

Chapter One

“You’re being overprotective and paranoid.” Sara Reaver paced the sidewalk, ignoring the stares of the people waiting in line to enter Serve. She turned to face the street and made an effort to keep her voice down. Uncle Rodger wasn’t a fan of ugly *womanly* emotions—unless it was calculated to serve a purpose. Right now, the only reason she was in danger of losing her temper was his being an overprotective ass. “If I was anyone else, you wouldn’t be trying to force me out of the city.”

He sighed. “Sara, I’m not trying to force you anywhere. I told you not to push Jesse Nord too hard, and you ignored that order.”

“He was half a second away from telling the truth. He just needed the right motivation.” And if he’d come clean about why he was really in that parking garage last month, her client, Mrs. Morris, wouldn’t be facing jail time. The woman was more concerned about her reputation than the possibility of going to jail, though, so for the time being, the media shit storm was Sara’s focus. The client wasn’t always right, but it was her job to fix the problem.

“You miscalculated and pissed off some dangerous men in the process. It’ll blow over, but you need to be out of sight until it does.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to beg him not to do this. She wasn’t young or stupid enough to think that no one would hurt her for pushing too hard, but exiling her to the country was over the top. “I don’t have to leave the city. I’ll just lay low for a little while.”

“I’m not taking any chances.” And then her uncle went and dropped the bomb she’d been dreading. “I already talked to Garrett about it. He’s got a man who will keep you out of trouble until this all blows over.”

Sara could actually see the trap closing in around her, and it seemed the harder she struggled,

the more it suffocated her. “I can’t believe you talked to Garrett before you talked to me.” That hurt, like they were so sure that she’d be unreasonable that they had to join forces to get her to do what they wanted. She started digging through her purse for a cigarette before she remembered that she’d quit over a year ago.

That wasn’t a good sign.

She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “You’re treating me like a child, and I resent it.”

“Then prove I don’t have to.” He didn’t sound the least bit sorry. “I expect you to be packed and ready to go tomorrow morning.” He paused. “Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be, Sara.”

The only person it was difficult for was *her*. *He* didn’t have to leave the city. *He* wasn’t worried about being targeted by a pissed off CEO with ties to unsavory people. No, Uncle Rodger could take care of himself.

If only he had half as much faith in her ability to do the same.

But it didn’t matter that she was one of the best fixers he had on his team and had a knack for finding creative ways out of the situations that their clients came to them with.

Or that she could take out nearly everyone on both the shooting range and the practice matt. No, all that mattered was that she was little Sara Reaver, the niece he used to cart around on his shoulders—or whatever other memory he dragged up whenever it suited him. He was even worse than her brothers. The fact that he’d drawn them in—because when it came to family, anything Garrett knew, Will knew—was only the icing on the cake.

She was trapped and they both knew it.

As tempting as stomping her foot and digging in her heels sounded, it wouldn’t make her uncle respect her more. In fact, it was all but guaranteed to make him put her in the equivalent of

the time-out chair for months. So she forced herself to unclench her teeth. "I'll be ready."

"Good. Text me when you're on the road."

"Of course." She hung up and only barely resisted the urge to fling her phone into the street. She wanted to call her brother and lay into him, but that wouldn't do any good. And she couldn't call her best friend, Ridley, either, because she was most likely attached at the hip to Garrett. As happy as she was that they'd figured stuff out, it was damned inconvenient right now.

Her thumb traced the screen. She could call Will. He had a wonderful habit of cutting to the heart of things without letting messy emotions get in the way. But that was before he'd gone and fallen in love. And gotten engaged. He might try to help, but no doubt he had better things to do with his night than listen to her bitch about something that was beyond both of their control.

Especially since things had been so *weird* since her brothers fell into love and relationships and engagements. She was happy for them. Truly, she was. But a part of her had always thought that the Reaver siblings would ride off into the sunset, single until the end of time. After all, they'd seen just how quickly marital bliss could turn into a nightmare that a person didn't simply walk away from.

They crawled, broken and bleeding.

That person you loved so much it consumed you could wake up one day, and be a stranger, everything you thought you knew about them suddenly a lie. If it could happen after twenty years of marriage, she didn't hold out much hope that anyone was safe. The only real law of life was change, and that proved double for people in relationships. She'd seen the horrible confusion and betrayal on her father's face, had heard him whisper the questions that had no real answers.

Why are you leaving? Why aren't you happy anymore? Why don't you love us enough to stay?

Sara really hoped her brothers' happiness would last, but she wasn't about to throw her hat into the ring with a guy and hope for the best.

Love couldn't hurt her if she didn't give it a chance.

With a sigh, she dropped her phone into her purse, doing her best to ignore the sliver of betrayal that always seemed to dig in when she thought about her brothers moving into the next stage of life.

Sara turned and faced Serve. If she had one night of freedom left, she might as well enjoy it. Normally, she avoided this place. Both her brothers frequented it with depressing regularity, and her therapy bill was already high enough without adding seeing a sibling in a sexual situation to the list. But if Garrett was busy arranging a babysitter for her, he wasn't here, and Will and Penelope had plans tonight of a non-kinky variety. The coast was as clear as it could possibly be.

That meant at least something good would come from this fiasco.

A little bounce worked its way into her step as she bypassed the line, gave the bouncer a quick peck on the cheek, and strode into another world. The owner of Serve, Jonah, was as hilarious as he was sexy. Newbies came in expecting NYC's premier BDSM club to be all dark and gothic and serious, but the reality was totally different. Everything was very tongue-in-cheek, from the DJs who favored Muse, to the giant mouth framing the elevator up to the actual BDSM portion of the club. It made Sara grin every time she saw it.

