

## Chapter One

“You really won’t reconsider?”

Danielle Kastien adjusted the lace mask covering the skin around her eyes. “Nope. Besides, he invited me to the party. It would be rude not to show up.” Especially since she had every intention of seducing the mail guy she’d been chatting up for the last few months at said party. Considering how hard it’d been to keep her hands off him in the building coffee shop, she was already petitioning for saint status. She’d been so sure he was about to kiss her earlier this week—he’d leaned in and everything—but he’d bailed at last second.

That ended tonight.

He’d spent every Tuesday and Thursday drinking her in with those warm brown eyes the same way he drank his coffee—slow, and as if she was the most delicious thing in the world. If he could appreciate something so disgusting as coffee, it made her wonder what it would be like to have him focus that appreciation on her.

Yes, spending time with Grayson had the nasty habit of making her think all sorts of wicked thoughts.

Chelsea perched on the edge of the vanity and handed over the brilliant red lipstick Danielle favored. When she was a kid, she’d hated the fact she was so short and built delicately—it meant she couldn’t keep up on the rare times her four star general father actually took her along with him—but now she liked to play up her China-doll looks.

“I know you were invited, but are you sure you’re not reacting to that blowout you had with your father yesterday?”

“The one where he informed me all my life decisions to date are pathetic and worthless, and I’ll never amount to anything?” Dad didn’t like what she was doing with her life, and he never

had. He didn't approve of her corporate job at the Mulligan's law firm, or the fact she was twenty-six and still "mucking about" with various men instead of settling down with a good provider. He'd actually used that term—a good provider. As if they were still living in the fifties, and her place was to be pregnant, barefoot, and in the kitchen. He'd be *thrilled* if she ended up with someone like him—some man in a powerful job who'd steamroll her through life until she fit the perfect little mold he thought she should.

"Would that be the conversation you're talking about?" Danielle had never been all that good and coloring inside the lines. She finished with her lipstick and rolled her lips together.

"Ah... Yes."

She made an effort to keep her carefree smile in place, despite the fact she felt like breaking something. She might not have the most glorious of jobs, but she was putting herself through night school so she'd have the qualifications to be eligible for promotion. Not that she'd told her dad about night school—or anyone else.

But there was no use thinking about it now, even if fights with her dad usually left her feeling reckless, which led to all sorts of stupid decisions. This wasn't one of those, though. "I've had my eye on this guy for awhile. My jumping him has nothing to do with my daddy issues." Not everyone was meant to settle down with their soulmate like Chelsea had—when she'd finally acknowledged that she'd had a husband all this time Danielle never knew about.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with Nathan and I tonight?" From her best friend's tone, she knew the question was a lost cause.

Danielle's smile was a bit more real this time. "Nah. You guys are great and all, but I'm not really into the whole third-wheel thing—or seventh-wheel since you have all those other couples with you."

“It won’t be all married couples. There are plenty of gorgeous single men out there who don’t work in your building.” Chelsea stood and smoothed down her Lucille Ball dress. With her red hair done in the familiar up-do, she looked both like a blast from the past and a chic present-day model. The woman was made to wear that style. She frowned. “What happens after tonight? I don’t suppose you’re going to date this one?”

Date? Danielle paused and let herself actually consider it. She and Grayson, had shared coffee a twice a week for the last few months. It had started when he caught her checking out his ass on the elevator, and they just kept running into each other. She’d never admit it, but she caught herself lingering in the lobby longer than was strictly necessary just to see if he’d show up and give her *that* look, the one that made her knees turn to Jell-O.

He always did.

And then there were the conversations they had. What started out as a stolen fifteen minutes to down her energy drink while he had coffee sometimes turned into a full hour. A few times they’d even talked longer. When she was sat across the table from Grayson, time seemed to stand still. He made her laugh, and he made her hot, and she found herself telling him things he had no business knowing.

