

MAGIC  
&  
MINT MARTINIS



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# CHAPTER 1

If he had to listen to that Mariah Carey song one more time, Dash was going to lose his shit. Why had he agreed to work the bar tonight? Right, the regular bartender was on maternity leave. He swiped the rag across the bar near the giggling gaggle of bachelorettes who batted their eyelashes at him.

“Can I get you ladies anything?” he asked, knowing he would regret the answer.

The bride, wearing a plastic tiara with a short white veil hanging over her dark brown hair, slid up to the bar and tried to sit on a barstool. She missed and fell to the floor with a screech. He had to give the bridesmaids credit, they instantly turned their attention from him to their friend sprawled under his bar.

Despite their inebriated state and the bride’s insistence on rising to her feet by herself, they managed to deposit her safely on the stool with only a minimum amount of squealing. Thank god. Between the high notes Ms. Carey hit and these beautiful, but too high-pitched, women, he was going to need a hearing check at the end of the night.

“Another round, bartender!” the bride shouted, slamming her martini glass on the bar. The little candy cane went flying and landed in his hair.

With a sigh, he pulled it out and tossed it in the trash. Before he could say no, the sleigh bells over the entrance rang out merrily, and a woman pushed her way in. She was wrapped in a puffy down coat, a thick knit cap pulled low on her head, and a scarf wrapped around her throat. Fluffy snowflakes clung to her outwear.

The bridesmaids were way too happy to greet this new customer for her to be a stranger. They bounced on their toes and the bride’s smile widened, but tears appeared in the corners of her eyes.

“Lina! You made it!”

She tried to lunge at the newcomer, but the others propped her on the stool. The way-too-bundled-up Lina started unraveling her winter garb. First the scarf, bright red, wrapped at least three times around her neck, covering her nose.

Dash had seen plenty of beautiful women in this industry. They were a dime a dozen, including the nickel’s worth currently in front of him. But Lina’s rosy cheeks, pretty pink cupid’s bow, and slightly pointy chin were perfectly balanced.

Next came the hat, a silly striped job that looked homemade with the largest green pom on top he’d ever had the honor of seeing, revealing a bunch of dark brown curls circling her head in a wreath, wild from the static.

The bachelorettes allowed the bride to leave her stool, and she immediately swept Lina into her sloppy hug, before plopping a tiara reading “Maid of Honor” on her head.

“Of course I made it, despite the airline’s best efforts to delay me.” Lina patted the other woman’s back gently. “It’s not every day your sister gets married.”

He saw the resemblance, though the bride was taller with straight hair. And her lips weren’t quite the same perfect pink. But the biggest difference were the eyes. While the bride had perfectly

respectable, even lustrous, warm brown eyes, Lina's were hazel, all greenish brown.

She shrugged off her puffy coat, revealing a body full of luscious curves begging to be explored. Shoving her hat, scarf, and gloves into the sleeve, she hung it on the hook at the end of the bar.

"So, what did I miss?" Lina took the stool next to her sister.

The bride returned to the bar, reminded in her drunken state of her mission to become even more so.

"We were about to order another round," she said.

Dash arched a brow. "And I was about to say no. You've had plenty."

"But my sister just showed up, she had the worst trip, and I haven't seen her in over a year. Please?" She pouted and batted her lashes.

He glanced at the new arrival.

"We're all catching a ride share, so one more isn't going to hurt," Lina said.

"Fine, but only one more." Dash winked at Lina as the bridal party erupted into applause.

She blinked in surprise, but he turned away before she could say anything. Why on Earth had he done that? He didn't wink at the ladies. He didn't initiate the flirting. Ever. Never had to. But a single look at this woman, and he was hornier than a reindeer in rut.

He got busy making the drinks, six this round. Chocolate liqueur, peppermint schnapps, a little marshmallow vodka, shaken over ice and garnished with a little, bitty candy cane.

Dash slid the last drink in front of Lina, who seemed a million miles away staring at her sister, but not really seeing her.

