

CHAPTER 1

I smooth down my pencil skirt and tailored gray jacket, glancing at the hall mirror as I touch up my dark lipstick. With a resigned look, I check that my tawny hair is neatly secured in a sleek high bun. Sighing, I take a steadying breath, suppressing the gnawing anxiety in my gut.

I'll do.

I scrutinize my reflection, satisfied with the image of cool efficiency and authoritative gray tailoring I see before me. There's no hint of the emotional turmoil brewing inside. I narrow my eyes, searching for any imperfections in my impeccable armor—stray hairs, specks of dust, or creases. Nothing escapes my scrutiny.

I've never been one to love my own reflection, what with my youthful appearance, cool blue eyes, and pouting lips. But today, I look the part of a personal assistant to a high-profile boss. On the outside, I exude professionalism and capability, with every detail in place and my clothes flawlessly neat. I've always been adept at concealing my true feelings.

Slipping into my stilettos with a deliberate and careful motion, I steady myself with one hand against the wall. Catching the movement in the room behind me, I instinctively check the mirror.

"Morning, Ems. Wow, you look as professional as ever," Sarah stifles a yawn as she emerges from her room, rubbing her eyes with the back of her fist in a childlike manner. It's unusual for her to be up this early on her day off—mornings have never been her thing.

Dressed in a baggy pink housecoat, her short, bleached blonde hair sticking up in all directions, Sarah looks effortlessly lovable. I can't help but feel affection for that bundle of cheerful energy. Her bright blue eyes betray the weariness of the early hours, and she watches me closely, a silly smile playing on her lips. A little too closely for my liking.

“Good morning, Sarah,” I offer a light smile, attempting to ignore her intense gaze. Straightening up, I retrieve my briefcase from the floor and stride purposefully into our open-plan apartment. Even in front of Sarah, I’m acutely aware of my grace and mannerisms, knowing I’m under scrutiny. I push down the tightness in my nerves, suppressing the restlessness in my stomach.

“Remember, you need to be here by ten o’clock for the boiler repair,” I remind her as she shuffles along behind me towards the living room area, hoping to divert her attention from her curious staring. Mentally running through my schedule like a checklist gives me something else to focus on besides my unease today.

“I know. I know! You left a memo on the fridge, remember?” she giggles playfully, rubbing her eyes again and giving me a patient look, arching an eyebrow with an almost indulgent expression. She looks much younger than her age, and sometimes I forget that we went to school together. These days, I feel more like her guardian than her roommate, if I’m being honest. I sigh once more, suppressing the apprehension growing inside me, and muster a small smile of bravado.

“Don’t forget,” I sound stern, but she doesn’t react. She’s used to my serious tone and my meticulous organization of our lives. She knows that’s just the way I am—the need to be in control and have everything in order makes me feel more capable.

“I won’t. I swear. I’m not working until tonight, so I’ll stick around and chillax... maybe binge-watch some Netflix,” she says nonchalantly, moving lazily through the bright white and gray kitchen to make herself a coffee. With another sleepy, bright smile, she lifts the mug I washed earlier this morning from the rack for herself. I watch her casual, confident movements around the space and her domain when she’s at home, which gives me a sense of calm.

CHAPTER 2

“I’m off to work,” I announce, striding confidently into the small hallway adjacent to the bar area that extended into the lounge. I grab a few open letters from the counter, ones I haven’t dealt with yet today. It’s unusual for me to linger and act indecisively; typically, I’d already be on my way to the subway station, even though I’m early.

“Oh, here,” Sarah says, sliding a white envelope from behind the toaster and holding it out to me expectantly. She wears a blank expression. “Before I forget... I know you’ve

probably taken care of them already, as usual.” Her eyes sparkle with affectionate amusement.

I take the envelope from her, examining it with a frown. It’s long and devoid of any writing on the front. “What is it?” I ask, slowly accepting it with careful fingers.

“It’s my half of the utilities and rent. I got paid early,” she explains, her smile bright as she starts preparing her breakfast, popping slices of bread into the toaster.

“Ah, right. I’ve already taken care of it... thank you,” I reply, slipping the envelope into my bag to deposit during lunch. I make a mental note to remind myself. Paying our bills at the beginning of each month is part of my routine, effortlessly managed due to my well-paying job with its perks.

“No surprises there, then,” she mumbles, casting me an affectionate look. Cute eyes and gentle sighs accompany her sideways gaze, which I catch. I shake my head, fully aware that she prefers me to handle our living expenses. She’s never been good with money, and without my organized presence, I doubt she’d remember to pay the rent on time. Taking care of things is how I prefer it—it gives me purpose, control, and the focus I need to thrive.

“I won’t be home until six o’clock, Sarah. I assume you’ll be at work by then. Have a wonderful day,” I inform her, moving away from the breakfast bar and heading toward the main door of our apartment. As I pass the dining table, I pick up my warm jacket and smile when I reach the dark slate door.

