

Chapter 1

“We should head to a bar and celebrate.”

I wasn't surprised by my roommate's emphatic pronouncement. Cary Taylor found excuses to celebrate, no matter how small and inconsequential. I'd always considered it part of his charm. “I'm sure drinking the night before starting a new job is a bad idea.”

“Come on, Eva.” Cary sat on our new living room floor amid a half dozen moving boxes and flashed his winning smile. We'd been unpacking for days, yet he still looked amazing. Leanly built, dark-haired, and green-eyed, Cary was a man who rarely looked anything less than absolutely gorgeous on any day of his life. I might have resented that if he hadn't been the dearest person on earth to me.

“I'm not talking about a bender,” he insisted. “Just a glass of wine or two. We can hit a happy hour and be in by eight.”

“I don't know if I'll make it back in time.” I gestured at my yoga pants and fitted workout tank. “After I time the walk to work, I'm going to hit the gym.”

“Walk fast, work out faster.” Cary's perfectly executed arched brow made me laugh. I fully expected his million-dollar face to appear on billboards and fashion magazines all over the world one day. No matter his expression, he was a knockout.

“How about tomorrow after work?” I offered as a substitute. “If I make it through the day, that'll be worth celebrating.”

“Deal. I'm breaking in the new kitchen for dinner.”

“Uh . . .” Cooking was one of Cary's joys, but it wasn't one of his talents. “Great.”

Blowing a wayward strand of hair off his face, he grinned at me. “We’ve got a kitchen most restaurants would kill for. There’s no way to screw up a meal in there.”

Dubious, I headed out with a wave, choosing to avoid a conversation about cooking. Taking the elevator down to the first floor, I smiled at the doorman when he let me out to the street with a flourish.

The moment I stepped outside, the smells and sounds of Manhattan embraced me and invited me to explore. I was not merely across the country from my former home in San Diego, but seemingly worlds away. Two major metropolises—one endlessly temperate and sensually lazy, the other teeming with life and frenetic energy. In my dreams, I’d imagined living in a walkup in Brooklyn, but being a dutiful daughter, I found myself on the Upper West Side instead. If not for Cary living with me, I would’ve been miserably lonely in the sprawling apartment that cost more per month than most people made in a year.

The doorman tipped his hat to me. “Good evening, Miss Tramell. Will you need a cab this evening?”

“No thanks, Paul.” I rocked onto the rounded heels of my fitness shoes. “I’ll be walking.”

He smiled. “It’s cooled down from this afternoon. Should be nice.”

“I’ve been told I should enjoy the June weather before it gets wicked hot.”

“Very good advice, Miss Tramell.”

Stepping out from under the modern glass entrance overhang that somehow meshed with the age of the building and its neighbors, I enjoyed the relative quiet of my tree-lined street before I reached the bustle and flow of traffic on Broadway. One day soon, I hoped to blend right in, but for now I still felt like a fraudulent New Yorker. I had the address and the job, but I was still wary of the subway and had trouble hailing cabs. I tried not to walk around wide-eyed and distracted, but it was hard. There was just *so much* to see and experience.

The sensory input was astonishing—the smell of vehicle exhaust mixed with food from vendor carts, the shouts of hawkers blended with music from street entertainers, the awe-inspiring

range of faces and styles and accents, the gorgeous architectural wonders . . . And the cars. *Jesus Christ*. The frenetic flow of tightly packed cars was unlike anything I'd ever seen anywhere.

There was always an ambulance, patrol car, or fire engine trying to part the flood of yellow taxis with the electronic wail of earsplitting sirens. I was in awe of the lumbering garbage trucks that navigated tiny one-way streets and the package delivery drivers who braved the bumper-to-bumper traffic while facing rigid deadlines.

Real New Yorkers cruised right through it all, their love for the city as comfortable and familiar as a favorite pair of shoes. They didn't view the steam billowing from potholes and vents in the sidewalks with romantic delight, and they didn't blink an eye when the ground vibrated beneath their feet as the subway roared by below, while I grinned like an idiot and flexed my toes. New York was a brand-new love affair for me. I was starry-eyed and it showed.

