single customer, who was to be his sole focus for the performance. He watched DeeDee lean back against the bar, her gaze fixed on him. Kurt was standing next to her, and Andrew had to smile when he gave a thumbs-up.

The tinkling opening notes of "Destination Unknown" by Missing Persons came over the speaker system, and Andrew took a deep breath, focusing on what was to come. A few bars in, he leaped up once more to grab the pole at its highest point and then held his body rigid, legs spread wide, before sliding down to the floor and landing in the splits. Even above the music he caught the gasps from his tiny audience. Fluidly, he got to his feet and began to twist his body around the pole, adopting position after position which showed off his flexibility. When he held himself upside down on the pole while doing the splits, he caught more gasps. He kept his movements flowing and sensual, never straying from his familiar routine but ensuring every motion was smooth and precise.

The music faded into the pulsing drumbeat and heavy guitar riff of "Pure Morning" by Placebo. Andrew lowered himself to the floor and undulated his body in a sensual parody of sex, nothing too over the top, before moving smoothly onto his back and hooking his legs behind his head.

"Bloody 'ell," his customer swore quietly, still audible above the soundtrack. Andrew smiled as he grabbed hold of his briefs and pulled them slowly over his arse and down his long legs, to where he held his now freed ankles above his head. As he removed the underwear completely, he flipped onto his front and performed a one-handed handstand, legs and arms held perfectly still as he grasped the edge of the stage and kept his muscles taut. He

allowed his body to move with fluid grace, focused on giving his best performance. As he moved into a proper handstand, doing the splits in midair, he was conscious of a faint ripple of applause. When the strains of “Cities in Dust” by Siouxsie and the Banshees heralded the end of his set, Andrew rose to his feet to gyrate around the pole, his movements sinuous and flexible. He threw everything he had into those last few minutes of music, arching his back as he focused his gaze on his solitary customer, who watched him, gaping. Andrew mouthed the words, running his hands over his body and smiling at the lone client. When the music finally ended and silence descended upon the club, he was panting softly but grinning, the burst of applause which filled the room sweet music to his ears.

DeeDee crossed the floor to stand before the stage, her face split in a broad smile as she looked up at him. “Grab your clothes and come backstage when you’re dressed. That door to the left of the stage.” She walked off toward it. Andrew hastily collected his clothes as another dancer appeared on the stage, a tall young man with a fashionably stubbled face, wearing jeans, a black leather jacket, and numerous chains around his neck. He gave Andrew a brief nod as they passed. Andrew heard Jim’s voice over the PA system as he introduced Madison. Andrew got dressed as quickly as he could, allowing for removal and replacement of his boots, and then hurried to the stage door. He found himself in a brightly lit office, but beyond it he could see a locker room, from whence came the chatter of male voices. Outside in the club, the strains of Katy Perry rose up to accompany Madison’s set.

DeeDee sat at a cluttered desk, cautiously tasting a half mug of coffee which she replaced on the desk with a grimace. She smiled at him. “Sit down, Andrew.” She motioned to a seat against the wall. The office was tiny, with shelves full of folders above her head. DeeDee inclined her head toward the locker room and raised her voice. “If anyone’s making a coffee in the next five minutes, I’ll have one.” A couple of voices floated back in reply. Satisfied, DeeDee sat back in her chair and regarded Andrew keenly.

Andrew held himself upright, back straight. “So, did you like what you saw?” He could play the no-nonsense game too.

DeeDee’s smile was more businesslike this time. “Yes, I did. And if you want the job, you’ve got it. I believe you said you can do weekends?” He nodded. “That works for me. We’re closed Sundays and Mondays, although sometimes I open up the club for those who want to practice their routines with the pole.” That keen expression was back. “I don’t know

what you were used to in the States, but here, the only money you make is what those guys out there place in your little armband, or in the receptacle on stage for coins.”

Andrew nodded once more. “That’s how it was in Atlanta at my last club.”

She cocked her head. “What about lap dances? Did you do those?”