“Oh, wait... good luck meeting your super-hot boss for the first time, Miss Anderson!” she exclaims, beaming at me with excitement, raising her eyebrows and leaning out across the countertop. Her head pops out from the kitchen at a funny angle, appearing messy but cute, and far more awake than usual. I offer a hollow smile, determined not to reveal my emotions or show any signs of weakness.

“Thanks,” I reply, feeling a slight heat rise in my face as nerves hit my stomach hard. I quickly dismiss the sensation, swallowing it down like a seasoned actress.

“Are you nervous?” she probes, furrowing her brow and still leaning out a little too far to observe me adjusting my briefcase handle and putting on my jacket. I frown in response, feeling the tightening knot in my stomach intensify, but I shake my head to indicate ‘no.’

Admitting it to her would mean admitting it to myself, and that would only allow my nerves to overpower me, causing me to lose my edge.

That simply wouldn't do.

“Of course not. I never am,” I respond. She adds quickly, “You never are!,” with a grin before retreating back into her culinary world, oblivious to any unease in my demeanor. I smile once more, watching her fade from view, and wave my fingertips before heading out the door on my mission to get to work.

Sarah, dear Sarah. She has such unwavering faith in my abilities and outward composure that I often wonder if she still remembers the girl I used to be when we first met all those years ago. Does she even associate me with that version of myself?

Closing the door behind me in hushed silence, I grasp the handle for a moment, inhaling deeply and allowing myself a brief moment of stillness. I refuse to let my emotions break through my armor. Gazing down at the cool silver knob, I use it as an anchor to calm my racing nerves, suppressing any anxiety or fear that threatens to creep in.

I can do this.

This is what I've tirelessly worked for. Finally, my skills and dedication are being recognized after years of toiling and climbing the corporate ladder. I must quell the inner doubts and shed the remnants of my adolescent self, focusing solely on the tasks and responsibilities that await me today. It's exhilarating yet overwhelming, but internally, I steel myself, stilling my trembling hands as I've practiced countless times over the past decade. Each day, I have strived to become the person I am now, the composed and confident persona known as Emma Anderson.

It takes a moment before I can bring myself to step away from the door. But when I do, the protective armor envelops me, and the mask seamlessly settles upon my face. With each step, my determination strengthens, returning me to my familiar, practiced demeanor. Deep within, I find the resilience and unwavering strength to navigate through this day and every day that follows. And so, I make my way to the subway station.

CHAPTER3

Floor sixty-five of the Carrero Corporation, Executive House, Lexington Avenue, Mid-town Manhattan.

My palms are clammy, and a wave of heat rushes through my body, threatening to make me sick. It frustrates me that I can't regain control as easily now that I'm here. Time seems to crawl as I watch the clock's hands move slowly, and the only sound I hear is the rushing of blood in my ears. Every noise and movement in the sleek, modern office feels amplified, and the shiny keyboard in front of me stares back expectantly. I haven't even started working yet.

This isn't like me at all.

I've taken twelve deep breaths in a row, but my hands still tremble. I feel as if I might collapse at any moment. I'm disappointed in myself for letting my nerves get the better of me, and I try to compartmentalize each emotion, tucking them away in that neat box in my mind.

Don't fall apart, Emma.

I scold myself and check my reflection once more in the glass wall opposite me, ensuring I don't betray any hint of what's happening inside. Despite the turmoil within, I appear self-sufficient, calm, and in control. As always, there's no trace of the conflict behind my cool blue eyes or the sleek tawny hair that frames my face. Years of practice have granted me the ability to act my way through life, concealing the turbulence beneath my composed facade. I won't allow anyone to see it again.

"Emma?" Margaret Drake's voice echoes towards me as the sound of her stiletto-clad footsteps draws closer across the white marble floor from her internal office. She looks composed and graceful in her tailored black pantsuit and shiny high heels.

“Yes, Mrs. Drake?” I stand uncertainly, not sure if I should, suddenly feeling nervous and shy in the presence of this woman I’ve been shadowing for over a week. She exudes professionalism today, with a sense of purpose. Despite my inner turmoil, I steady my hands on the hem of my waist and plaster a smile on my face.

“Mr. Carrero will be arriving shortly. Make sure there’s fresh water with ice and clean glasses on his desk,” she says, offering an encouraging smile, perhaps sensing my unease.

“Have the espresso machine ready in case he asks for one, and lay out all his mail and messages on his desk before he arrives. Once he’s here, please stay out of his way until I call you for introductions.” She gently pats my shoulder with a bright smile—an action I’ve grown accustomed to.

“Yes, Mrs. Drake,” I nod, still trying not to feel overwhelmed by her effortlessly styled platinum blonde hair or her impeccably tailored jacket that highlights her curvy figure. When I first met her a few days ago, I was taken aback by her appearance. My previous mentor informed me that Mrs. Drake, in her fifties, was Mr. Carrero’s assistant. Given her crucial role in the business, I had expected someone colder and more intimidating. Yet, here she stands before me, a designer-clad, composed figure of beauty and natural friendliness. Now she’s become my mentor, and I can’t help but admire her intelligence and exquisite presence.

“Oh, and Emma?” she pauses, turning slightly.

“Yes, Mrs. Drake?”

