

Chapter One

Perfect pastry = a perfect business

Nothing on this earth could make her happier than that fact. Nothing at all. Certainly not that oh, so elusive thing as a *perfect man for her*.

No matter what her mother said.

“Mr. Perfect’s on the front page again.”

Sophie glanced away from dabbing black buttercream frosting on the witches. “Jorge. Why do you read that rag?”

“To keep you up-to-date on your friends.” His enormous body lounged in the one chair she allowed in the industrial-sized bakery. Made of hard plastic, the thing was uncomfortable, yet Jorge always managed to spend plenty of time sitting on it, waiting for the deliveries to be ready. With his stack of New York City tabloids at hand.

“Alexander Stravoudas is not my friend.” She leaned over the long steel table and returned her focus to what was important: her business. Not news about a guy who’d exited her life and Melanie’s a month ago.

“He was, once upon a time.”

“No, he wasn’t.” He’d been Mel’s fiancé for one brief moment, once upon a time, but Sophie, thankfully, had been able to talk some sense into her friend. Mel was now where she belonged—with Jack. And Mr. Suave-and-Debonair had moved on to... Well, on to whatever. She didn’t care.

What she did care about was the long list of tasks she needed to complete this evening. She had to get these two hundred cookies done so Jorge could deliver them to the Halloween party on time. Then she had to go into her dinky office and figure out how to execute on the bride’s request to add a picture of her cat to the wedding cake. Last, but not least, she needed to make sure the apricot-filled *kolaches* were cool enough to sprinkle powdered sugar over them so they’d be ready in time for tomorrow’s show. This was going to be a long night.

A shiver went through her. Everything was happening. Just like she’d prayed and dreamed.

Pure Pastry was becoming a raging success.

“He’s going to be raging when he reads this,” Jorge mumbled from behind the rustle of the newspaper.

Straightening, she sighed as she rubbed her lower back. “What now?”

“He’s lost another contract.” The newspaper crackled in the big man’s hands as he turned a page. “Add to that, supposedly Chi-Chi Vangra turned him down when he asked her out.”

“That’s too bad.” She couldn’t help the sarcasm winding through her words. She didn’t like the man, hadn’t from the moment she’d met him. Maybe it had been the way he’d looked at Mel—as if she were some amusing toy—even after putting an eye-popping diamond on her finger. Or likely it was the over-the-top wealth and accompanied arrogance she found to be such a turnoff. Or perhaps it was her gut knowledge that the man would move on to a new woman within minutes of splitting with her best friend.

And look. Her gut had been right. As always.

“You’re not very sympathetic.” Jorge stuck his bald head above the top of the paper and eyed her. “The poor guy’s had a hard month.”

“I’m sure he’ll survive.” Her dry tone sugared each word.

“Ever since your best bud ended their engagement, it’s been one thing after the other.” The old man tapped the newspaper with one stubby finger. “Before, the guy could do no wrong.”

“I bet he did a lot of things wrong before Mel broke up with him.” She leaned back down to finish the last cookie. “The tabloids just didn’t cover it.”

“Well, they’ve changed their tune.” He eased himself off the chair, his large belly rolling impressively over tight jeans. “Now he can do no right.”

Sophie ignored the waving newspaper and the chatter. It was nothing to her. The news. The man. She had far more important things to think about than Alexander the Great, as the tabs had named him. “Help me box these cookies and you can be on your way.”

“Can I have one?” Jorge already knew the answer.

“One,” she warned as she slid a sheaf of folded boxes from under the table. The old man sauntered over and peered at the throng of witches and ghosts and pumpkins. Choosing one of the scariest ghosts, he hummed as the sugar cookie crumbled in his mouth.

She couldn’t help the smile crossing her face.

That.

That sound had been what hooked her at the tender age of ten. Her grandpa and dad had made exactly that sound when they'd tasted her first batch of brownies. The batch she'd done by herself without any assistance from her beaming grandma and proud mom.

"Damn, Soph." Jorge chewed and swallowed. "You better lock these cookies away from me or there won't be any left by the time I get to the party."

"You wouldn't eat them all." She started to stack the cookies in the boxes, placing parchment paper between each layer. "It was your idea to have me donate them to the Harlem Center in the first place."

"They're good kids."

"And so," her quick hands continued to fill the boxes, "they deserve a treat."

