

## Chapter One

*"Don't do it, Nick. I swear I will kill you if you do."*

Sophie Callaghan begged Nicholas Newman not to walk away from the love of his life, again.

A salt and vinegar chip wavered halfway between Sophie's mouth and the Pringles can that lay on her lap.

After a long, lingering look, Nick closed the door with a soft click.

*No...*

Wistfulness settled on her shoulders like soft snow.

The notes of "Nadia's Theme" and the closing credits of *The Young and the Restless* sealed the chip's fate, which was followed by the rest of the contents of the tube.

She searched for any last crumbs. "Imagine living like a Newman or an Abbot, Pongo. No overdue bills, no finding quarters for the laundry, and never dining on two-minute noodles in Genoa City. How good would that be?"

Pongo lay sprawled on his back, stubby legs in the air, opened one eye, then went back to sleep.

*I'm having way too many conversations with my dog.*

Sophie sighed and collapsed back onto her awesome yellow Goodwill couch. She ignored the growing stack of bills on the counter and hugged Pongo's warm, squishy body.

"One day we'll get you a nice Mrs. Pongo and adopt Pongettes from the shelter and have a little family. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Pongo, who looked like he was made from different dog parts stuck together, wagged his stumpy tail, and answered in his own unique style. She swooped sideways in a practiced move as Pongo's contribution to global warming hit the room in a string of ripped popping sounds.

"Whoa, that was ripe even for you." She fanned the air. "The sooner I get you back on your insanely expensive, indoor-outdoor, salt-reduced, perfect-coat, fart-reducing dog food, the better."

She leaned in and kissed his forehead, then stood and retrieved the empty tube of chips and the bowl of cornflakes she'd eaten for dinner from the coffee table. Two flakes clung to the side of the bowl like prisoners scaling the walls.

*A few more dinners like this, and I'll have to down an orange so I don't get scurvy.*

She eyed the empty fruit bowl.

*Yeah, like I can afford fruit.*

"Time to go to work, Pong."

She ruffled her dog's head, walked to her bedroom, and changed into her work clothes of dark jeans, flat boots, and a black sweater, then wrestled her unruly mass of mahogany brown hair into a prisoner ponytail.

She glanced in the mirror and looked away with a shrug. From an early age, her father had told her daily it was better to go through life *natural*, like her, instead of having unwanted attention, which is why no one noticed her when she snapped his or her picture. Being a good PI meant she could blend into the background, and blend she did. She could wear Waldo's jersey in a sea of gray and people wouldn't remember her. She'd always been the too-tall, too-plain girl that boys didn't notice, which she now owned, but occasionally a remark snuck past the goalie and scored a direct hit.

She snatched her keys from the counter where she'd thrown them earlier.

If all went according to plan tonight, she'd be recording a man named Babic so she could get info on his boss, Alexander Petrov, and try to figure out why her late father had secret journals; one filled with pages of names of people he'd swindled along with amounts and the towns where they lived. The other journal had shown an obsession with Petrov—a Lithuanian billionaire shipping magnate.

Which made no sense.

Her father had been a traveling preacher for the people... or so she'd believed.

For six years since her father died, she'd been chipping away at the journals, trying to understand how the man who'd rocked her to sleep when she woke from nightmares, the man she'd adored, had deceived her.

If a girl couldn't trust her daddy, whom could she trust?

*No one.*

The thought hurt like a pressed bruise. She pushed past it, set the six alarms, then headed out the door. Another Friday night sitting alone in a sex club recording her target's conversation while slaves whipped him.

*Fan-friggin-tastic.*

\*\*\*

Forty minutes later, Sophie slid into a booth at Hostage. Whips, chains, and medieval racks had found a home in the artsy Colorado town of Yaw Yaw. The club became an instant hit when it opened six months ago. Nestled behind galleries, crystal shops, and yoga studios, the thriving sex club was packed as usual.

She stared at a woman sitting on a stool to her left. Her dress was hoisted above her hips, her back arched, a blond head buried between her thighs. A pink wristband dangled from the blond's wrist, which meant she was a slave... and hungry.

Her cheeks hot, Sophie turned away and intently studied the information chart on the table advising the color-coding of the wristbands, until her eyes burned.