“This week, you’ll meet with Donna Moore. She’s Mr. Carrero’s personal shopper, and she’ll outfit you with appropriate work attire for trips, events, and all that red-carpet stuff he’s so fond of.” She smiles warmly, accompanied by a slight sigh and a raised eyebrow, suggesting her disapproval of his public antics.

I swallow, deliberately suppressing my nerves once again. While I was aware that my role would require me to be available for trips and functions on short notice, I wasn't informed that it would involve the public aspect of his life.

Damn!

"Yes, Mrs. Drake," I say, trying to calculate how much this will impact my savings. I'm worried it might eat into them more than anticipated. Perhaps a lot more.

"Company expenses will cover it, Emma. Mr. Carrero expects his personal staff to maintain a certain appearance," she winks at me. "Consider it a necessary expense for all employees on the sixty-fifth floor." Mrs. Drake possesses an uncanny ability to read people's minds. I appreciate this trait—it eliminates awkward misunderstandings and hesitations, leaving no room for second-guessing. I'm relieved that it won't affect my savings or jeopardize my future dream of buying an apartment in New York to reduce my commuting time.

"Thank you, Mrs. Drake," I nod as she begins to walk away.

"Emma?" She turns her head back to me, sporting a half-smile.

"Yes, Mrs.—"

"Please," she interrupts. "It's Margaret... Margo... from now on! Only my children's friends call me Mrs. Drake. You've been here for over a week, and I'm more than satisfied with your progress. We'll be working closely together, so please." She gives me a warm smile before turning on her expensive high heels and heading back towards the grand door of her own office.

I feel a sense of warmth and calm. I get the impression that Margo has taken a liking to me during my time here. However, I'm not sure I appreciate the casual suggestion of

using her first name. I prefer to keep things professional and impersonal. I'm skilled at keeping people at a distance, and it's a boundary I prefer to maintain. Allowing business to cross into the realm of pleasure is a messy mistake I never, ever allow to happen.

CHAPTER 4

I absentmindedly glanced back at the monitor of my computer, the company logo swirling in front of me as a screensaver: "Carrero Corporation." As if I could ever forget where I worked, surrounded by opulent settings, posters, and prints of Carrero products, ads on every possible surface, and that familiar gold hexagon logo with a black C shining back at me.

Mr. Carrero comes to mind—Jacob Carrero. I've only seen pictures of him, yet he's the main reason I feel sick with nerves. Men with wealth, power, and good looks make me uneasy. They're a different breed and harder to predict. They see women as commodities and are far more dangerous than average men.

To be honest, men in general make me uneasy, but my experiences with average men have taught me how to handle myself. Jacob Carrero is by no means average. He's been on personal time off since before I replaced my predecessor. She's on maternity leave and doesn't plan on returning, and I'm the recommended replacement.

Carrero is the epitome of a playboy billionaire. He's devastatingly handsome, exudes confidence, and is adored by women. With his Italian-American heritage, he has inherited his parents' distinct look. His mother shares the same mixed features, and he is one of New York's wealthiest heirs. The Carrero family is almost like royalty, and Jacob is the eldest of the two prominent princes who have grown up in the public eye. He has been gracing the social news pages for years, charming the cameras and smiling in every picture.

I've done extensive research to prepare myself for working alongside him, but it still makes me uneasy, even though we haven't met. I'm well aware of his incredible attractiveness, which even someone like me, who finds most men intolerable, can't deny. He has a reputation for being a bad boy, with a significant portion of his early adult years steeped in scandal due to his wild behavior.

He seemed to revel in partying and playing the public eye, bringing shame to the Carrero name. However, in recent years, he appears to have matured a bit, focusing on the family business while still maintaining a string of women and attending glamorous events. He's a predictable playboy billionaire.

From the pictures, I know he has dark brown, almost black hair, and green eyes that may have been enhanced by Photoshop. No eye color can be that breathtaking in real life, and magazines are notorious for airbrushing good looks onto every image. He sports a rough, stubbly beard and a trendy, cropped, messy haircut, likely styled with one of the expensive Carrero grooming products he endorses. He obviously loves himself enough to put his face on their million-dollar ad campaigns every year.

At twenty-eight, he exudes a worldly maturity, yet in straight-on photographs caught off guard, he looks younger than his age. I can't deny his appeal. He has the body of someone blessed with a strong, tall physique, and he takes care of it. He's not shy about showing it off, as there are enough topless shots of him in the media. He also seems to have a fondness for tribal tattoos, which complement his physique. He looks like the stereotypical brainless model—too good-looking to be a nice guy and far too muscular to have a decent IQ.

There's no doubt he possesses an excessive amount of sex appeal, and that's what makes me nauseous. He effortlessly charms and manipulates women, unlike any men I've ever encountered, which makes me distrust him.

I can handle men who leer and grope, whose intentions are evident on their faces and who are generally cowardly. But I've never faced someone with the capabilities that Jacob Carrero seems to possess—the ability to make women swoon at his feet and follow him around, infatuated and lustful. It's pathetic, really.