"Candy cane for your thoughts," he said.

She gave her head a little shake, sending all those curls into a frenzy. They looked as soft and silky as a snowshoe hare in the summer, and he wanted to run his hands through them. What was wrong with him today?

Lina considered the glass in front of her with those perfect lips pursed and her smooth forehead wrinkled. She was cute when she was confused.

“What the fuck is this?”

“It’s what your friends are drinking. Top shelf chocolate-mint martini.”

She groaned but snatched it off the bar. Taking a deep sniff, the confusion changed into curiosity, and her brows rose.

“Doesn’t smell half bad. Well, beggars can’t be choosers.” She swallowed it in a few gulps, humming appreciatively as she returned the glass to the bar. “Thanks, I needed that.”

“Want another?” He smiled, trying to keep it friendly and not more...sensual.

“As long as I’m not paying, why the hell not?”

“Coming right up, Ms. Scrooge.”

He turned his back on her protests that she wasn’t a Scrooge. Dash found himself whistling as he shook another cocktail. He stopped as he realized what it was he whistled. The damn “All I Want For Christmas” song again. Son of a bitch.

He delivered the drink with a friendly smile. “Then what are you?”

“Tired. It took me over thirty-six hours to get here from Europe.”

Dash winced, but the other bartender dropped a bucket of ice before he could reengage in conversation. Great, just great.

“Excuse me,” he said.

By the time he helped clean the mess, the delightful Ms. Lina had joined the festive bride and bridesmaids on the dance floor, shaking their booties to a jazzy song about Santa Claus.

He couldn’t tear away his gaze. Her delight was captivating. It wasn’t long before they all came back to the bar, but Lina ordered water for the gaggle.

“You’re no fun,” her sister pouted, and the rest of the bridesmaids muttered their agreement.

“If memory serves, there’s a dress fitting in the morning. You don’t want to be nursing a hangover in a brightly lit dress shop, do you?” she said, the good mother hen. “Drink your water. You’ll thank me tomorrow.”

The sister planted a kiss on Lina’s cheek, leaving behind a streak of coral lipstick. “I’ll thank you now. You’re always looking out for me. I love you!”

Lina rolled her eyes, but her smile was genuine. “I love you, too.”

The ladies drank their water and returned to the dance floor, but Lina stayed behind, nursing her water.

Dash slid her another martini. “On the house.”

She looked at it skeptically. “What are you putting in these? Sweet drinks aren’t usually my jam, but this goes down smooth.”

He gave her his best panty-dropping smile, widening it when her cheeks flushed. It had earned him plenty of dates and invited more than his fair share of women to his bed.

“Trade secret, I’m afraid. Don’t worry, I’ll cut you off if you get too tipsy.”

“Oh, that’s not why.”

Before he could gather more information, a blond bridesmaid approached.

“Why do you get one?” She pouted and pulled on Lina’s arm.

“Because I got here late and had to spend way too long hurtling through the atmosphere in a metal tube.” Lina rose from the barstool, finished her drink in a long gulp, and allowed the bridesmaid to lead her to the dance floor.

After a couple of songs, she extricated herself from the crowd and returned to the bar, her hair even curlier with sweat, her cheeks even more flushed. What he wouldn’t give to be the man making her flushed and sweaty. He readied another drink and met her as soon as she eased onto the barstool.

“Are you just hanging out waiting for me?” Lina sipped her drink and studied him.

Once again, he blessed her with his megawatt smile. Her pupils dilated and she licked her lips. Holy holly. He shifted closer to the bar so she wouldn't notice the boner her little gesture gave him.

"The boss and I have an arrangement. I'm allowed to keep the pretty women company."

She propped her elbow on the bar and rested her chin on her fist. Her gaze was slightly out of focus. That would be her last martini.

"Nice boss."

"Yeah, he's okay." Dash dragged the bar rag over the hard surface.