So I had to really work at playing it cool as I made my way over to the building where I would be working. As far as my job went, at least, I'd gotten my way. I wanted to make a living based on my own merits, and that meant an entry-level position. Starting the next morning, I would be the assistant to Mark Garrity at Waters Field & Leaman, one of the preeminent advertising agencies in the United States. My stepfather, megafinancier Richard Stanton, had been annoyed when I took the job, pointing out that if I'd been less prideful I could've worked for a friend of his instead and reaped the benefits of that connection.

"You're as stubborn as your father," he'd said. "It'll take him forever to pay off your student loans on a cop's salary."

That had been a major fight, with my dad unwilling to back down. "Hell if another man's gonna pay for my daughter's education," Victor Reyes had said when Stanton made the offer. I respected that. I suspected Stanton did, too, although he would never admit it. I understood both men's sides, because I'd fought to pay off the loans myself . . . and lost. It was a point of pride for my father. My mother had refused to marry him, but he'd never wavered from his determination to be my dad in every way possible.

Knowing it was pointless to get riled up over old frustrations, I focused on getting to work as quickly as possible. I'd deliberately chosen to clock the short trip during a busy time on a Monday, so I was pleased when I reached the Crossfire Building, which housed Waters Field & Leaman, in less than thirty minutes.

I tipped my head back and followed the line of the building all the way up to the slender ribbon of sky. The Crossfire was seriously impressive, a sleek spire of gleaming sapphire that pierced the clouds. I knew from my previous interviews that the interior on the other side of the ornate copper-framed revolving doors was just as awe-inspiring, with golden-veined marble floors and walls and brushed-aluminum security desk and turnstiles.

I pulled my new ID card out of the inner pocket of my pants and held it up for the two guards in black business suits at the desk. They stopped me anyway, no doubt because I was majorly underdressed, but then they cleared me through. After I completed an elevator ride up to the twentieth floor, I'd have a general time frame for the whole route from door to door. Score.

I was walking toward the bank of elevators when a svelte, beautifully groomed brunette caught her purse on a turnstile and upended it, spilling a deluge of change. Coins rained onto the marble and rolled merrily away, and I watched people dodge the chaos and keep going as if they didn't see it. I winced in sympathy and crouched to help the woman collect her money, as did one of the guards.

"Thank you," she said, shooting me a quick, harried smile.

I smiled back. "No problem. I've been there."

I'd just squatted to reach a nickel lying near the entrance when I ran into a pair of luxurious black oxfords draped in tailored black slacks. I waited a beat for the man to move out of my way and when he didn't, I arched my neck back to allow my line of sight to rise. The custom three-piece suit hit more than a few of my hot buttons, but it was the tall, powerfully lean body inside it that made it sensational. Still, as impressive as all that magnificent maleness was, it wasn't until I reached the man's face that I went down for the count.

Wow. Just . . . wow.

He sank into an elegant crouch directly in front of me. Hit with all that exquisite masculinity at eye level, I could only stare. Stunned.

Then something shifted in the air between us.

As he stared back, he altered . . . as if a shield slid away from his eyes, revealing a scorching force of will that sucked the air from my lungs. The intense magnetism he exuded grew in strength, becoming a near-tangible impression of vibrant and unrelenting power.

Reacting purely on instinct, I shifted backward. And sprawled flat on my ass.

My elbows throbbed from the violent contact with the marble floor, but I scarcely registered the pain. I was too preoccupied with staring, riveted by the man in front of me. Inky black hair framed a breathtaking face. His bone structure would make a sculptor weep with joy, while a firmly etched mouth, a blade of a nose, and intensely blue eyes made him savagely gorgeous. Those eyes narrowed slightly, his features otherwise schooled into impassivity.

His dress shirt and suit were both black, but his tie perfectly matched those brilliant irises. His eyes were shrewd and assessing, and they bored into me. My heartbeat quickened; my lips parted to accommodate faster breaths. He smelled sinfully good. Not cologne. Body wash, maybe. Or shampoo. Whatever it was, it was mouthwatering, as was he.