I know that getting this position is a huge honor. I know I'm good at my job, and I've pleased the right people downstairs to be here at such an early age. But for the hundredth time, I feel sick and scared. I doubt myself despite my achievements—a curse of my self-doubts.

To gather myself, I divert my attention to a manual task. Following Margo's instructions, I prepare the large, expensive espresso machine in the white kitchen. The room, albeit a little clinical, is small, modern, and sleek, serving mainly as a tea and coffee station, despite the presence of a huge refrigerator. I wipe down the surfaces of the machine and the surrounding countertops, ensuring the coffee canister is free of dust. I ready Mr. Carrero's tray with iced water, finding some comfort in this calming task. My nerves are still rattled, irritating me. I thought I had gained more control over them.

I arrange everything neatly on Mr. Carrero's desk as Margo requested. I straighten items as I go, checking the room to ensure everything is in place. Neatness brings me calmness and a sense of control—as if by organizing everything, my life becomes more orderly.

With my jacket removed, I smooth down my blouse, relishing the silky feel of the expensive pale gray fabric. I return to the desk with a pile of mail and messages I took for him yesterday. They are the only ones requiring his attention, and I place them on his desk, aligning them with the neatly positioned leather chair behind it.

The office is spacious and airy. One wall consists of glass, offering a breathtaking view of New York. The view is partially obstructed by open vertical blinds. Large abstract prints

adorn the gray walls to the left. My gaze can't help but skim over the silver-framed pictures in the left corner of the wooden desk. They feature various people in black and white stills—beautiful women, celebrities, and one of his father, Mr. Carrero Sr., whom I saw briefly from a distance during a grand function last year that required extra staff. The two Mr. Carreros resemble each other only slightly, in that typical Italian way. Jacob must take after his mother more.

In pride of place is a large framed picture of his mother, whom I recognize. She is incredibly beautiful, and their resemblance is striking—dark hair, a gorgeous face, a cool tan, and the same bright green eyes. Yet, her face radiates a gentle warmth.

In contrast, Carrero Senior has fair hair, deep brown eyes, and a tightly etched, harsh face, as if his skin has weathered countless storms. In the picture of father and son, a coldness lingers between them, despite their close proximity while holding a champagne bottle in front of a ship's stern. It sends a shiver down my spine. I'm familiar with cold looks from men, and the memories are unwelcome.

After a quick scan to ensure I haven't overlooked anything, I gracefully exit the room, assured that everything is in order.

It's almost 9:00 a.m., and he will be arriving shortly. My nerves are stretched so taut that I fear I may snap from the tension if it doesn't subside soon.

CHAPTER5

Sitting at my desk, I absentmindedly twist my pen in my fingers, and a surge of anger washes over me, directed inward. With a sharp motion, I still the pen and place it down with a resounding smack, scowling at it as though it's the culprit. This childhood habit lingers, a subtle tell that I'm not truly the person I pretend to be. It's the only flaw in the facade of perfection I cling to so tightly.

I fidget, an incongruity with the persona I've carefully crafted since my teenage years, distancing myself from the life I once knew. It serves as a stark reminder of how far I've come from my Chicago upbringing, and it irks me on multiple levels. Not only does it betray the confidence I strive to exude, but it also feels juvenile. Though I've largely mastered my fidgeting, this morning my raw nerves give me away.

Taking a deep breath, I still my hands and focus on the task at hand—typing the documents Margo has given me to adjust. I remind myself to maintain a calm composure while waiting for my new boss to arrive, though every passing moment feels excruciating.

In a graceful cloud of Chanel No. 9, Margo sweeps into the foyer and passes by my desk near the entrance to our offices, signaling Mr. Carrero's arrival. My heart skips a beat. Fondly, she smiles in my direction, offering an encouraging wink as though I am about to meet royalty.

Perhaps I am.

Hell, swallow. Deep breath. Relax.

I hear Margo briefing him on his schedule in the hallway as they approach. While they have exchanged emails, she mentioned that he prefers a verbal recap to bring him up to speed. I make a mental note of this, as it will soon be my responsibility.

Remaining seated, I keep my eyes on the keyboard, willing my nerves to remain in check.

I catch snippets of their conversation, and despite having watched interviews online, I'm taken aback by the natural sound of his voice. It possesses a deep, husky quality with a boyishness I hadn't noticed in his previous interviews. It's the kind of voice you would recognize anywhere, even in a crowded room, drawing you in with its familiarity and comforting warmth. It completely throws me off guard.

Pausing my typing, I involuntarily flinch as he laughs at something Margo says. This unexpected reaction causes butterflies to flutter in my stomach.

I don't usually react like this to men!

My fingers fumble on the keys, betraying my momentary lapse, but fortunately, no one pays me any attention.

I need to regain control. Get a grip, Emma!

My cheeks begin to warm, and I quickly take a practiced, steadying breath to suppress my blush. The gibberish on my screen prompts me to swiftly hit the back button, erasing the evidence of my stumble. I curse my clumsy fingers and that lingering, childish part of myself that I perpetually suppress and silence.

Stop it, Emma. Just stop. You are more capable than this.