Green meant you were here as an observer. If you wore red, you were a dom. If your wristband came in orange, you liked to be spanked. If being a slave was your thing, then pink was your color. Gold if you were submissive, and if purple dangled from your wrist, then you were up for *anything*.

Sophie shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She'd been taught that body contact between a man and a woman was for reproduction only. Anything else was the equivalent of eating kittens' souls and chanting in tongues.

The scent of sex, expensive perfume and high-end whiskey soaked the air.

She glanced around the club. The furniture, the floor, and the ceiling were painted a matte black. Only the long, rectangular, acrylic tables in the booths, teeming with tropical fish of every highlighter color, broke through the murky darkness.

Groups of people or couples occupied satin-curtained booths or clustered around the bar.

Or *not*.

A woman was bent over a fish tank table, being hammered home by a Greek god of a man. Another man stroked himself, his gaze locked on Zeus.

Sophie stared at the swirl of fish, the tips of her ears flaming.

*Poor Nemo, I bet he wants to be out of here as much as I do.*

She turned her head and took a sip of the lemony sweetness of margarita.

Admission alone was putting a sizeable dent in her dwindling bank balance. Thank

God she was starting a new job tonight because she was barely scraping by. Between paying back her father's sins, getting her car fixed — again — and cooking for her elderly neighbors, this was two-minute noodle week, again.

On that happy note, she scanned the club. If Babic followed the same pattern as the last two weeks, he'd soon be settling in the corner with a pair of twin busty Barbies with boobs so perfectly round and symmetrical they could be used as flotation devices. Barbie number one would straddle his lap, Barbie number two straddling *her* lap.

*Playtime without Ken or the Malibu camper.*

She stood, smoothed her hands down her jeans, and walked the club's perimeter in the shadows. She usually smelled him before she saw him. The man bathed in scent so strong that Killer Hornets collapsed when he walked past.

*Got him.*

Blond buzz cut, botox forehead, veneered teeth so white they glowed in purple light.

Babic.

While Babic watched the Barbies make out, she sidled up to his table pretending to be fascinated by the threesome and pressed a tiny microphone against the underside of the smooth wood. She'd collect it when playtime finished.

She walked back to her booth, sat on the smooth leather seat, and picked up her drink. A man who could be Babic's twin slipped into his booth. A heated conversation

followed, judging by the wild hand gestures from the other man. Babic rapid-fired back while positioning Barbie's head in his lap.

*Babic the multitasker.*

The margarita turned sour in her mouth.

She kept watching Babic, ignoring nausea and Barbie's bobbing head. After agonizingly long minutes, the other man slid out of the booth.

Babic's soulless eyes pinned Sophie. His lazy gaze dropped to the gold band on her wrist, then rose back to her face. The air in Sophie's lungs froze. She let out a breath when his eyes shut. His head hit the back of the leather booth when Barbie picked up the pace.

She glanced around the club, desperate for something else to look at, and jolted when a man's smoky eyes locked on hers.

*No way.*

*No freaking way.*

With shaking hands, she set her glass down.

As usual, he looked like he'd stepped off a Harley: scuffed boots, aged denim hugging muscled legs, mirrored aviator glasses perching on messy black hair. Powerful arms crossed under his wide chest. The man cranked out enough testosterone to fuel the NFL. A woman stopped beside him, her mouth open, 'yes, please' written on her face.

Sophie rolled her eyes before she ripped her gaze away and ignored her galloping heart.

*Damn it.*

Harlan Franco, Colorado's busiest bounty hunter.

And a total ass.

She'd heard the rumors he had a listing with Groupon where he delivered pleasure to armies of panting women. She drew in a long, shaky breath before releasing it slowly.

Eighteen months ago in a hotel bar where they'd been trailing the same jumper, she'd fallen into Harlan's arms, literally, like the clichéd chick in a Hallmark movie. Her breasts had mashed against his hard chest. She'd caught one whiff of him and much to her dismay, her body had flooded with hormones of the reproducing kind. She'd seen herself reflected in his sunglasses, flushed, her bottom lip snagged between her teeth, as if he'd delivered on his Groupon promise.