He held out a hand to me, exposing onyx cuff links and a very expensive-looking watch.

With a shaky inhalation, I placed my hand in his. My pulse leaped when his grip tightened. His touch was electric, sending a shock up my arm that raised the hairs on my nape. He didn't move for a moment, a frown line marring the space between arrogantly slashed brows.

“Are you all right?”

His voice was cultured and smooth, with a rasp that made my stomach flutter. It brought sex to mind. Extraordinary sex. I thought for a moment that he might be able to make me orgasm just by talking long enough.

My lips were dry, so I licked them before answering. “I'm fine.”

He stood with economical grace, pulling me up with him. We maintained eye contact because I was unable to look away. He was younger than I'd assumed at first. Younger than thirty would be my guess, but his eyes were much worldlier. Hard and sharply intelligent.

I felt drawn to him, as if a rope bound my waist and he were slowly, inexorably pulling it.

Blinking out of my semidaze, I released him. He wasn't just beautiful; he was . . . enthralling. He was the kind of guy that made a woman want to rip his shirt open and watch the buttons scatter along with her inhibitions. I looked at him in his civilized, urbane, outrageously expensive suit and thought of raw, primal, sheet-clawing fucking.

He bent down and retrieved the ID card I hadn't realized I'd dropped, freeing me from that provocative gaze. My brain stuttered back into gear.

I was irritated with myself for feeling so awkward while he was so completely self-possessed. And why? Because I was dazzled, damn it.

He glanced up at me and the pose—him nearly kneeling before me—skewed my equilibrium again. He held my gaze as he rose. “Are you sure you're all right? You should sit down for a minute.”

My face heated. How lovely to appear awkward and clumsy in front of the most self-assured and graceful man I'd ever met. “I just lost my balance. I'm okay.”

Looking away, I caught sight of the woman who'd dumped the contents of her purse. She thanked the guard who'd helped her; then turned to approach me, apologizing profusely. I faced her and held out the handful of coins I'd collected, but her gaze snagged on the god in the suit and she promptly forgot me altogether. After a beat, I just reached over and dumped the change into the woman's bag. Then I risked a glance at the man again, finding him watching me even as the brunette gushed thank-yous. *To him*. Not to me, of course, the one who'd actually helped.

I talked over her. “May I have my badge, please?”

He offered it back to me. Although I made an effort to retrieve it without touching him, his fingers brushed mine, sending that charge of awareness into me all over again.

“Thank you,” I muttered before skirting him and pushing out to the street through the revolving door. I paused on the sidewalk, gulping in a breath of New York air redolent with a million different things, some good and some toxic.

There was a sleek black Bentley SUV in front of the building, and I saw my reflection in the limo’s spotless tinted windows. I was flushed and my gray eyes were overly bright. I’d seen that look on my face before—in the bathroom mirror just before I went to bed with a man. It was my I’m-ready-to-fuck look and it had absolutely no business being on my face now.

Christ. Get a grip.

Five minutes with Mr. Dark and Dangerous, and I was filled with an edgy, restless energy. I could still feel the pull of him, the inexplicable urge to go back inside where he was. I could make the argument that I hadn’t finished what I’d come to the Crossfire to do, but I knew I’d kick myself for it later. How many times was I going to make an ass of myself in one day?

“Enough,” I scolded myself under my breath. “Moving on.”

Horns blared as one cab darted in front of another with only inches to spare and then slammed on the brakes as daring pedestrians stepped into the intersection seconds before the light changed. Shouting ensued, a barrage of expletives and hand gestures that didn’t carry real anger behind them. In seconds all the parties would forget the exchange, which was just one beat in the natural tempo of the city.

As I melded into the flow of foot traffic and set off toward the gym, a smile teased my mouth. *Ah, New York*, I thought, feeling settled again. *You rock.*

I’d planned on warming up on a treadmill, then capping off the hour with a few of the machines, but when I saw that a beginners’ kickboxing class was about to start, I followed the mass of waiting students into that instead. By the time it was over, I felt more like myself. My muscles quivered with the perfect amount of fatigue, and I knew I’d sleep hard when I crashed later.