Accompanied by his entourage, he walks through the main area of our airy office, heading towards Margo's desk located behind me in a separate room. Margo, closest to him, conceals him from view, but I manage to catch a glimpse.

He towers over her, surpassing her height despite her four-inch heels. Two men accompany him—one dressed in a black suit, exuding a serious demeanor, likely his security with an earpiece. The other, casually attired in a tan jacket and chinos, strolls along leisurely.

I recognize him as Arrick Carrero, the younger brother. Though he doesn't receive as much media attention, I can place his face. Unlike his brother, he hasn't inherited the same masculine beauty or commanding presence, but then again, he's still in his late teens and seems to shy away from the spotlight. I note that he stands at about five-foot nine, muscular despite his height, with tawny hair resembling his father's and a peculiar nose profile similar to Jacob Carrero's, but not identical. Jacob possesses a nose that perfectly complements his flawless... well, everything. I wonder how Arrick feels, being the less attractive Carrero son and living in his brother's shadow.

Within a moment, they all pass through Margo's inner door and disappear into his office, the door closing behind them. I breathe a sigh of relief, finally able to focus on typing out the document. With no visual distractions, my skilled fingers fly across the keyboard effortlessly.

It feels like an eternity has passed when the switchboard lights up, and Margo's distant voice interrupts my concentration. Unaware that I had been holding my breath, I give myself an internal shake.

"Emma, please come into Mr. Carrero's office. Thank you," her voice sounds distant and tinny through the remarkably high-tech machine.

“Yes, Mrs. Drake,” I flinch at my use of her formal name, knowing she prefers me to address her as Margo. I mentally scold myself, determined not to repeat the mistake.

I don’t make mistakes. Ever.

CHAPTER 6

I stand and smooth down my clothes and put my jacket back on quickly. Buttoning it up nervously, I walk the short distance to her door which blocks entrance to his.

I need all my willpower to walk into the office and all my acting ability, dredged up from somewhere deep, to pull off the undaunted, calm demeanor that I try to present at all times. My stomach turns somersaults and my throat dries up. I don’t know why I’m having so much trouble today.

“Ah, Emma, here you are.” Margo meets me as I pull open the heavy wooden door and slide in, suddenly conscious of how short I am, even in my spike heels, next to her swan-like body. She is tall for a woman, and I’m around five-foot four.

“Jake, this is Emma Anderson. She’s your new assistant-in-training, your new number two.” She smiles fondly at me and gestures me to come to her. I move beside her and get the gentle, familiar pat on my shoulder as she tries to put me at ease.

I blink a few times, pausing at the use of the name Jake.

Am I missing something here?

My brain clicking with memories from my research, it dawns on me he prefers the name Jake. He corrected many interviewers, and I remember he likes the informality, and so he encourages the use of his nickname.

All my thoughts slip away to nothing, and I’m held captive to the floor unable to speak as the object of my nerves gets out of his seat. This is what I’ve been afraid of, my reaction when faced with someone I find attractive, and it is completely new to me.

I don’t even notice the others in the room as he effortlessly glides toward me. He has the walk of someone who’s never doubted his own confidence or abilities, someone who knew early in life that he was devastatingly attractive and has the best kind of reaction from all women. It’s mesmerizing in a way but also disconcerting.

He towers above me as he approaches, putting him over the six-foot mark easily. Wearing all black, suit minus tie, and shirt with top buttons open, the overall effect makes me breathless. He's beyond underwear-model hot; he's like some female fantasy come to life.

Jeeze.

"Miss Anderson." He extends his arm, and all I can do is reach out and shake the neatly manicured yet masculine hand. I'm painfully aware of the way my heart quickens, and my breath is slightly labored at the tingling sensation of his skin on mine. I immediately feel betrayed by my own body.

I push it down, abhorred that I should react this way. It's alien to me and has me shifting on my own axis. I don't like being forced out of my comfort zone and into new experiences.

"Mr Car—" my voice is feeble. I'm so pathetic and obvious.

"Jake! Please," he cuts in, those green eyes taking me in, leaving me no clue to anything going on behind them. "Margo informs me she's happy with you so far and will be training you a little more extensively to step in fully when she retires. I guess that means we should get better acquainted and on a first name basis." He throws me a charming soft smile, and I'm not immune to the effect. It's a gesture that hints that he knows exactly what he's doing with it though.

So, this is how you win over women is it, Carrero? Melting them with seductive smiles. Ughhh.

My insides lurch unexpectedly. His hand is smooth and unusually warm in mine, and I'm starting to feel clammy. Anxious Emma peeks her head out only to be pushed back down with a firm shove.

Be still, Emma. Stay cool. Stop drooling.

"I'm really grateful for the opportunity." I sound normal enough with only a slight waver in my voice this time, and I'm relieved. If anything, my years of poise are saving me from myself right now; I'm pulling off the pretense.

He subtly looks me over. There is nothing in his glance, which surprises me, just an interested appraisal as he tries to measure me up. I guess he's used to women going all weak-kneed and pie-eyed at his presence, and it interests him that I don't appear to be.