Harlan had booked a room, and they were devouring each other, stopping only to remove clothes. He'd wanted her as much as she wanted him, or so she'd thought. His tongue dominating her mouth, his hands on her aching, swollen breasts. She'd melted against him like chocolate. Harlan had steered them into the bathroom and instead of having mind-blowing shower sex, he'd grinned, kissed her hard on the mouth, walked out of the bathroom, and wedged a chair under the door.

The embarrassment of standing in her underwear with a kind security guard who'd told her Harlan had flicked him fifty to wait for twenty minutes before letting Sophie out had wounded her. She'd stared at the security guard blankly until the Harlan fog had cleared and stinging reality bit deep. What was it about Harlan Franco that scrambled her self-control? No other man affected her like Harlan did which was painfully embarrassing. But the humiliating kicker that stole her breath was that Harlan had faked his attraction to her, all to bring in a skip.

Lesson well and truly learned.

Since then, she'd seen him a few times, always with a breathless blond attached to his arm. He never acknowledged her presence.

Turns out she'd been the delusional one. Hurt, humiliated, and furious with herself, she'd retaliated by taking Lopez from under his nose.

She picked up her drink, licking salt from the cool rim, her eyes scanning the room before locking onto Harlan's. Nothing moved on his face. As usual, she was as attractive to him as a blocked drain.

Sophie raised her eyebrows, saluted him with her drink, and turned away.

A woman glided past her holding a platter of frozen fruit. Sophie stared at a banana.

*I wonder what they do...*

Her cheeks heated.

*Oh, right.*

She stood, turned to gather her bag, and move to another part of the club, but Harlan materialized at her side. Her breasts brushed against his solid arm, and her body shivered.

His fingers clamped around hers without invitation, surprisingly gentle but with authority.

Lightning traveled through her bones.

*Well, this is plain embarrassing.*

“What are you doing here, Sophie?”

There was no need for him to know she was here working.

“I’m searching for a big, bad dom.” She flashed her gold wristband, a joke reminder to herself that she would never let herself be dominated by a man again.

She’d had three alpha-male, powerful, demanding lovers, and three humiliating times she’d turned into their expectation of who they wanted her to be. She didn’t understand why she let it happen, but it would *never* happen again.

He’d been scanning the crowd over her shoulder, but at her words, his eyes locked on hers. “Are you alone?”

“I am.” She adjusted the strap on her bag.

She was her own best friend.

The techno beat from the packed dance floor sent vibrations up her spine, then changed to a low, sexy Latin American dance. She didn't have to turn around to imagine what was happening on the dance floor.

His Chris Pine blues roamed from her head to her boots in a lazy, insolent way that fused her molars.

*You can drop the act—we both know you're not interested in me and back at ya.*

As much as it pained her to admit it, the man was delicious. Long, dark lashes framed sinful sapphire eyes that on any other man would be pretty, but you wouldn't call this man pretty. Naturally tanned skin stretched over high-cut cheekbones that could probably cut paper and diamonds. Straight white teeth. Lips made for pleasuring. It appeared he shaved when he wanted, and he hadn't wanted to for a while. She'd tucked nicely under his chin at five eight in flat boots.

Unfortunately, she knew he tasted like a tall glass of sin and deceit.

He walked into any room like he owned it. Heads turned, both male and female, *especially female*, and Harlan looked like he didn't know or care.

"Got to say I did *not* appreciate you stealing Lopez," he said after a beat. "I'd been trailing him for weeks. That man was mine."

She stared at him, stunned. So he was going to ignore the elephant in the room that he'd left her dressed only in underwear after pretending he was attracted to her, just to get a jumper?

Her mouth dropped open, but she slammed it shut.

*Fine by me. I'd rather forget that terrible afternoon existed.*

But she couldn't forget, because at unintentional times it reared up, and that horrible feeling of thinking she'd been invited to a party, only to turn up and find out she'd been the only one *not* invited and what was she doing there, still burned.

"I didn't steal him from you. The man was mine. I flirted with him, and he followed like a horny teen thinking he was about to get *lucky*."

Harlan looked about as happy as if he were attending a knitting convention. His stance was wide, face unreadable. She cocked her head. "I hear the medieval rack has an opening. You should take it, might loosen you up."