“You did really well.”

I wiped the sweat off my face with a towel and looked at the young man who spoke to me. Lanky and sleekly muscular, he had keen brown eyes and flawless café au lait skin. His lashes were enviably thick and long, while his head was shaved bald.

“Thank you.” My mouth twisted ruefully. “Pretty obvious it was my first time, huh?”

He grinned and held out his hand. “Parker Smith.”

“Eva Tramell.”

“You have a natural grace, Eva. With a little training you could be a literal knockout. In a city like New York, knowing self-defense is imperative.” He gestured over to a corkboard hung on the wall. It was covered in thumbtacked business cards and flyers. Tearing off a flag from the bottom of a fluorescent sheet of paper, he held it out to me. “Ever heard of Krav Maga?”

“In a Jennifer Lopez movie.”

“I teach it, and I’d love to teach you. That’s my website and the number to the studio.”

I admired his approach. It was direct, like his gaze, and his smile was genuine. I’d wondered if he was angling toward a pickup, but he was cool enough about it that I couldn’t be sure.

Parker crossed his arms, which showed off cut biceps. He wore a black sleeveless shirt and long shorts. His Converse sneakers looked comfortably beat up, and tribal tattoos peeked up from his collar. “My website has the hours. You should come by and watch, see if it’s for you.”

“I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Do that.” He extended his hand again, and his grip was solid and confident. “I hope to see you.”

The apartment smelled fabulous when I got back home, and Adele was crooning soulfully through the surround sound speakers about chasing pavements. I looked across the open floor plan into the kitchen and saw Cary swaying to the music while stirring something on the range. There was an open bottle of wine on the counter and two goblets, one of which was half-filled with red wine.

“Hey,” I called out as I got closer. “Whatcha cooking? And do I have time for a shower first?”

He poured wine into the other goblet and slid it across the breakfast bar to me, his movements practiced and elegant. No one would know from looking at him that he’d spent his childhood bouncing between his drug-addicted mother and foster homes, followed by adolescence in juvenile detention facilities and state-run rehabs. “Pasta with meat sauce. And hold the shower, dinner’s ready. Have fun?”

“Once I got to the gym, yeah.” I pulled out one of the teakwood bar stools and sat. I told him about the kickboxing class and Parker Smith. “Wanna go with me?”

“Krav Maga?” Cary shook his head. “That’s hard-core. I’d get all bruised up and that would cost me jobs. But I’ll go with you to check it out, just in case this guy’s a wack.”

I watched him dump the pasta into a waiting colander. “A wack, huh?”

My dad had taught me to read guys pretty well, which was how I’d known the god in the suit was trouble. Regular people offered token smiles when they helped someone, just to make a momentary connection that smoothed the way.

Then again, I hadn’t smiled at him either.

“Baby girl,” Cary said, pulling bowls out of the cupboard, “you’re a sexy, stunning woman. I question any man who doesn’t have the balls to ask you outright for a date.”

I wrinkled my nose at him.

He set a bowl in front of me. It contained tiny tubes of salad noodles covered in a skimpy tomato sauce with lumps of ground beef and peas. “You’ve got something on your mind. What is it?”

Hmm . . . I caught the handle of the spoon sticking out of the bowl and decided not to comment on the food. “I think I ran into the hottest man on the planet today. Maybe the hottest man in the history of the world.”

“Oh? I thought that was me. Do tell me more.” Cary stayed on the other side of the counter,

preferring to stand and eat.

I watched him take a couple bites of his own concoction before I felt brave enough to try it myself. “Not much to tell, really. I ended up sprawled on my ass in the lobby of the Crossfire and he gave me a hand up.”

“Tall or short? Blond or dark? Built or lean? Eye color?”

I washed down my second bite with some wine. “Tall. Dark. Lean *and* built. Blue eyes. Filthy rich, judging by his clothes and accessories. And he was insanely sexy. You know how it is—some good-looking guys don’t make your hormones go crazy, while some unattractive guys have massive sex appeal. This guy had it all.”