I'm glad he can't see my internal reactions as they are behaving disgustingly right about now.

I'm unnerved that this close he is just as handsome as his internet pictures, if not more so, and his ruggedness is intimidating. The sheer power of his shoulders and toned body strains behind the expensive clothing; I know from photographs that he prefers more casual attire than suits and ties most of the time. He is sexually intimidating and so far out of my league in every way and now, in the flesh, that is so much more obvious. I swallow hard.

"May I get you a drink, Emma? You look flushed." His voice pours over me like honey and my mouth dries up fully. I'm blushing, heat emanating from my roots, and scowl at my inner-adolescent self. He removes his hand and walks away from me with a confident swagger toward his desk.

I'm uneasy and try to regain my equilibrium, swallowing several times to get the moisture back into my parched mouth and keeping my eyes off his ass. A drink would be good right now, if only to release my throat.

"Thank you." I catch Margo watching me with a strange look in her eye, and I realize it's a touch of uncertainty. Mr. Carrero moves off to a bar at the rear of the room near the side of his desk; with his back to us, he fixes me a drink.

Shit!"

CHAPTER 7

Margo's thinking I'm just another receptionist with the hots for Mr. Carrero. Another woman to fall at the hurdle of meeting him.

I pull myself together as I smooth invisible wrinkles in my clothes and straighten my body up, trying to get back my professional air and grace. I hate that I've shown signs of being rattled. I don't normally break under so little pressure, and I'm not impressed with myself.

I see her expression ease, and I relax.

Perhaps I'm overthinking this.

I'm mindful that Mr. Black Suit is standing in a corner by the window glaring at us; it's a little intimidating but also reassuring. Just out of sight to my far left on a long, cream, Italian leather couch, the younger man is sitting below some huge modern art prints depicting what might be naked women. I blink and look again. Yes, naked women.

Ughhh. Really? Could you be anymore playboy, Carrero?

Arrick is disinterested in what's going on. He's playing with his cell, and I think I recognize the Angry Birds music that Sarah loves to irritate me with. An annoying, immature game I think, although Arrick looks late teens to early twenties, so he can be forgiven for a juvenile game, I suppose.

"Here you go." Jake's voice cuts into my thoughts, bringing my attention back to him as he hands me a tall glass of something bubbly with ice. I take a sip and give him a grateful smile, expecting flavored water. It's a cold, clear liquid that tastes sweetly tropical with an unexpected hint of alcohol.

I guess it's not ice water.

It's a cocktail, and I try not to show my surprise but a tiny frown hits my brow before I can correct it, inwardly startled.

Surprising. He did this himself. Booze at work though?

"Thank you, Mr. ... Jake," I correct, and he gives me a soft smile again. With minor annoyance, I ignore the butterflies rising from my stomach.

Stop behaving like a fourteen-year-old!

“So, Emma, Margo tells me you’ve worked here for just over five years?” He sits back perched on his desk, body relaxed and eyes fixed on me. Margo stands close by listening. He is distractingly good-looking, more so when he lounges all casual and charming, very un-boss like.

“Yes. I’ve worked on various floors but mainly the tenth.” I place my glass on the table so my fingers don’t toy with the rim, showing my nervous habits. I’m disappointed to be putting it down; it tasted amazing, but I’m not a fan of alcohol at work, or anytime for that matter. He has skills with making drinks though.

“You were Jack Dawson’s assistant for a while?” he questions as his eyebrows dip in an unusually cute way, and he studies me non-intrusively.

Get a grip, Emma!

“Yes, Mr. Dawson.” I smile, although I know it must look as forced as it feels. Dawson, in his late sixties, small, and overweight, is an unbearable leech who grabbed my ass at every opportunity and pressed himself against me whenever I tried to pass him. I was surprised he still had those kinds of urges at his age. He’s the type of man I’m used to dealing with, with his wandering hands and sleazy smiles, the kind of man I can handle after years of practice.

“It was Miss Keith who recommended you for this position, I believe?”

Easily distracted by his appearance, I home in on his beautiful teeth, white and perfectly lined up, just as a billionaire’s mouth should be. I wonder how much he spends on dental work every year to be Carrero model material.

“Yes. I loved working for her while her own assistant was on leave; I learned a lot from her.” A surge of satisfaction at how cool and calm I sound once again rushes through my

body. My nerves are settling and his effects on me are winding down with effort. I guess the shock of meeting him is abating finally.

I was wrong about his eyes though. In person they're the most gorgeous, pure green I've seen; the photographs don't do them justice at all in fact.

"She spoke highly of your efficiency and professionalism. It's rare for Kay to make an internal recommendation for a position like this." He smiles briefly and the butterflies swoop back in. I blush, the heat rising up my face, and it annoys me as I try to maintain my professional maturity. I loved Kay Keith as a boss; I was desolate when her assistant came back to work and I was demoted back to Dawson's office, returning to the letch and his slimy hands.

"Thank you." I smile genuinely, inner pride glowing. It's not an easy thing to move from a lowly admin assistant up through a company like this in just five years, especially with my meager qualifications. I have sacrificed so much in my life to get here."