His warm chuckle rolled across her skin. His blue eyes sparkled, and for one long moment, she forgot to breathe. Luckily, her lungs obeyed biology, and she hauled in a breath.

He leaned in close, his heat hitting her like a summer storm. "Show me how you got Lopez to follow you, and I'll tell you why I'm here."

She blinked. "Are you here working?" She deflected and took another sip of her drink, and her brain cranked up a gear. If he was here working a case, she could nab his jumper and pay back another name in her father's journal.

Tempting.

Very tempting.

Her gaze slid around the high-end club. Babic pounded into Barbie number two while Barbie number one whipped his butt. Angry red welts crisscrossed his skin.

Sophie stared, perplexed. *How can he be so comfortable naked in a room full of people, having sex while getting flogged?*

Someone bumped into her from behind. She pitched forward. Harlan's arm curled around her waist. Her fingers clutched impossibly hard biceps, and her body heated to the point she could toast her breakfast cinnamon rolls on bases one and two.

*Why does my body turn into a hormonal mess when he's around?*

He released her as if she were diseased.

Yet again, the sting of humiliation slithered across her skin. She pulled the band holding her hair tighter.

If he were here following a jumper, she'd get the reward *and* the satisfaction of beating Harlan. Oh yeah, she'd *so* take his jumper.

"I'll show you how I got Lopez to follow me, and *then* I'll be finding Mr. Big Bad Dom for the night, so let's get this show on the road. I'll need a new margarita with a cherry."

By a miracle of intervention, a black-suited server materialized. Before she could pass the server money, Harlan lay bills on the tray, murmured something in his ear and, in record time, the man appeared with a frosty glass.

She tried to hand Harlan a twenty.

He ignored it.

Her head snapped back. "I don't take drinks from strangers, and I always pay my own way."

"We're not strangers, Sophie."

They entered a stare-off. Blue clashed with brown. When her eyes started smarting, she pressed the bill into his hand.

"Yeah, we're strangers," she replied. "And for the record, you'll never know me."

He blinked, his eyes narrowed, but he took the twenty.

She breathed deep and ran through the routine in her mind.

The last time she'd attempted this she'd waited in the dark pool hall until Harlan had headed to the bathroom, then she'd sidled up to Jermaine Lopez—nursing a beer at eight in the morning, the breakfast of champions—and had produced her one and only party trick. The man followed her, his tongue practically hanging out. She'd had him cuffed and in her car when Harlan's expletive-fueled rant had hit her ears.

The smooth cherry was cool against her lips. She took her time nibbling the sweet flesh from the stem.

Without looking up, she could feel Harlan's stare. The room melted away.

"Hold out your hand," she murmured.

He held his steady palm between them.

She closed her eyes, bending the stem a few times with her tongue, softening it. She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

It looked like he was fighting a yawn.

She pushed down on the stem with the tip of her tongue until it formed a U. She crossed one stem over the other, using the back of her front teeth to keep the stem stable. A drop of sweat slid between her breasts. His eyes flared but stayed locked on her mouth.

Now came the tricky part.

She used her front teeth to hold the X while she maneuvered the stem, her tongue performing Olympic-style gymnastics. Leaning forward, she dropped the knot into his palm, resisting the urge to grin.

His intense burning gaze blistered her skin.

“So, where’s Mr. or Mrs. Jumper you’re tailing?” She gazed around the club. “Is that him?” She pointed to a group of men flexing whips at the flogging station. Her eyes were drawn to movement to her left. “Wait. Is that her?” She pointed to a woman on a sex swing, her legs open, heading toward a man ready to receive.

Harlan leaned in closer, his mouth brushing her ear. “Tell me, Sophie, where’s the wire?”

She kept her face set and met his gaze. “Why would I be wearing a wire? I told you, I’m here for a big strong man to tell me what to do.” She took a slug of her drink. “I *love*

being a good girl." She forced the liquid down her throat and somehow managed not to choke on the words.

His eyes and nostrils flared.

She couldn't make out a band on his wrist. "No pink band tonight?"

He chuckled unexpectedly, his eyes sparkling. "I'm not a slave."