He’d had a feeling this was going to crop up. “Yes. I’m assuming your dancers do those too?” It was DeeDee’s turn to nod. “What are the going rates?”

She handed him a small flier. “The customers purchase a VIP wristband from the club. Those are five pounds. No band, no lap dance. Then we have three different levels. For ten pounds, you can dance at their table. Of course, they don’t get to touch. This would also be a good time to point out that the customers shouldn’t touch you when they come up to the stage.”

“Got it.” So far there were no surprises.

DeeDee went on. “The next stage is a lap dance in the Sky Box. That’s the area up the stairs on either side of the entrance. There are padded seats there. You can be viewed by anyone, of course, but generally, customers can see when a dance is taking place up there. Those are twenty pounds, and they last for one song.”

Andrew nodded. What he was interested in, however, were the four boxes he could see with obscured glass. “I’m guessing your final level would be a VIP Box.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged, “but the price for those differs according to how long the customer wants you for. They pay ninety pounds for fifteen minutes, and you get to keep sixty-five of that. Thirty minutes for £165, of which you keep £120. And £340 for an hour, of which you keep £245.”

He did some swift mental calculations. The prices were in keeping with the States, more or less. “And are there restrictions on what can or can’t be done in there?” He awaited her response with bated breath.

“What you choose to do in the VIP Boxes is entirely down to your discretion,” DeeDee said at last. “But I should also point out that while women are allowed in the club and the Sky Boxes, they are not permitted in the VIP Boxes.” Andrew quirked an eyebrow. It wasn’t as if he’d never danced for women at his last club. He knew of clubs who only allowed accompanied women inside, and that was as long as they conformed to a dress code.

DeeDee sighed. “Let’s just say we’ve learned our lessons from mistakes other clubs have made. The last thing we want is a woman crying rape after she’s been alone in a VIP Box with one of the boys. That doesn’t mean I don’t trust my boys—I trust them implicitly—but it’s for their protection.”

“Understood.” Andrew liked DeeDee’s practical manner and matter-of-fact way of speaking.

“You’ll also be expected to do a Shower Show as part of your sets. I don’t know if you’ve ever done one of those in your act.”

Now that *was* new. “A shower?”

DeeDee grinned. “Didn’t see the shower cubicle, huh?” He shook his head. “To the left of Kurt’s main bar is a glassed-in shower. Two boys go in there and have a shower, and sometimes boys do a solo shower scene. End of story.” She smirked. “Just as long as you’re giving a good show while you do it, and if you’ve got a partner in there with you, you’re careful not to touch his genitals. Other than that, you can make it as wholesome or as downright steamy as you like.” She chuckled. “Wait ’til you see Ryder and Madison. Why the glass *always* gets fogged up whenever those two take a shower is beyond me. But there’s usually a crowd when they get in there.”

Andrew grinned. He could understand why the punters would want to look at Madison. Even on a brief glimpse, the tall stripper was drop-dead gorgeous.

DeeDee leaned forward. “And now for the all-important question—when can you start?” She glanced at a time sheet on her desk and sighed. “I only ask because I’m three dancers down for tonight.”

Andrew was about to laugh when he saw she was deadly earnest. He thought quickly. It was Saturday, and his only plan for the evening so far had been takeaway Chinese and a film on TV. *And it would definitely get me some good karma.* Starting a new job in an unfamiliar city, after years of living in America, a new stripping job—not to mention a planned visit to check out a BDSM club, which he fervently hoped would be an important part of his life—yeah, Andrew needed all the good karma he could get.

“Give me an hour to go home and collect some gear, and I’ll start tonight.”

DeeDee’s smile was so wide, it almost split her face in two. “I think you and I are going to get along.” She tilted her head. “Do you have a stage name?”



Andrew nodded. “Blair.”

She held out her hand, and Andrew shook it firmly. “Welcome to the family, Blair.”

God, he had such a good feeling about this. Now all he needed was for Collars & Cuffs to turn out to be every bit as good as others painted it, and he was in business.

Life was definitely looking good.