

Chapter One

Penelope Carson smiled at the man across the desk. She'd nailed her presentation, and John actually looked really excited about the plans she had for the Falcon Bar. She all but had this deal signed. "Thank you for your time."

He stood and shook her hand, and she tried not to hold his limp handshake against him. Her father had always told her that a handshake was the best way to get a read on a man, and John Starker was coming across as a weak-willed follower.

She took a deep breath, and dialed her smile up a notch. Business was different now than it had been a decade ago. She was bringing Carson & Associates into the future. That meant letting go of some of the assumptions of the past—and making a significant amount of personal sacrifices along the way.

It didn't mean she had to enjoy his sweaty palms, though.

"When can I expect to hear from you?" she asked.

"I have a few more interviews today, but the decision will be made before tomorrow evening."

It would have been nice if he told her he was sending the other consultants away, but she understood. Manhattan might have enough failing businesses to keep her living in luxury until she was an old woman, but word got around. John was covering his ass, and she could appreciate that even if she didn't particularly like it. "Wonderful."

"I look forward to working with you."

She left the room with a bounce in her step. He'd all but confirmed his choice, other consultants or no. Tonight, she was celebrating. Penelope nodded at John's secretary, Rochelle, but the woman didn't greet her like she expected. Instead, she raised her eyebrows and motioned

somewhat frantically. *Weird*. She followed the motion and froze.

Will Reaver stood with his back to her, his attention apparently on the announcement board near the door. Damn it, what was he doing here? Even as the thought crossed her mind, she kicked herself for asking it. Of course he'd be here. They often crossed paths in competition for accounts, and it looked like this was just another in a long list she'd snatched out from beneath his nose. She put a little more weight into her steps, her heels clicking over the wood floors.

She didn't flinch when he turned, but only because she'd had a chance to prepare herself. Will's face always made her miss a step. It didn't seem to matter how much she despised him or how often they shared vicious little conversations—one look into those icy blue eyes and her stomach started doing somersaults. It started again now, her nerves increasing as the distance between them decreased. He looked like some sort of Norse god who had decided to throw on a suit and play at being a respectable human being. Except that wasn't right. He wore that suit like he'd been born in it, his wide shoulders filling it out to perfection and his slacks hinting at equally massive thighs beneath the fabric.

Crap. She jerked her gaze up, but it was too late. He'd caught her checking him out. One of his eyebrows inched up, his painfully perfect mouth twitching into something that on another person would be a smile. On Will's face, it was a smirk. "Penelope."

She stopped just out of reach. Not that his touching her was really a concern—he seemed to go out of his way to avoid even the smallest chance of brushing against her. "Will."

Standing here, it was an effort not to count the paces between them. She felt like one of the gunslingers of the Old West, meeting this man at high noon and ready to duel to the death. It was a silly notion, but she couldn't shake it.

He looked her up and down. "My twin told me the strangest story awhile back. Apparently

you insinuated that you and I had an intimate history.”

“Did I?” She most definitely had. It was too much fun to pull at Will’s whiskers, and doing it via his twin had been an added bonus.

“You did. Don’t do it again.”

Annoyance flared that he thought he could doll out commands that she’d automatically obey.

“Will Reaver.” Rochelle’s voice saved her from saying something unforgivable in front of witnesses.

They glanced at the secretary. He turned back to Penelope, all expression gone from his face. “I’ll be seeing you.”

She hated how he could do that, could rile her with a few choice words and then walk away as if none of this really mattered. She forced herself to stand there and wait for him to disappear through the office door. To do anything else would reek of running away, and she refused to give him the satisfaction. As soon as the door closed behind him, she turned a smile on the secretary.

“Thank you so much for calling me, Rochelle.”

“Sure thing, Pen.” The older woman grinned right back. “Your father was one of the best, so of course I’d make sure his daughter was on the list when John needed a business consultant for the bar.”

She kept her smile from becoming strained through sheer force of will. Her reputation was growing, but her father had over a decade to make a name for himself. If she wanted to surpass that—and she very much did—she had to set aside anything that could possibly be a distraction and put all she had into getting new accounts and making them successful. As amusing as she found poking at Will Reaver, in the long run it didn’t matter what he thought of her.

The only thing that mattered was she had that contract all but signed, and as a result, was one

step closer to her goal of being New York's premier business consultant.

She fished her phone out of her purse and dialed Mary. The best way to get over how much Will unsettled her was to start the celebrations now. She checked her watch as the phone rang. Four in the afternoon. If she moved now, she shouldn't have a problem securing a reservation at the newest up and coming restaurant—courtesy of Carson & Associates.

Mary finally answered, sounding out of breath. "Pen! I didn't expect to hear from you."

"I know we have plans next week, but I just landed a huge account. Meet me for drinks?"

"I wish I could. I have plans with Ryan tonight." A murmur in the background. "Okay, fine. Technically, I have plans with him right this second."