But dating was something else altogether. Dating meant bringing him home to Dad, and trying to build a relationship. Relationships meant boundaries, and boundaries and Danielle never had got along all that well. She liked breaking them way too much.

“Danielle?”

She plumped her boobs and then checked the effect in the mirror. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know me. I don’t date.”

“Not yet.” Chelsea laughed at the look on her face. “You never know what could happen if

you meet the right guy.”

Danielle stood up and turned a quick circle. “What do you think?”

“You look amazing, and you know it.” Chelsea smiled. “Catwoman was a stroke of genius.”

Danielle wasn’t going to deny it—the whole black catsuit and killer heels thing made her feel like a vixen. Grayson wouldn’t know what hit him. “I do my best.” She made a shooping motion. “Now get going. You don’t want to be late for your shindig.”

She slipped her ID and credit card into her super sweet utility belt, and then added her bullwhip. It was a smaller version of the comic book character’s, but she couldn’t find a full length one in the amount of time she’d had. After taking one last moment to check to make sure she looked as fantastic as she felt, Danielle headed for the door.

Tonight she was going to get her some hot mail guy. She’d worry about the consequences later.

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Tonight would be the night he told her the truth.

Grayson Harper shook his head, amused at his melodrama. He wasn’t the type to leave anything to chance, and the same rule applied to Danielle, the sassy little thing he’d run into a few months ago. When he’d caught her checking out his ass and she’d tried to cover it up by making a snarky comment about him having two left feet, and he’d been intrigued despite himself. Because she didn’t know who he was.

How she’d managed *not* to know surprised him since he owned the damn building, but he couldn’t turn down a chance to have coffee with her—to have a conversation with someone who didn’t know him as Grayson Harper, CEO and all-around corporate hardass and steamroller.

Not that he minded most days. He’d built up his corporation from little more than nothing.

Doing so hadn't left much time for friends or casual socializing, though he hadn't felt the loss until the last few years.

Truth was, having coffee a few times a week with Danielle filled a need he had barely been aware existed. She treated him as if he was just a man and she was just a woman. When he was with her, his resume took a backseat to his personality, and he'd found himself relaxing in a way he rarely was able to. With her, he could just take a step back and enjoy himself instead of taking control of every situation like he normally did.

Perhaps he should have told her the truth the second time they met in the coffee shop, but Grayson refused to run the risk of her changing because of who he was. Over the years he'd stopped dating altogether because of the way women looked at him—as if he were a ladder into the life they wanted. When they saw him, they saw money signs and a position of power. While he didn't think Danielle was the type of woman to cling to a man for those reasons—or any reason at all—after he heard her go off about men who held powerful jobs, he was almost afraid of the opposite reaction.

It didn't hurt that he wanted her with a desire that nearly swept away all his hard-won control.

He wanted to spend more time with her—outside of the building's coffee shop. Their interactions had changed over the last few weeks, both of them flirting heavily and finding ways to touch each other. If those brief brushes were any indication, the chemistry they shared went beyond verbal.

Earlier this week, he'd almost kissed her—would have if they weren't meeting in the goddamn company coffee shop. She'd actually closed her eyes and leaned in, so there was no doubt she felt the same way he did.

The Halloween party was a charity event his company had put together put together every year, but this was the first time they'd put together a full-on masquerade ball with costumes and everything else. His secretary had been beyond thrilled about the entire thing, and the office was buzzing with speculation on who would show up as what. Even Grayson had gotten caught up in the excitement, which was why he'd chosen tonight as the night to make his move.

He adjusted the cloak about his shoulders and fixed the mask against his face. He'd always been a fan of *The Phantom of the Opera*, and lately he'd shared a keen familiarity with the man behind the mask. Everyone saw what they wanted to see—a terrifying creature bent on destruction—and not what he really was.

A damaged man driven mad by loneliness.

Tonight, Grayson planned on making sure he didn't follow in the Phantom's footsteps.