His answering chuckle stopped abruptly when the doorbell chimed. "Who is that buzzing after hours?" he grumbled. "I don't like it that you're here alone after the others go home."

The others being her two assistants. Who, even if they were here, would be useless in driving off any bad guys. Megan would probably start crying and collapse at any sign of danger. Tamika would be too busy tweeting her best friend about the news she was being robbed to do any damage. "I highly doubt any bad guy is going to ring the doorbell to announce his presence."

Ignoring the continued grumbling from the old man, Sophie headed for the steel door. She'd been lucky to find this space right smack dab in the middle of the Lower East Side. She needed a place in the heart of New York City since most of her customers lived on the island. Two years ago, when it had been clear her exposure on the TV show was going to skyrocket sales, her small walk-up apartment down the street could no longer handle the baking orders.

She'd needed space. Lots of space.

So she'd definitely lucked out with this place. The twenty-five-thousand square-foot building had once housed an eighties' nightclub but had lain vacant for years. However, some developer had come along a couple of years ago and started leasing units just as she had begun her search. The place was rough and rundown. Still, with some help from her buddies, she'd managed to turn it into what she needed.

Wrestling with the stubborn lock, she finally wrenched the door open.

To a surprise.

Sophie baked surprises. Supplied surprises.

She personally did not appreciate surprises. Of any kind.

She stared at him, trying to understand why. Why had he come here and surprised her?

“Sophia.” He’d always called her by her full name and it always irritated her.

The October sun sunk low behind the tall spires of endless skyscrapers. But the darkness behind him merely highlighted the brilliance of his presence. He radiated energy and heat and bright. She’d forgotten his vitality, the way his appearance always seemed to suck out her breath.

She’d forgotten how much he irritated her.

He didn’t smile. Not as he had when they’d first met. Not when he’d still been in full campaign mode to win her over. He didn’t flash his white teeth or bat his blue eyes or do anything to make her agreeable to whatever he was going to pitch.

No. Instead, Alexander Stravoudas looked very much like he’d looked the last time she’d seen him.

When she’d given him back the bling.

“May I come in?” The deep voice thrummed along her spine as it had every time he spoke in her presence.

Which had irritated her too, come to think of it. “What are you doing here?”

A broad, bulky hand landed on the door. Her gaze swung to the hand attached to the long, lean arm which was attached to the tall, lean man standing right in front of her.

The hand also irritated her. Not only because it was now trying to nudge the door open, but because it was not what an artist’s hand should look like. She’d been unwillingly fascinated when she’d stared down at his hand as he held Mel’s, showing off the outrageous rock he’d bought to announce he’d found a bride. His hand had bemused her then, and it bemused her now. This hand should not be designing such beautiful buildings.

He had the hands of a brute. Not an artist.

The brute’s voice dipped in displeasure. “Let me in.”

Oh, there. There was another source of infinitely more than mere irritation. There was what had sealed his doom in her judgment when she’d experienced it for the first time.

His arrogance. His complete disregard for any other person's point of view.

Like hers.

She'd only mentioned the subject because it had been important to Melanie. She'd wanted to make sure her buddy was going to continue with her work after the marriage. The work she'd spent four years in college studying.

"She doesn't have to work," he'd said, oozing his crappy conceit. "She's going to be my wife."

As if there could be no other position quite soooo wonderful as that. He hadn't thought about how much good Melanie did every day at her work. He hadn't thought about whether or not Mel would want to spend every one of her hours cooing over his greatness. He hadn't thought about his future wife's desires or the good she did every day. Not at all.

He'd only thought about himself.

Thank goodness Melanie had left him and gone back to Jack and her work with the special-needs kids at the elementary school.

Thank goodness she, Miss Sophia Charlotte Feuer, no longer had to be nice to this man.

Folding her arms in front of her, she frowned. "Go away."

"No." The big hand didn't nudge anymore. It slammed the door open and he stepped forward.

"Hey," Jorge exclaimed in immediate outrage. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The brute glanced past her and smiled.

Jorge went silent.

That smile. That was another one of the things she'd forgotten. She'd forgotten how irritated his smile made her. It made her itch. To slap or smack or jeez, even punch. He had full lips, indecently so for a man. The lush fullness of the bowed upper, the ripeness of the lower jutting out, almost as if the man was pouting. The mouth was too much, too over-the-top.

The lips, the mouth...she hated to admit it...were perfect for him.