The crowd thinned, and he was about thirty minutes from ringing the last call bell. But he was loath to do anything to make this delectable creature leave before absolutely necessary.

"You remind me of someone." Lina blinked at him slowly, her long lashes fanning out.

He doubted she wore much makeup, and her lashes were not fake. It was truly an overabundance of lashes, ones he would like to examine in more detail as she slept beside him.

Dash pulled himself away from these thoughts. Ridiculous. He was being ridiculous tonight. He wasn't averse to settling down, but he enjoyed his single life. Maybe it was the change in schedule. Maybe it was her way of paying attention without sizing him up for a tux and an altar. Or was it—no, it couldn't be that.

He leaned in close enough to notice the tiny flecks of gold nestled in her irises like lights on a Christmas tree. "Who do I remind you of?"

Underneath the mint from the drink was a scent bringing to mind cinnamon and cayenne, her scent. It was all he could do to keep from inhaling deeply, *sniffing* her. That didn't fly in the modern world.

"Not sure, but it's almost as if I should know you." Lina finished her drink, maintaining eye contact. "Did we meet in elementary school or at summer camp?"



“I must have one of those faces.” He did get that a lot, but he knew why. Before he had a chance to pull the conversation in a less dangerous direction, the gaggle swarmed her.

“C’mon, Lina,” the sister said, slinging her arm around Lina’s shoulder. “We’re heading to the condo for popcorn and a movie marathon!”

The blond bridesmaid who dragged Lina to the dance floor earlier gestured for the tab and signed the bill.

“Thanks!” Dash glanced at the check.

Great tip, but written below her name was, “Call me anytime,” with a phone number and an obscene number of hearts. She winked at him, then helped the bride into her coat. There were two or three with their phones out, trying to find ride shares while half drunk. Dash gently extricated one of the devices and helped. The women stumbled out the front door, and a little spark of chivalry made him slip his jacket on and follow them out into the softly falling snowflakes.

With six of them, they had called two cars, and Lina had taken charge, splitting them evenly. The first car took off, and she opened the front door to the second car.

“Goodnight, and happy holidays.” A sad longing clawed at Dash’s innards.

She looked at him, but her smile quickly faded, and she turned a pastel pea green. Before Dash could recoil, she puked all over his black boots. She wiped her mouth on the back of her glove.

“That’s why I don’t drink sweet drinks,” she muttered.

“Jesus, lady—” the driver began.

“Oh, she’s fine,” her sister piped up from the back seat. “One and done, right, Lina?”

“Yeah.” She turned those Christmas-tree irises to Dash. “I’m so, so sorry.”

He waved it away. “It’s not the first time somebody’s puked on my boots. I’ll keep it in mind if I ever serve you a drink again.”

With a wan smile, she shut the door and the ride share took her away. He wouldn't bump into her again, and unlike every other bar bunny who flirted with him, unlike all his one-night stands, it affected him deeply. More like the endings of his, what one—no, two long-term relationships. For a woman he'd spent all of twenty minutes with total.

Dash went around to the alley, asked the kitchen for some water, and did his best washing the vomit off his boots while trying to figure out why.

"Some night, boss," the cook said as he made his way through the kitchen.

"Yeah, but what are you gonna do? Keep the pretty ladies away?"

A bunch of protests followed him and he pushed through the kitchen door to the bar. The other bartender shook his head.

"You're too nice, Dash. If I was the boss, I woulda cut them off earlier."

"What can I say, I'm a softy." He rang the last call bell. "Pay up, Massholes!"

The regulars all grumbled, but tabs were paid, coats were donned, and in a few minutes, the bar was empty except for staff.

"Hey, boss," the other bartender said, "I've got finals on Monday and need to study. Can I take off now?"

"Fine, fine. Go. And good luck."