She stared at him for a second, mesmerized, before she kicked herself. "Shame, I think it might suit you. You never know, you might enjoy getting flogged into submission." She shrugged tight shoulders. "So where's the jumper?"

His hand curled around her biceps. "So there's no wire in your thong? Maybe it's in a lacy black bra. I wouldn't mind finding it with my tongue."

"What?" She struggled to keep her face neutral while her bones dissolved.

"Do I have to strip-search you? Make sure it isn't *hidden*?"

She blinked, her mouth flooding.

*This so isn't happening again.*

"I told you the only reason I'm here is to find a man who understands my *needs*."

Her mouth became drier with every word. This man, his words, scrambled her. "See you around, Harlan."

He gripped her hand, and she froze.

Harlan raised his other arm, the cuff on his leather jacket sliding down to reveal a red band.

*Oh no. Oh, hell no.*

“I’m a big, bad dom.” His velvet voice slid across her skin. “Let’s talk about your needs.”

Her stomach curled into a little ball and played dead.

*Think, Sophie, think.*

She’d have to play along. If she backed away from him, he’d figure out she most definitely was not a submissive, and she was here for an entirely different reason. No one knew the truth about her father. That fun fact would go to the grave with her.

*The ass thinks I’ll fall for him a second time only to be locked in a backroom here?*

Oh yeah, she’d totally play along. Maybe it was time for *him* to get locked in a bathroom.

He leaned in and whispered. “I’m going to sign my name on your body with my tongue. I *will* have my mouth on you before I fuck you until you come so hard and so many times you’ll have to learn to walk again.”

She opened her mouth, hoping something would emerge from her mush of brain and land witty and smart on her tongue.

Nothing.

It would appear her brain had taken a cruise to Guatemala.

She pulled back when Harlan traced a finger from her hip to her shoulder. Even through denim and thick cotton, his fingers left a trail of fire.

She clenched her hands, trying and failing to stop her body's disastrous reaction. Smoldering blue eyes captured hers. "You will be on your knees, calling my name when I take you."

"In your wet dreams." The words came out strong and sure. Well, at least in her mind they did.

His lips brushed her ear. "You smell like sin and tonight I'm a sinner." He pushed against her and the hard length of him pressed against her thigh.

"Stop it," she whispered.

"I like what you did with that cherry. I've had a taste of your mouth, and I plan on finding out what else your talented mouth can do."

He pushed farther in to her thigh, and she bit back an ill-concealed moan.

He stared down at her, his eyes blazing as if she belonged to him. "Are you ready?" he asked, his knuckles tracing across her jaw, igniting nerve endings and scattering goosebumps from her jaw to her hip.

"For what?" She kept her voice even when her body ached with need.

"For what I'm about to do to you."

His words detached bone from muscle.

And it was killing her.

The part of her brain that wasn't on the Guatemala cruise dumped a bucket of ice water over her head. "No."

Harlan turned, one insolent eyebrow cocked.

“My needs don’t need discussing, and especially not with you,” she said.

A smile that could turn a nun transformed his face. “Oh, we *will* talk about your needs.”

Her heartbeat ramped up to *just won Olympic gold*. “No, we will *not*.”

He crushed the distance between them and kissed her. Hard, hot, and powerful, and her body responded instantly, *again*. His tongue touched hers, and she moaned into his mouth. His breathing fractured.

He broke the kiss but kept her an inch from his mouth. “Tell me what I’m going to do to you, Sophie.” His voice was low and strained, his eyes molten.

She shook her head, clinging to the barest thread of control.

A sound like a submarine’s ping came from somewhere. In a haze, she watched him frown, grab his phone from his jeans pocket, and swipe his finger across the screen. He turned.

“Don’t move. I’ve got to take this.” He then jogged toward the back of the club to a private room—the only place you could use your cell.

She took a shuddering breath.

Her hand covered her mouth.

*What is wrong with me?*

She cringed.

*He's playing me just like in the hotel room, and I'm letting him.*

With her head down, she willed her racing heart to steady. She made her way to Babic's table, where a new Barbie was bouncing on his lap. Sophie forced a fascinated smile while her trembling hand skimmed the underside of the table. She plucked out the device, leaving most of the clay behind.

Babic paused, his gaze roaming over her face. "You want to be next?"