And worked perfectly well in entrancing men as well as women, when they broadened into a gloriously beautiful smile.

The one he wore right now.

“I didn’t realize Sophia was entertaining.” He stepped right past her and thrust his brutish paw towards the older man. Who clutched it. Of course.

The charm offense.

Another irritating thing she had noted about Alexander the Great. At the endless happy hours he’d hosted that she’d attended with Mel, and then the long, insufferable week at his plush Hampton estate with the pre-wedding party, she’d seen this trick of his do amazing stuff. Even she had to admit, the whole schtick was pretty damn incredible.

Within moments of entering a room, he had everyone in a dazzled stupor.

Within seconds of meeting a person, Alex Stravoudas had made a new lifelong friend.

Within days of meeting Melanie, he’d had her best bud convinced he was the guy.

But there was one bright, shining spot in the midst of all this capitulation to Mr. Perfect’s charm. During the entire three months he’d tried to win Sophie over, he’d never moved an inch towards his goal.

Which had really, really irritated *him*.

She was glad, proud even. This man didn’t deserve her respect and he certainly hadn’t deserved Mel’s hand in marriage. He didn’t have a heart. She was sure of it. Which is why she felt not a spot of guilt at what she’d done. She didn’t care that he’d had some problems with business during the last month. He deserved it. He was nothing but a heartless con artist.

The con artist smiled at Jorge. “Call me Alex.”

The old man mumbled something indistinct, yet his whole body language spoke of waning anger and bluster. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised. Exactly as she would have if Tamika or Megan were hanging around, panting and preening at the man, Sophie was going to have to be the one to throw the intruder out. “I want you to leave.”

He turned, his smile still in place. But there was something frozen in those blue eyes of his. He didn’t like her any more than she liked him. Which begged the question as to why the heck he was here.

She suppressed the whisper of curiosity.

“Ah, Sophia,” he said, as if the existence of Jorge had put her entirely from his mind. He’d done this before, after he’d understood she couldn’t be won over. Subtly putting her down. Diminishing her.

A lick of temper flared deep inside.

“Yes, *Sophie*.” She tightened her fingers on her arms. “The owner of this place.”

“Not really.” He paced across the room to the dinky office and glanced in. As if *he* were the owner.

She didn’t have an Irish temper. Not like her mom. Still, something close to a volcano blasted from her gut, heating her face and burning her brain. “What the hell are you doing?”

Jorge shuffled beside the table laden with boxes. “Do you want me to throw him out?”

The charmer swung around and chuckled. “There’s no need for that. Sophia and I are old friends.”

She snorted. Eyed the two men. Thought about her options.

Jorge was big. But old.

Stravoudas was bigger. And young.

The cookies needed to be delivered.

The glint in the con artist’s eyes told her he wasn’t going easily into the night.

Finally, her curiosity got the best of her. “Jorge. Get going. The kids are waiting.”

“You sure?” The old man swung his gaze from the smiling man to the frowning Sophie.

“I’m sure.”

With a snort, he grabbed the dozen boxes, hefted them into his burly arms, and left.

The door thunked behind him. Silence followed. A strange sort of hushed silence one only felt right before a thunderstorm was about to roll across the city with ferocious glee.

“Well?” She shot the word at him, trying to jerk out of the welling anxiety suddenly swimming in her stomach.

He no longer smiled. In fact, the fake smile had fallen off his handsome face the moment Jorge had turned away from him and left. “Weeeelllll...”

His drawl mocked her. Flashed the wisp of anxiety right out of her, replacing it with... irritation. Typical. “Weeeelllll...” She mocked him back. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” He lazed against the stone wall by the office. “An excellent question.”

“Stop playing—”

“You always get straight to the point, don’t you, Sophia?”

“Sophie.”

“Always succinct. Pithy.” He folded his arms in front of him. “A person could even say acerbic, bitter.”

The words hurt. Which was incredibly stupid. What did it matter what this man thought of her? “Is this why you came around? To insult me?”

He ignored her. “It always amazes me that such a bitter woman works with sugar all day long.”

Sophie stared at him.

A month ago, when she’d given him back the bling and told him in no uncertain terms that Mel was lost to him, she’d expected this kind of attack. Some anger or lashing out. But he’d smiled instead. A cold smile, true, yet a smile nevertheless. Then, he’d thanked her for the ring and graciously escorted her from his office. His perfect manners had made her want to hit him, which wouldn’t have done any good. At six-foot-four, he would have flicked off her puny five-foot-two attack like a flea. So, instead, she’d used her words to hit at him. She’d been snide and snippy, still, the only thing he’d done was smile some more.