He really was turning into a softy. Was it only being nice to pay his people what they were worth and give them a break when all they were trying to do was better themselves? No. It was good business in the long run. He had half the turnover rate as most other bars and clubs in the city, and he promoted from within his growing business. You might start as a twenty-year-old server at The Old Bell, but you could finish as an executive vice president at Nichols Entertainment before your thirty-fifth birthday. It had happened to at least four people in the past fifteen years, and he was just getting started.

Soon enough the bar was clean, the floors were mopped, and the prep done for tomorrow. Dash locked the door behind the last of the staff and turned off all the lights. Time to head home.

He pulled an odd silver skeleton key from his pocket. It sat cold in his palm, surrounded by a blue light. The bit, the part that unlocked the door, was in the shape of a snowflake. Dash returned to the door and a keyhole appeared, also glowing blue. The key fit perfectly, and the door frame blazed, casting the kitchen in a cold shimmer. He twisted the key and the door disappeared. Tucking the key back into his pocket, he walked through the portal. As soon as he stepped through, the door in the bar would return to normal, as if the magic had never happened.

## CHAPTER 2

Lina had set the most annoying alarm she could on her phone, the old dog barking one. It still took a while for it to penetrate her killer hangover-jet lag combo. Why, oh why, had she consumed four—four!—chocolate mint martinis? She knew better.

The door to her room slammed open.

“Good morning, sleepy head! As you so kindly pointed out, we have a dress fitting.”

Sometimes she hated Cassie’s unending optimism and ability to shake off almost any insult to her system. Hangovers, jet lag, head colds. Lina had two out of the three at the moment, and the last thing she wanted to do was try on a bridesmaid dress. But she had returned from her assignment to partake in all the festivities, both holiday and wedding, so she would go. But damned if she would enjoy it.

How was she even conscious after the last forty-eight hours? No, more. She’d woken at the butt crack of dawn three days ago to drive to Athens, only to discover her flight was delayed. She made it to London, where they flat-out canceled the leg to Boston. After two or three uncomfortable hours dozing as she waited for the next flight,

she was too wired to sleep on the plane across the Atlantic. By the time she arrived at the bar last night, she was half-dead from exhaustion.

Oh, the bar. And the flirty bartender. As consciousness wormed its ugly way through her, a very particular memory surfaced.

“Hey, Cass, did I actually puke on the hot bartender?” *Oh, please say no. Please.*

Her sister giggled. “Just his boots. Glorious. Always can count on you to end the night with a bang, Lina.”

She groaned and dragged the blankets back over her head. The man had been exactly her type with wavy auburn hair, a close-clipped beard, twinkling blue eyes, and cute little dimples when he smiled. Not too tall, not too short, muscular without looking as if he lived at the gym. And he seemed into her. Lina had considered returning once or twice during her visit the next three weeks, try to lure him into her bed. Any bed, really. Then she’d lost the martinis.

Cassie pulled the covers off her.

“Ugh, can’t you let me die from embarrassment?” Lina threw her arm over her eyes.

“No way, Alice would make a horrible maid of honor. Come on. You’re gonna love the dress I picked out for you.”

Her mouth tasted like a cheap packet of mint cocoa powder had crawled in and died. Lina staggered to the bathroom down the hall and turned on the shower while brushing her teeth. The mere idea of anything other than coffee had her stomach protesting.

A few minutes later, clean and shiny and dressed in comfortable clothes—she owned nothing else—Lina sat at the kitchen counter, cupping her coffee in her hands.

Wesley, her sister’s fiancé, pulled some toast from the toaster and placed it in front of her.

Lina pushed it away. “Thanks, Wes, but no thanks. No repeats on the show from last night.”

“Trust me, Lina, Cassidy’s friends are much easier to take with food in your belly.” He flashed her his perfect smile, and his brown eyes lit up.

Wesley was tall, with short blond hair and chiseled cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. Smooth shaven, he painted the perfect picture of a corporate lawyer. He rarely dressed in anything more casual than a button-down shirt and slacks.

Lina nibbled on the toast, and her stomach settled a bit.