Heat rushed to Penelope's face as she realized there was a decent chance she'd just interrupted something intimate. "Oh lord, I'm sorry. Just pretend I didn't call."

Mary laughed. "Don't worry about it. I'll see you next Monday, though?"

"Definitely."

"Perfect. Talk to you then."

She hung up, feeling curiously adrift. It used to be her and Mary against the world, but ever since her best friend had met Ryan, it seemed like things had shifted. It was only a matter of time before he proposed, and they were already talking about a family and a life that was completely foreign to Penelope. She loved seeing Mary happy and wouldn't change that for the world, but she couldn't help being...left out.

She turned down the street and started walking. Having a family and children was everything Mary had ever wanted. It was wonderful to see her dreams finally on the cusp of being realized.

Those things weren't on Penelope's horizon now, and she wasn't sure they ever would be. She liked her life. She loved her job, loved taking a business on the brink of ruin and turning it

into something else—something successful. She'd single-handedly taken her father's dream and brought it to the next level, and the pride in his eyes when she filled him in on each newest account was worth more than gold. How could a relationship or family compare to that?

Dad had tried to do both, and it almost ruined Carson & Associates. If that wasn't an argument to shelve even thinking about wasting time in her personal life on some relationship that wouldn't last, she didn't know what was. There were no guarantees once you brought another person into your life. She'd seen how her mother undermined everything her father was trying to do with his consultant business. She couldn't afford to end up with someone who would do that same thing.

She shoved the thought away. It was all a moot point, anyway. She'd had nothing even resembling a relationship, and that was just the way she liked it. Penelope ignored the pang inside her at the thought and resolutely turned to planning her celebration for one. If Mary was busy, there was really only one place to go.

Serve.

She'd have a drink and head up to one of the upper floors and see if there was a submissive in need of a good time. She grinned. Yes, this was even better than drinks. She'd play for a bit, and head home to sleep and wait for the call confirming that she'd secured the Falcon account.

Penelope pictured the look on Will's face when he found out that she'd won yet another account away from him and grinned. Tonight was looking up.

Will Reaver walked out of his meeting with John Starker feeling on top of the world. He'd had a flicker of consternation when he realized Penelope Carson had presented before him—she had the unforgivable habit of stealing his prospective clients—but that quickly disappeared when

he realized how attentively John was listening. Then the man had gone and all but promised the account to Will.

He permitted himself a smile as he strode onto the street and hailed a cab. What to do to celebrate? His twin, Garrett, was out of town on some mission or other, so he wasn't an option. Will briefly considered calling Uncle Rodger or his father or even his little sister, Sara, but discarded the idea almost before it'd taken form. Ever since Garrett had finally settled down with the electrifying Ridley, they had turned their fledgling matchmaker sights on Will. Sara wasn't as bad in some ways, but she was also sneakier, and the fact she'd had a hand in orchestrating Garrett and Ridley's relationship only made her ego that much larger. He would barely be in their presence five minutes and would already be hearing about how the neighbor down the street was a really nice lady, and so was Rodger's client's daughter and... It never ended. Then he'd be fielding questions about when he was going to bring a nice girl home and move on into that next stage of life.

Will had an easy enough answer for them—*never*.

There were plenty of excuses for why he'd stay single until kingdom come—he was too busy, he liked a very specific brand of sex that most people couldn't handle, he didn't particularly like children—but they were just that. Excuses. The reality...

The reality was that he wasn't meant for marriage or fatherhood or anything of that nature. A serious relationship—*any* relationship beyond a few nights—meant a loss of control that was unforgivable. Relationships changed a person, made them unrecognizable. Quite frankly, the reward wasn't anywhere near compelling enough to withstand the risk. He'd leave that up to Garrett or, heaven forbid, their little sister, Sara. He shook his head and rattled off the address to the one place he could go and slip free from the mundane aspects of his life.

The cab fought through evening traffic towards the meatpacking district, but he tuned it out, focusing instead on his encounter with Penelope. He'd caught her ogling him again, but that moment had quickly gone the way of all their encounters. He didn't know what it was about her that got so under his skin so effectively, but he found himself saying unforgivable things when he spent too much time in her presence.

Being a business consultant was a cutthroat business, but she wasn't any more mercenary than the rest of the people in their field. And he could almost—*almost*—admire her for using that southern belle business to her advantage. But ever since she stole Hell's Belles out from beneath him, they'd been butting heads whenever they got too close. It would be significantly easier to avoid her if they weren't in constant competition for the same accounts.

He paid the cabbie and stopped on the sidewalk to look at the building in front of him. Serve. He'd been coming here on regular basis since it opened, grateful to have a place to scratch his itch—so to speak—without having to worry about the lines blurring. There were plenty of unattached subs who enjoyed a few hours of his time and were content with that. *He* was content with that. Will scrubbed a hand over his face. Well, he *had* been. Something had changed in the last few months, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. The relief he usually felt after a satisfying scene wasn't anywhere near as strong as he'd gotten used to, and it didn't matter how often he came here, he was losing that contentment he'd prized so highly.