She’d been quite out of sorts by the time she’d left his office.

But at least she’d had the satisfaction of breaking apart the Perfect Couple for good.

Why this? Why now? Had he stewed on her words for a month and lost his perfect control? The thought made her smile.

“Perhaps there’s some sugar in you, after all.”

Her temper flared at his condescension. “Say whatever you have to say and leave.”

The gold ring on his pinky finger flashed in the overhead lights. The ring only highlighted the rough, rugged hand. The hand that whitened as he fisted it. “Okay, Sophia. I won’t pretty it up for you.”

“Good.” The whisper of anxiety floated into her stomach once more.

“I’ve decided since you’ve created the problems in my life, you should be the one to fix them.”

His arrogance flooded the room and swamped her anxiety, drowning it into silence. “Me?” Disdain dripped from her one word.

“You.” His cold blue gaze never wavered from her face.

“I’m sorry if you have problems—”

“No, you’re not.” His chuckle rasped along her nerves. “You’re not sorry at all.”

“Okay, I’m not,” she admitted, lifting her hands in the air with a wave of dismissal. “Your problems mean nothing to me.”

“I have to disagree.” He moved from the wall, walking across to the tall ovens flanking one side of the room. His long, lean legs crossed the big room in only a few steps. He stared into one of the dark caverns as if he were taking some kind of inventory.

Anxiety whispered back, winding around the anger inside her. “Would you spit out—”

“I own this building.”

His words slammed her mouth shut.

He glanced over his shoulder, and this time, his eyes were alive and hot with pleasure. “I’m your landlord.”

“Why didn’t you ever mention this before?” She clung to her composure. What did it matter if he owned this place? She had a lease. A rock-solid lease. Plus, she was an excellent tenant.

“The information didn’t seem pertinent.” Broad male shoulders shrugged. “At the time.”

Ice settled in her gut. She didn’t know what was coming, but it was going to be bad. Her Irish sense of doom sagged down on her like a thick, stifling blanket, freezing the ice into a solid block of stone inside her.

“Now, though…” He turned away from her again, the long, blond curls of his hair tightly tied in his usual ponytail, swished on the gray silk of his suit.

“Now what?” She just wanted it out. Whatever *it* was.

“So impatient. So demanding.” His words were a mere murmur, as if he spoke them only to himself. As if he didn’t mean them as a put-down. As if she couldn’t hear the contempt in his voice. “So unfeminine.”

Sophie jerked herself straight. Okay, she wasn’t the kind of female he liked. That had been clear from the moment they’d met. She didn’t coo over him or smile at his every joke. She didn’t slather praise on his every accomplishment or bow down before his wealth. She loved Mel, but she’d been disgusted by her friend’s fawning love for this man. She’d thought of it as some sort of crazy sickness. She’d even told Mel that when she’d finally convinced her friend this man was all wrong.

Still, merely because she wasn’t a female he appreciated didn’t mean she wasn’t feminine. “Leave.”

The chuckle came once more, filled with a harsh confidence. “I’ll remind you once more, I’m your landlord.”

“That fact doesn’t give you the right to march in here and throw insults at me.”

“Insults? Am I insulting you, Sophia? For once, are my words penetrating that thick hide of yours?” He swiveled from his perusal of her ovens and spiked her with his heated eyes. Leaning his tall body on the steel frame, he managed to appear as if he owned the place.

Which he did. Damn it.

They stared at each other across the cool, brightly lit room. The silence reeked of threat. A threat she hadn’t been willing to acknowledge until now. Yet it blazed from him; his negligent pose only emphasizing what was in his eyes.

“I’m going to take you in hand.” His soft words floated across the steel table to settle in her churning gut. “I’m going to teach you a lesson.”

His egotism blasted the fear out of her in one short second.

She laughed. It felt good to laugh at this man and his asinine arrogance. It felt good to crush her stupid fears with amusement.

But then she looked back at him.

And the fears came rumbling back.

She didn't know why. He hadn't moved. His eyes were only the usual cold blue she'd become used to whenever he glanced her way. His mouth might be a touch grimmer around the edges, but nothing she hadn't seen before. Yet something about the way he watched her, the way he held himself, very still and silent—something told her she was in trouble. Something told her this man meant what he said.

