

# CHAPTER 1

Stella

“Stella!”

My heart rate sped up. Nothing triggered my fight-or-flight response like the sound of Meredith’s voice.

“Yes?” I hid my trepidation behind a neutral expression.

“I trust you can bring all the items back to the office yourself.” She slipped on her coat and tossed her handbag over her shoulder. “I have a dinner reservation I simply can’t miss.”

“Of—”

She disappeared out the door.

“Course I can,” I finished.

The photographer paused what he was doing and raised his eyebrows at me. I answered with a tired shrug. I wasn’t the first magazine assistant who’d suffered under a tyrannical boss, and I wouldn’t be the last.

Once upon a time, working at a fashion magazine would’ve been a dream. Now, after four years at *DC Style*, the reality of the job had dulled any shine the position once held.

By the time I packed up the photo shoot, dropped the items off at the office, and started my walk home, my forehead was slick with sweat and my muscles were well on their way to becoming Jell-O.

The sun had set half an hour ago, and the streetlights cast a hazy orange glow over the snow-packed sidewalks.

The city was under a blizzard warning, but the bad weather wouldn’t kick in until later in the evening. It was also faster for me to walk home than take the Metro, which freaked out whenever there was so much as an inch of snow.

One would think the city would be better prepared considering it snowed every year, but nope. Not DC.

I shouldn't have been looking at my phone while walking, especially given the weather, but I couldn't help myself.

I pulled up the email I'd received that afternoon and stared at it, waiting for the words to rearrange themselves into something less upsetting, but they never did.

*Effective April 1, the cost for a private room at Greenfield Senior Living will increase to \$6,500 per month. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience this may cause, but we are confident the changes will result in even higher-quality care for our residents...*

The green smoothie I'd downed during lunch sloshed in my stomach.

*Inconvenience*, they said. Like they weren't hiking the prices of an assisted living facility by over twenty percent. Like living, breathing, *vulnerable* human beings wouldn't suffer because of the new management's greed.

*In, one, two, three. Out, one, two, three.*

I tried to let the deep breaths wash away my rising anxiety.

Maura had practically raised me. She was the one person who'd always been there for me, even if she didn't know who I was now. I *couldn't* move her to another assisted living facility. Greenfield was the best in the area, and it'd become her home.

None of my friends and family knew I'd been paying for her care. I didn't want the inevitable questions telling them would raise.

I would just have to find a way to cover the higher costs. Maybe I could take on more partnerships or negotiate higher rates for my blog and Instagram. I had an upcoming dinner with Delamonte in New York, which my manager said was an audition for their brand ambassador position. If I—

"Ms. Alonso."

The deep, rich voice brushed my skin like black velvet and stopped me in my tracks. A shiver chased its wake, born of equal parts pleasure and warning.

I recognized that voice.

I'd heard it only three times in my life, but that was enough. Like the man who owned it, it was unforgettable.

Wariness flickered in my chest before I doused it. I turned my head, my gaze traveling over powerful winter tires and the sleek, distinctive lines of the black McLaren pulled up beside me before it reached the rolled-down passenger window and the owner in question.

My heart slowed a fraction of a beat.

Dark hair. Whiskey eyes. A face so exquisitely chiseled it could've been sculpted by Michelangelo himself.

Christian Harper.

CEO of an elite security company, owner of the Mirage, the building where I lived, and quite possibly the most beautiful, most dangerous man I'd ever met.

I had nothing except instinct to back up the *dangerous* part of my assessment, but my gut had never steered me wrong.

I inhaled a small breath. Released. And smiled.

"Mr. Harper." My polite reply was met with dry amusement.

Apparently only he was allowed to address people by their last names like we all lived in a giant, stuffy boardroom.

Christian's eyes grazed the snowflakes drifting onto my shoulder before they met mine again.

My heart slowed another fraction of a beat.

Tiny crackles of electricity hummed to life beneath the weight of his gaze, and it took every ounce of willpower not to step back and shake off the strange sensation.

"Gorgeous weather for a walk." His observation was even drier than his stare.

Heat rushed over the back of my neck. "It's not that bad."

It was only then that I noticed the alarming rate at which the snow was thickening. Perhaps the blizzard forecast had been a *little* off on its estimate.

"My apartment is only twenty minutes away," I added to...I didn't

know. Prove that I wasn't stupid by trekking through the city in a snowstorm, I guess.

In hindsight, perhaps I should've taken the Metro.

"The blizzard's already rolling in, and there are ice patches all over the sidewalks." Christian rested his forearm on the steering wheel—an action that had no right being as attractive as it was. "I'll give you a ride."

He also lived at the Mirage, so it made sense. In fact, his apartment was only a floor above mine.

Still, I shook my head.

The thought of sitting in a confined space with Christian, even for a few minutes, filled me with a strange sense of panic.

"I'm okay. I'm sure you have better things to do than chauffeur me around, and walking clears my head." The words spilled out in a rush. I didn't ramble often, but when I did, nothing short of a nuclear blast could stop me. "It's good exercise, and I need to test out my new snow boots anyway. This is the first time I've worn them all season." *Stop talking.* "So as much as I appreciate your offer, I have to politely decline."

I finished my nearly incoherent mini speech on a note of breathlessness.

I was getting better at saying no, but I still overexplained myself every time.

"Does that make sense?" I added when Christian remained silent.

An icy gust of wind chose that moment to whip past. It tossed the hood of my coat off my head and burrowed past my layers into my bones, sparking a burst of involuntary shivers.

I'd been sweating bullets in the studio, but now I was so cold even the memory of warmth was frosted with blue.

"It does." Christian finally spoke, his tone and expression unreadable.