My belly fluttered as it had when Dark and Dangerous touched me. In my mind, I remembered his breathtaking face with crystal clarity. It should be illegal for a man to be that mind-blowing. I was *still* recovering from the frying of my brain cells.

Cary set his elbow on the counter and leaned in, his long bangs covering one vibrant green eye. “So what happened after he helped you up?”

I shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I left.”

“What? You didn’t flirt with him?”

I took another bite. Really, the meal wasn’t bad. Or else I was just starving. “He wasn’t the kind of guy you flirt with, Cary.”

“There is no such thing as a guy you can’t flirt with. Even the happily married ones enjoy a little harmless flirtation now and then.”

“There was nothing harmless about this guy,” I said dryly.

“Ah, one of those.” Cary nodded sagely. “Bad boys can be fun, if you don’t get too close.”

Of course he would know; men and women of all ages fell at his feet. Still, he somehow managed to pick the wrong partner every time. He’d dated stalkers, and cheaters, and lovers who

threatened to kill themselves over him, and lovers with significant others they didn't tell him about . . . Name it, he'd been through it.

"I can't see this guy ever being fun," I said. "He was way too intense. Still, I bet he'd be awesome in the sack with all that intensity."

"Now you're talking. Forget the real guy. Just use his face in your fantasies and make him perfect there."

Preferring to get the guy out of my head altogether, I changed the subject. "You have any go-sees tomorrow?"

"Of course." Cary launched into the details of his schedule, mentioning a jeans advertisement, self-tanner, underwear, and cologne.

I shoved everything else out of my mind and focused on him and his growing success. The demand for Cary Taylor was increasing by the day, and he was building a reputation with photographers and accounts for being both professional and prompt. I was thrilled for him and so proud. He'd come a long way and been through so much.

It wasn't until after dinner that I noticed the two large gift boxes propped against the side of the sectional sofa.

"What are those?"

"Those," Cary said, joining me in the living room, "are the ultimate."

I knew immediately they were from Stanton and my mom. Money was something my mother needed to be happy, and I was glad Stanton, husband number three, was able to fill that need for her and all her many others as well. I often wished that could be the end of it, but my mom had a difficult time accepting that I didn't view money the same way she did. "What now?"

He threw his arm around my shoulders, easy enough for him to do because he was taller by five inches. "Don't be ungrateful. He loves your mom. He loves spoiling your mom, and your mom loves spoiling you. As much as you don't like it, he doesn't do it for you. He does it for her."

Sighing, I conceded his point. “What are they?”

“Glam threads for the advocacy center’s fund-raiser dinner on Saturday. A bombshell dress for you and a Brioni tux for me, because buying gifts for me is what he does for you. You’re more tolerant if you have me around to listen to you bitch.”

“Damn straight. Thank God he knows that.”

“Of course he knows. Stanton wouldn’t be a bazillionaire if he didn’t know everything.” Cary caught my hand and tugged me over. “Come on. Take a look.”

I pushed through the revolving door of the Crossfire into the lobby ten minutes before nine the next morning. Wanting to make the best impression on my first day, I’d gone with a simple sheath dress paired with black pumps that I slid on in replacement of my walking shoes on the elevator ride up. My blond hair was twisted up in an artful chignon that resembled a figure eight, courtesy of Cary. I was hair-inept, but he could create styles that were glamorous masterpieces. I wore the small pearl studs my dad had given me as a graduation gift and the Rolex from Stanton and my mother.

I had begun to think I’d put too much care into my appearance, but as I stepped into the lobby I remembered being sprawled across the floor in my workout clothes and I was grateful I didn’t look anything like *that* graceless girl. The two security guards didn’t seem to put two and two together when I flashed them my ID card on the way to the turnstiles.

Twenty floors later, I was exiting into the vestibule of Waters Field & Leaman. Before me was a wall of bulletproof glass that framed the double-door entrance to the reception area. The receptionist at the crescent-shaped desk saw the badge I held up to the glass. She hit the button that unlocked the doors as I put my ID away.