She didn't plan on wasting time with drinks tonight—if she only had one night, she intended to use it to the fullest. A little thrill went through her as she cut her way around the bar and grinned at the manager, Nolan. “Hey, handsome.”

“Hey, yourself.” He was gorgeous, like all the employees there seemed to be, his hair like the best dark red wine and his eyes a delicious deep brown. The difference between Nolan and

everyone else was that Jonah trusted him enough to be in charge of the day-to-day operations. He kept asking her out, but she preferred to keep things on a Serve-only basis. “You going up?”

“That depends.” She leaned into him, liking his muscles despite the fact that no sparks erupted in her stomach at the contact. It was better this way. Safer. “When are you off?”

“For you? Give me fifteen minutes to find a replacement.”

She grinned. “Perfect.”

Z watched Garrett’s little sister flirt with the manager, the invitation clear in every line of her body. He’d never met her in person, but Garrett talked about her enough that he felt like he knew her. Sara Reaver, as troublesome as she was pretty. And she was pretty. Tonight she wore a short black dress that showed off her legs to perfection, but it was the pearls that really got him. Pearls were something he’d always associated with old women who had more money than sense. To see them on this little blonde who obviously had dirty plans on her mind?

Yeah, it did things for him.

Z set his drink aside as the elevator doors closed behind her. Garrett told him she was in trouble, and that she wasn’t likely to agree to leave the city without a fight. Hard to say at this point, but she sure as hell looked like she planned to have fun tonight.

He should let her have it. The exit strategy officially came into play tomorrow, so what would it hurt to give the woman one last night of freedom?

But what if something happened because he’d decided to back off?

He found himself walking up to the elevator before he’d finished the thought. She was more than a job—she was kin to one of the only men in this world he trusted, which meant he couldn’t afford mistakes. Once he’d told Garrett where they were, the man had made a call and gotten

him on the list to be allowed upstairs—with the understanding that he wouldn't interact with anyone beyond Sara.

That was fine. Z hadn't let himself off the leash in years, and he wasn't about to start the night that his friend's little sister was potentially in danger. He knew all too well how things went tits up when he lost control, after the last time...

He nodded at the manager and gave his name. The man raised his eyebrows, but stepped aside. "Jonah has specific rules for you. Don't break them." He paused, as if considering adding something, and it didn't take a genius to know he was considering warning Z off Sara.

Z waited, genuinely curious. For all that she'd been flirting and sending all the signals that this man would get lucky tonight, there hadn't been the genuine level of comfort that came along with a relationship. Beyond that, either Garrett or his uncle would know if Sara was actually seeing someone, and they'd agreed she wasn't. Z wasn't naive enough to think she'd share such information willingly, but both had their ways of finding that kind of thing out without her knowing.

Either way, she wasn't seeing *this* man.

He headed upstairs, pushing the button for the first upper floor since he wasn't sure where she'd be. Of the three upper floors, they were rated by degree of how hardcore the play was. He stepped onto the second upper floor and looked around the room. There was a spanking bench and a few other things set up for scenes, but the room was dominated by a large sitting area that seemed designed more for chatting than anything kink or sex related.

But no Sara.

He turned and took the elevator to the next floor. And there she was, lounging on a couch next to two men who seemed to be hanging on her every word. Not that he could blame them—

even from across the room, there was something about her that drew him. He wanted to talk to her, to hear what her voice sounded like, to get a better look at the way the pearls draped over the curve of her breasts.

Z shook his head. What the fuck was he thinking? She was a body to protect, no matter how slight the risk might be, and that meant he had no business thinking about *her* body. He didn't make a habit of taking protection jobs—wouldn't have taken this one if it wasn't Garrett asking—but he'd never had a problem keeping things contained before. The fact that he hadn't even spoken to her and her presence was already pushing at his control wasn't a good sign.

Different scenes were in play around him, the sensory overload only setting him further on edge. *Keep it reined in, man. Get the girl, and get out of here.* Because he *wanted* to stop and watch the man whipping the woman bent over a bench, pausing every few strokes to finger her between her legs. Or the couple fucking on the couch across from Sara, in plain view of anyone who cared to watch. Or the Dom tying his sub to the bondage contraption, creating a fascinating pattern with purple rope across her body. It was like fucking Candyland in here.

Which meant he needed to leave. Now.

He stopped in front of her. "Sara Reaver."

She stared at his boots and took her time working up to his eyes, a slow smile curving her lips. "Today's not my birthday, but I'm not about to complain."

"We need to talk."

"Baby, I'll kiss your boots and call you Daddy if it means you'll play with me." But then her blue gaze sharpened on his face and her smile fell away. "Wait a minute. I know you." She shot to her feet. "They said I had until tomorrow. Get the hell out of here."

It was tempting to do exactly that, because he couldn't help but see the way her breasts

heaved with each breath, or notice she barely came up to his shoulder even with her heels, despite the fact her legs seemed three miles long in that short dress. "I can't do that."

"Can't, or won't?" She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I'm not leaving."

That was what he was afraid of. Being here was a drug to his system, lulling him into the promise of what could be. He knew better. He'd learned the hard way, letting go had very real consequences that were impossible to contain. He'd made a promise to himself seven years ago, and he'd never had a problem with even being tempted to break it. Until now. Standing here, staring down at her, he was having a hell of a time remembering all the reasons he had to never go *there* again.

While he'd been lost in a furious inner battle, Sara seemed to have decided on something. She sidled closer, her lily perfume teasing him as she ran a single finger down his chest. "I have the perfect idea. Why don't *you* stay and play with me?" Her finger stopped just short of the top button of his jeans. "I want to see how closely you can guard my body."