But tonight wasn't the time to worry about that. He had a lucrative deal that would be signed tomorrow and catapult his company to the next level. Tonight was for celebrating.

Will pushed through the doors, nodded at the bouncer, and headed straight for the gaping mouth that framed the elevator to the upper floors. He wasn't opposed to a drink or two before playing, but right now all he wanted was to be surrounded by his people and sink himself into a

scene with one of his regulars. Afterward, maybe he'd celebrate with a glass of the good scotch they had stocked down in the bar.

The elevator doors opened on the second floor and Will barely made it three steps into the room when his gaze landed on Penelope. He almost froze, but he'd had nine years of practice at hiding what he was feeling, so he managed to keep going with only the slightest hitch in his step. She stood talking to a Dom he'd seen her talking to with some regularity, her tight curls pulled back into a cloud around her head. She must have found time to change because she now wore a deceptively simple white dress that set off her dark skin to perfection. It was always white with her, which never ceased to put him in mind of a sacrificial virgin.

A joke if ever there was one because, as far as he knew, she only played Dominant.

There was something about her, though, something that called to him on an instinctive level. He'd never been able to put his finger on exactly what it was about her that never failed to drive him up the wall, and tonight wouldn't be the night that changed. Will was only on her radar as an obstacle, the same way she was a thorn in his paw. Usually. Right now he was having a hard time remembering why he avoided her.

Before he had a chance to decide what he was going to do, she turned and saw him. The front of her dress dipped down between her breasts, the material following the curve and leaving no doubt that she wasn't wearing anything beneath it.

Jesus.

She smiled—he'd seen that expression enough times to know she was about to go in for the kill—and sauntered over to him. "Fancy meeting you here." Her southern accent was dialed up to an eleven, a sure sign that she was about to insult him. "I was sure you'd be at home, crying into your whiskey bottle about losing another account to me."

What was she talking about? “You’ve gotten your wires crossed. The Falcon account is *mine*.”

Instead of looking worried, her smile only widened. “You’re so adorable when you’re being dense.”

“I’m not the dense one in this conversation. John’s going with my company.” A flicker of doubt tried to worm its way through him, but he smashed it. It didn’t matter what information she thought she had—that account belonged to him.

“Are you confident enough to bet on it?”

He wasn’t a betting man. Bets left something up to chance, and Will despised chance and everything else he couldn’t control. He might have John’s assurance that he had this deal, but John also must have said something to Penelope to make her this confident. What did she know that Will didn’t? He opened his mouth to make a sharp comment and change the subject, but what came out was, “Of course I am.”

Her dark eyes flashed with something like victory. “Perfect. When I win, you’ll wear my collar for a week.”

Every part of him rebelled at the thought. Play sub to anyone, let alone *her*? Absolutely not. He didn’t get his rocks off on his knees, and he never would. Will took a deep breath, forcing his irritation down. She might think she had this in the bag, but he would show her otherwise. A low scream cut through the relatively quiet of the public play room and they both glanced over to the woman on the spanking bench, her ass already red. Even as they watched, the Domme swung the paddle again, coming down on the sub’s ass with a meaty smack.

He turned back to Penelope. “I’ll take that bet, but if you lose, you’re putting yourself in the same position—submissive to me.” Even as he spoke, he knew he should take it back. He might

have a pesky desire for the woman, but that didn't mean he wanted to actually go *there* with her. Except he did. He wanted her obeying his every command, if only because of how much it would piss her off.

He let the words settle between them, taking a perverse delight in the shock on her face.

“I—what?”

He took a step forward, crowding her a little bit. “You’ll be my own personal submissive for seven days.” Will paused, enjoying the way her eyes went wide, but then her reactions actually registered with him—reactions he’d seen too many times to discount. There was no reason for the dilated pupils or the quickened breathing or the flush working its way over her skin—no reason except desire. She might hate him, but she *liked* the idea of submitting. *I’ll be damned.* “Unless, of course, you’d rather not risk it?”

Her smile died. “Nice try, sugar. You’re on.” She held out her hand.

Wondering if he was making a horrible mistake, Will took her hand. He couldn't help but notice how soft her palms were against his, or how she shook a little bit when he tightened his grip briefly. He smiled to himself. Oh, yes. Penelope might be the type to take a man out at the knees, but all signs pointed to her having a submissive streak a mile wide. A submissive streak no one else seemed to know about. The idea of having her on her knees for him had been amusing, if only to tweak her a bit. To have her there and craving his command? *Christ.* The very thought had Will's body tightening with anticipation.

He couldn't wait to see her in his collar.