CHAPTER 8

Margo adds, "Well, so far, I've found her to be a joy. Efficient and capable, with a good understanding of the business. I don't think it will take long to get her up to speed with her requirements." Margo beams at me with an odd twinkle in her eye. I like her. She's still standing close observing us and is oblivious to the other two men behind her. I know she's watching to see if we are a fit and is standing back to let us get to know each other. Her presence calms me.

"Glad to hear it. So, Emma, how has it been so far? Learning the ropes of life on the sixty-fifth floor?" There is a slight humor in his expression, a hint of that Carrero charm he's famed for. It's hard not to fall for it if I'm being honest, but I know it stems from years of schmoozing with the rich and famous, and probably fake. He's a pro.

"A breeze," I answer coolly, avoiding that penetrative gaze he has going on now. "Nothing I can't handle so far." I allow a half-smile of confidence.

“Has Margo warned you about the frequent traveling you will have to undertake or the unsociable hours we sometimes keep? This job can be full on, Miss Anderson. It’s not for the faint hearted.” He’s frowning now, still watching me so closely; it’s a little unnerving.

“Yes, I’m aware that this is not a nine-to-five job, Mr. Carrero. I’m 100% committed to my career, so it will not be an issue,” I reply without emotion, lifting my chin a little to show my determination.

“You’re young; what about a social life?” He still frowns at me, still tries to scrape away at my surface and figure me out. I would never give a man like him that chance.

“I haven’t much interest in many social activities. I left my hometown to come to New York, and I don’t know many people outside of work.” My voice sounds a bit unsteady, but I doubt he has noticed. He glances at me contemplatively.

“Career oriented? Can be lonely.” He tilts his head to the side and lightly hunches his shoulders in a move that’s devastating to my hormones and makes my body tingle and my temperature soar without warning. I gaze down to the floor for a second and take a breath to combat these alien feelings.

Stop eye-raping him, Emma. Have a little more professionalism.

“I’m never lonely, Mr. Carrero; I’m an independent person who doesn’t need assurances or company from other people to be happy.” I realize I’ve let my mouth shift into gear ahead of my brain and have revealed more than I intended to. It’s another old Emma habit that annoys me despite years of trying to overcome it.

It’s true though, I’ve been self-reliant from an early age. I keep people at arm’s length, even Sarah, because it suits me to do so. Relationships bring complications, disappointment, and pain.

He narrows his eyes and studies me again, more probing as this excruciating chat continues, trying to peel away my layers.

“Oh, Emma, that’s not the way a young girl like you should live her life,” Margo cuts in, alarmed. “You’re so pretty; you should have young men romancing you around New York.” She reaches out, touching my shoulder with a motherly squeeze before returning to her previous position. I smile emptily and ignore the urge to grimace at her words. If only she knew how that thought repulses me. One thing I’ve learned from my life is that

romance does not exist in the minds of most men, only sexual gratification, whether you consent to it or not.

“Sounds like you’re trying to talk her out of stealing your job, Margo,” Jake laughs, lifting his boyish expression to the older woman, a complete change to his first smile. This one seems more natural and even more devastating. I catch the affection flicker between them and it surprises me. She shakes her head at him.

“No, Emma knows I value her here. I think she’s a perfect fit.” She turns her cloudy gray eyes to me with a genuine warmth that thaws me a little. “Not too sure how much you’ll like it once Jake starts running you ragged, mind you.” She winks and places a hand on his arm showing the special bond they seem to share, and I wonder at it. They have a casual and comfortable ambience between them, almost like a mother and son. Very odd.

“I’m sure I can handle the demands,” I cut in confidently.

“Despite Jake’s public playboy reputation, Emma, I’m afraid he’s a workaholic. Surprising, I know, but you’ll get used to it; you’ll rack up plenty of air miles in the next few months.” Margo smiles again wistfully, this time patting Jake on the shoulder. There is a silent communication between them, secret smiles and glances, and I wonder how I will ever take her place.

“You’ll soon get fed up with seeing the world,” he says, giving me a comical frown with those alluring eyes back on my face; I hate the way they make me feel naked. “And the inside of hotel rooms” he adds with a mischievous smirk that heats my stomach with a flash. My insides flip over.

I try to ignore this remark, hoping to take him at face value and hoping this internal wave fizzles away as quickly as it appeared. I’m sure I’ll never see the inside of his hotel room. In fact, I can promise I won’t, despite his reputation.

“I’ve seen enough of those to last a lifetime,” Margo says, waving her hand and throwing him a glance I cannot translate, oblivious to my reaction. “Right, we have work to be getting on with. Emma, you’re with me for now.” She gestures to the door behind me and I nod. Mr. Carrero stands from his perched position on his desk edge and smiles, reaching his hand out again while never breaking eye contact. Holding me to it.

“To our working relationship, Emma,” he says. I accept his hand, ignoring the same tingling sensation his touch creates, skin ignited, and I smile tightly to disguise all the

sensations. Sighing with relief that this meeting is over, I nod before I turn and follow Margo out of his office, exhaling quietly and pushing all my taugth nerves and anxious tension out with a blow.