“Hi, Megumi,” I greeted her when I stepped inside, admiring her cranberry-colored blouse. She was mixed race, a little bit Asian for sure, and very pretty. Her hair was dark and thick, and cut into a sleek bob that was shorter in the back and razor sharp in the front. Her sloe eyes were

brown and warm, and her lips were full and naturally pink.

“Eva, hi. Mark’s not in yet, but you know where you’re going, right?”

“Absolutely.” With a wave, I took the hallway to the left of the reception desk all the way to the end, where I made another left turn and ended up in a formerly open space now partitioned into cubicles. One was mine and I went straight to it.

I dropped my purse and the bag holding my walking flats into the bottom drawer of my utilitarian metal desk, then booted up my computer. I’d brought a couple of things to personalize my space, and I pulled them out. One was a framed collage of three photos—me and Cary on Coronado Beach, my mom and Stanton on his yacht in the French Riviera, and my dad on duty in his City of Oceanside, California, police cruiser. The other item was a colorful arrangement of glass flowers that Cary had given me just that morning as a “first day” gift. I tucked it beside the small grouping of photos and sat back to take in the effect.

“Good morning, Eva.”

I pushed to my feet to face my boss. “Good morning, Mr. Garrity.”

“Call me Mark, please. Come on over to my office.”

I followed him across the strip of hallway, once again thinking that my new boss was very easy to look at with his gleaming dark skin, trim goatee, and laughing brown eyes. Mark had a square jaw and a charmingly crooked smile. He was trim and fit, and he carried himself with a confident poise that inspired trust and respect.

He gestured at one of the two seats in front of his glass-and-chrome desk and waited until I sat to settle into his Aeron chair. Against the backdrop of sky and skyscrapers, Mark looked accomplished and powerful. He was, in fact, just a junior account manager and his office was a closet compared to the ones occupied by the directors and executives, but no one could fault the view.

He leaned back and smiled. “Did you get settled into your new apartment?”

I was surprised he remembered, but I appreciated it, too. I’d met him during my second

interview and liked him right away.

“For the most part,” I answered. “Still a few stray boxes here and there.”

“You moved from San Diego, right? Nice city, but very different from New York. Do you miss the palm trees?”

“I miss the dry air. The humidity here is taking some getting used to.”

“Wait ’til summer hits.” He smiled. “So . . . it’s your first day and you’re my first assistant, so we’ll have to figure this out as we go. I’m not used to delegating, but I’m sure I’ll pick it up quick.”

I was instantly at ease. “I’m eager to be delegated to.”

“Having you around is a big step up for me, Eva. I’d like you to be happy working here. Do you drink coffee?”

“Coffee is one of my major food groups.”

“Ah, an assistant after my own heart.” His smile widened. “I’m not going to ask you to fetch coffee for me, but I wouldn’t mind if you helped me figure out how to use the new one-cup coffee brewers they just put in the break rooms.”

I grinned. “No problem.”

“How sad is it that I don’t have anything else for you?” He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Why don’t I show you the accounts I’m working on and we’ll go from there?”

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Mark touched bases with two clients and had a long meeting with the creative team working on concept ideas for a trade school. It was a fascinating process seeing firsthand how the various departments picked up the baton from each other to carry a campaign from proposition to fruition. I might’ve stayed late just to get a better feel of the layout of the offices, but my phone rang at ten minutes to five.

“Mark Garrity’s office. Eva Tramell speaking.”

“Get your ass home so we can go out for the drink you rain-checked on yesterday.”

Cary's mock sternness made me smile. "All right, all right. I'm coming."

Shutting down my computer, I cleared out. When I reached the bank of elevators, I pulled out my cell to text a quick *On my way* note to Cary. A ding alerted me to which car was stopping on my floor and I moved over to stand in front of it, briefly returning my attention to hitting the send button. When the doors opened, I took a step forward. I glanced up to watch where I was going and blue eyes met mine. My breath caught.

The sex god was the lone occupant.