Anyone knowing anything about Alexander Stravoudas knew his reputation.

Alexander the Great got whatever he wanted.

Even before he'd dated her best friend, she'd noted his rise in the business world. Prediction after shining prediction in the financial news came true—seemingly without Alexander the Great breaking a sweat. She had to admit she'd been a bit in awe of this man's ability to build a worldwide architectural business worth billions in only a few short years.

He'd earned the label of the Perfect Man way before he'd become a part of the Perfect Couple.

Once she'd come into his orbit, she'd understood why. Time and time again, she'd observe him as he zeroed in on an investor, a politician, a potential colleague, and went in for the kill. Amazingly, none of these supposedly intelligent people ever spotted the calculation behind the charm.

Watching this charlatan hunt her best friend had been even worse. As soon as he'd set his eyes on Melanie, he'd been clear in his intentions. Mel thought it had been romantic. Sophie had thought it Machiavellian. She'd detected no heart in his choice—only expedience.

Alexander the Great needed a pretty, educated wife and a baby maker.

Melanie fit the bill.

Trusting her gut as always, Sophie had done everything she could to get Mel out of this man's firing line. After much maneuvering, listening, and lecturing, she'd achieved complete success.

But it appeared this complete success meant she'd placed herself right in the middle of his bull's-eye.

He stared at her, his hunter eyes intent.

Ready to fire straight at her.

For a moment, she trembled. But then her quick mind rushed to her rescue and she breathed in a cool sweep of air. True, Alexander Stravoudas seemed to have some kind of preternatural ability to charm everyone, win every time, exert his will on all.

Yet he'd never been able to win over Sophia Feuer before.

Why should this time be any different?

"A lesson?" She forced herself to chuckle. "I don't think you have anything I want to learn."

How could cold blue turn to hot fire in one flash of a second? She had the sense he wanted to jump across the steel table separating them and grab her. Yet, he didn't move a muscle. Only those eyes of his blasted her with his fury.

The Perfect Man was clearly in a perfect rage.

At her.

Sophie couldn't understand why. Okay, she'd busted his engagement, but the man swam in a sea of willing women. All right, she hadn't fallen for his charm like every other person, but so what? It wasn't as if he needed everyone to love him. Fine, she'd been a bit over-the-top when she'd given him back the bling. Still, a man like this, with enough pride and arrogance for the entire city of New York, would surely have simply shrugged it off.

Surely.

Not.

Because why else would he be here? Glaring at her. Throwing insults. Implying threats.

A shiver ran through her and he must have sensed it because he smiled. The smile he only seemed to give her. The smile that never reached his eyes and made her blood freeze. "I've decided—"

"*You've* decided." She managed a snort of disgust.

"Yes, I have." The words were silky steel. "I've decided you are going to be my new fiancée."

The words boomed in her head, entering her brain to buzz like a swarm of locusts. She stared at him with not one thought clear enough to verbalize.

“Hmm.” He kept his pose, kept his gaze on her. “I can’t remember a time I’ve been able to shock you into silence.”

That was quite a ridiculous statement. Yes, she’d been labeled a chatterbox a time or two, and true, she’d asked him a lot of questions when they’d first met. Yet after a while, she’d spent most of her time when in his company observing him, analyzing, figuring out what was all wrong about him. He’d also appeared to be much more comfortable when her mouth was shut than when it was open. Consequently, she’d obliged him. Until their last meeting.

The buzz in her head settled into a low burr. Finally, some words popped in her mind. “Are you crazy?”

It was his turn to chuckle. “No.”

“We—”

“Detest each other?”

“Yes.”

His eyes were alive now with an odd kind of delight. Which made no sense. This scene was as un-delightful as a person could imagine. The whole situation bordered on the surreal. Sophie wondered if she’d fallen down a strange sort of black hole to arrive in another world. A world where a man proposed to a woman he detested and appeared as delighted about it as a man in love.

What the hell?

“What the hell?”

He smiled at her barked words. “There’s no need to swear.”

What a condescending jerk. His tone made her want to grab her biggest spoon and whack him on his head. “I can swear as much as I want and whenever I want.”

“Don’t be childish.” Did he tut? Did he actually *tut* at her?

“I’m done with this conversation.” Wrenching around, she headed for her office. “You can let yourself out.”

“I have found a missing clause in your lease.”