“Good girl,” he said.

She stuck out her tongue.

“Gross.” He laughed and poured himself another cup of coffee.

“I didn’t get a chance to say it last night but thank you for letting me crash here. It can’t be easy having an interloper as the wedding approaches.” She bit into the toast again, feeling much better.

“You’re not an interloper, Lina, you’re family. You’ll always be welcome in our home.”

He was handsome and rich *and* kind. Her sister had won the lottery.

“Still, thanks. With Mom and Dad in Arizona, and Granny...”

Lina choked up. She couldn’t help it, even over a year later. Wesley patted her shoulder.

“Hey, family, right? And who wouldn’t offer a place to stay for the do-gooder daughter of the Schultz family?”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Cassie walked in looking as put-together as always, wearing a pale blue wool sweater over a pinstriped Oxford shirt and gray slacks that hugged her hips like a second skin.

Lina wished she could find clothes to fit her that well. Her sister had inherited their father’s long, lean frame, while Lina was the spitting image of their mother, average height and above average curves. Way above average. Fat, some would call her. In this late capitalist hellscape, most would mean it in a negative way.

But Lina had embraced her body for what it was long ago. It helped her family was body positive. No one ever warned her a

moment on the lips was a lifetime on the hips. Both her parents taught her to make healthy choices in her food and to exercise. And her current job made both things all the more important, though it was hard some days to access fresh fruits and veggies.

The only thing she despaired of was finding off-the-rack clothes that made her feel as pretty as she was. She had no time to sew for herself, and since Granny had lost her eyesight years ago, there was no one else to sew for her. Relegated to the sometimes awful world of plus-size clothing, she did the best she could. She usually chose comfort over fashion anyway, but it would be nice to have more options.

Wesley poured Cassie a mug of coffee and passed it to her with a kiss more appropriate for the bedroom than the kitchen.

“Get a room,” Lina said with a smirk.

Cassie let go with a giggle. “I’m sure if the hot bartender had kissed you like that last night, you wouldn’t complain.”

“No, but he might. I can’t show my face there again.”

Which was too bad. She could have used a fling. Work had kept her too busy to make it into the city much, and she needed a distractions with all the wedding and holiday preparations. And since flings were about all she could manage with her job taking her all around the world, she’d been looking forward to finding one. The bartender last night had been a prime candidate, until...

“Aren’t you two going to be late?” Wesley looked at his smart watch.

“They can’t start without the bride,” Cassie said airily.

“Cass, they have a bunch of other brides to worry about. No need to muck up their day because we’re hungover.” Lina shoved the rest of her toast in her mouth and washed it down with the dregs in her cup.

With the ibuprofen kicking in, she was excited about today’s fitting. Cassie had excellent taste, and Wesley’s parents had insisted on an upscale bridal shop known for custom work. She sent her

measurements months ago, and today was the final fitting, the tweaks to make sure it fit her just right.

“I was kidding.” Cassie grabbed her bag and coat and headed for the door.

Lina snagged her coat from where she’d left it hanging over a chair last night. She pulled her scarf and gloves from the sleeve, but where was her hat? The hat Granny had knitted for her in high school? Oh no.

“What is it, Lina?” Wesley asked. “You look pale as a ghost.”

“I lost my hat.” Lina held back the tears.

“You can borrow my extra.”

Cassie shook her head vigorously at him, making a slashing motion across her throat.

“What? It’s a hat.”

Cassie put her arms around Lina and glared at her fiancé in the most adorable way. “It’s not just a hat, doofus. Granny made it for her in high school. Every Schultz has a ridiculous hat made by her.”

Wesley joined in on the group hug and whispered in Lina’s ear. “Sorry. Can I help you find it?”

“No.” Hopelessness and embarrassment washed through her. “It’s either in the ride share or...”

“Oh no,” Cassie said.

“Yep, might have to see a man about a hat and apologize for puking on him. Again.”

Time for a walk of shame. But first, dresses.