Well, I survived meeting Jacob Carrero for the first time. My underwear didn't self-combust, and I remained intact.

Strike Point one to me.”

CHAPTER9

It's after twelve. My head is a little woozy and stuffy as it's ridiculously hot in the office now, stifflingly so, and it's making me feel nauseous. I've called maintenance twice to find out why they still haven't fixed the AC; it's blowing out tropical heat rather than cold air and it's baking us all. My face is flaming and my pulse is beating so fast and hard like I've been sprinting. My clothes are clinging to me with dampness, and I'm irritated because of the inability to breathe or find relief. It's oppressive.

Margo has left for lunch and I'm to follow on her return. She was wavering in the heat as much as I was, but I told her I was okay to stay, wanting to prove my abilities.

Ever the hero, Emma! Good move.

This is a huge sign of trust and I think she's testing my capabilities, leaving me to man the fort and cope alone during a very busy schedule. It's been three days since Jake returned and I feel like Margo is relying on me a little more, that I'm living up to her expectations and taking it all in my stride.

I can't stand this heat on my cheeks and my blouse is clinging in places it never has before, sticking like a second skin. I'm obsessively clock-watching for her to return to relieve me for an hour from this damned, infernal sauna before I pass out. My

switchboard lights up and my insides tighten as Mr. Carrero's voice comes across the buzzer.

"Emma, can you come in here please?" he says, deep, low, and sexy. At the sound of his voice, I get the now familiar tingle in my stomach which I still have no control over.

I falter but reply, "Yes, Mr. Carrero." This is not what I need when I'm melting into a puddle in my chair and already out of sorts.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

I'm on my feet trying to peel my blouse from between my shoulder blades and smooth it down without success. I pick up my notebook and pen and glide past Margo's open office door and into his, pushing open the heavy dark wood and sliding in. I want this over quickly.

"Yes, Mr. Carrero?"

He looks casually seductive today sitting behind his desk amid an open laptop and piles of folders. His pale blue shirt has its top two buttons undone at the neck, his dark hair ruffled out of its normally spiked style as though he's been running his hands through it, and his sleeves rolled up revealing one of the tattoos on his inner left arm, a reminder of his rebel teen years. I know from images I've seen online that he has a few across his body, all black tribal tattoos and symbols. The effect is devastating, even on me, and I try not to react, annoyed that he still does this to me.

"Are maintenance any further forward with fixing the AC? It's way too hot up here!" He leans back, putting his hands behind his head in a very 'guy' manner. He stretches out and showcases that beautiful physique, his biceps increasing in size while straining at the fabric of his shirt. It is hard not to get a little quickening of the pulse rate.

Eyes down!

“I’ve called down twice, sir. They’re apparently on it.” I keep my eyes averted, my tone level and sounding as normal as possible.

“Emma, you look like you’re about to pass out; I think you need to head to another floor and cool down.” His eyes run over me; I’m already conscious that I must look disheveled. I feel it. But passing out would have more to do with the way he’s sitting now and my body being overly aware of how much sexier he is in just a shirt. It removes the formality somehow.

Really, Emma? He’s your boss!

“I can’t leave until Margo ... Mrs. Drake ... returns, sir.” I blink at him and resist the urge to let my eyes wander over his figure.

“When is she due back?” He frowns at me, oblivious to the riot of hormones raging through my body. Or just unbothered by them.

“Soon, maybe fifteen minutes or so. She’s on her lunch early, and I’ll go on her return.” I sound polite and factual, trying not to squirm in my damp shoes and hoping I do not look as awful as I feel.

“Soon as she’s back, I want you to go cool down; it feels like it’s melting up here. In the meantime, I need to dictate a letter. Maybe you’ll feel cooler in here as I have the air vents open.” He gestures at the wall of windows, and I note the blinds moving a little as the small amount of air gets in. He’s right; it is cooler in here ... marginally. Well, it would be if he wasn’t sitting looking like that.

Emma, again? Really?

“Ready when you are,” I say, holding up my notebook to move things forward and kill my train of thought. He turns his chair so he’s facing the couch to the left of me and gazes at it, deep in thought.

“It’s for the CEO of Bridgestone ... a man called Eric Compton. You’ll find his details on the system.” He is in business mode, tone serious and face focused already.

“Yes, sir.” I scribble it down in shorthand.

“Emma?” His questioning tone clicks my attention back to him.

“Yes?” I look up at the tone of his voice, sure I’ve done something he doesn’t like, momentarily phased.

“You can sit down, you know?” He’s smiling at me, amused, and nods at the chair beside his desk, pretty much in his line of vision. It was why he’d turned his chair. I blush and abruptly come around to sit in front of him. I hate that since coming to work for him my inability to control my blushing has returned, but he has a knack for making me feel childish.

“I don’t bite ... much!” He smiles with his I-know-I’m-irresistible look. My eyes snap to his, alarmed, and I see the thinly veiled humor. I give a short, embarrassed smile to cover my reaction, my heart moving up a gear, and I inwardly chastise my stupidity.”