"Good." The word shook through my chattering teeth. "Then I'll let you—"

The soft *click* of a door unlocking interrupted me.

"Get in the car, Stella."

I got in the car.

I told myself it was because the temperature had somehow dropped twenty degrees in the space of five minutes, but I knew that was a lie.

It was the sound of my name in that voice, delivered with such calm authority that my body obeyed before I could protest.

For a man I barely knew, he had more power over me than almost anyone else.

Christian pulled away from the curb and turned a dial on the dashboard. A second later, heat blasted from the vents and warmed my frigid skin.

The car smelled like rich leather and expensive spices, and it was eerily clean. No wrappers, no half-empty coffee cups, not even a speck of lint.

I sank deeper into my seat and glanced at the man next to me.

"You always get your way, don't you?" I asked lightly, trying to dissolve the inexplicable tension blanketing the air.

He slid a brief glance in my direction before refocusing on the road. "Not always."

Instead of dissolving, the tension thickened and slipped into my veins. Hot and restless, like an ember waiting for a breath of oxygen to fan it to life.

*Mission failed.*

I turned my head and stared out the windshield, too thrown off by the day's events to attempt more conversation.

The nerves scaling their way up my chest and into my throat didn't help.

I was supposed to be the cool, calm one, the one who saw the silver lining in every cloud and remained levelheaded no matter the situation. That was the image I'd projected most of my life because that was what was expected of me as an Alonso.

An Alonso didn't suffer from anxiety attacks or spend their nights worrying about every little thing that could go wrong the next day.

An Alonso didn't seek therapy or air their dirty laundry to a stranger.

An Alonso was supposed to be perfect.

I twisted my necklace around my finger until it cut off the circulation.

My parents would probably *love* Christian. On paper, he was as perfect as they came.

Rich. Good-looking. Well-mannered.

I resented it almost as much as I resented the way he dominated the space around us, his presence pouring into every nook and crevice until it was the only thing I could concentrate on.

I fixed my eyes on the road ahead, but the scent of his cologne filled my lungs, and my skin thrummed with awareness at the way his muscles flexed with each turn of the wheel.

*I shouldn't have gotten in the car.*

Besides the warmth, the only upside was that I would get home to my shower and bed sooner. I couldn't wait—

"The plants are doing well."

He threw out the statement so casually and unexpectedly it took me several seconds to realize that one, someone had broken the silence, and two, that someone was, in fact, Christian and not a figment of my imagination.

"Excuse me?"

"The plants in my apartment." He stopped at a red light. "They're doing well."

What did that... *Oh*.

Comprehension dawned, followed by a tiny flicker of pride.

"I'm glad." I gave him a tentative smile now that the conversation was in safe, neutral territory. "They just need a little love and attention to thrive."

"And water."

I blinked at his obvious, deadpan statement. "And water."

The words hung between us for a moment before a laugh broke free from my throat and Christian's mouth curved into the tiniest of smiles.

The air finally lightened, and the knot in my chest loosened a smidge.

When the light turned green, the powerful rumble of the engine nearly drowned out his next words. “You have a magic touch.”

My cheeks warmed, but I responded with a small shrug. “I like plants.”

“Perfect person for the job then.”

His plants had been on life support when I took over their care in exchange for keeping my current rent.

After my friend and ex-roommate Jules moved out last month to live with her boyfriend, my options were either get another roommate or move out of the Mirage, since I couldn’t afford to cover both portions of our rent. I’d grown attached to the Mirage, but I would rather downgrade my home than live with a stranger. My anxiety couldn’t handle that.

Christian had already lowered the monthly rent for us when we first toured the apartment and mentioned the regular price was out of our budget, so I’d been shocked when he’d proposed our current arrangement after I brought up the possibility of moving out.

It was a little suspicious, but he was friends with my other friend Bridget’s husband, which made accepting his offer easier. I’d been taking care of his plants for five weeks and nothing terrible had happened. I never even saw him when I went upstairs. I just let myself in, watered the plants, and left.

“How did you know I could do it?” He could’ve proposed any number of tasks—run his errands, do his laundry, clean his house (though he already had a full-time housekeeper). The plant thing was oddly specific.

“I didn’t.” Disinterest and a thread of something imperceptible twined through his voice. “It was a lucky coincidence.”

“You don’t seem like someone who believes in coincidence.”

Christian’s lack of sentimentality bled through in everything he did and wore—the sharp lines of his suit, the calm precision of his words, the cool detachment of his gaze.

They were the traits of someone who worshipped logic, power, and cold, hard pragmatism. Not something as nebulous as coincidence.

For some reason, Christian found that funny. "I believe in it more than you think."

Intrigue kindled at his self-deprecating tone.

Despite having access to his apartment, I knew maddeningly little about him. His penthouse was a study in flawless design and luxury, but it contained few to no personal effects.

"Care to share?" I tried.

Christian pulled into the Mirage's private garage and parked in his reserved spot near the back entrance.

No answer.

Then again, I hadn't expected one.

Christian Harper was a man cloaked in rumors and shadows. Even Bridget didn't know much about him, only his reputation.

We didn't speak again as we passed through the entrance and into the lobby.

At six foot four, Christian had a good five inches on me, but I was still tall enough to match his long strides.

Our steps fell into perfect sync against the marble floors.

I'd always been self-conscious about my height, but Christian's powerful presence wrapped around like me a security blanket, drawing attention away from my Amazonian frame.

"No more walking in a blizzard, Ms. Alonso." We stopped by the bank of elevators and faced each other. His shadow of a smile returned, all lazy charm and confidence. "I can't have one of my tenants dying of hypothermia. It would be bad for business."

Another unexpected laugh rustled my throat. "I'm sure you'll find someone to replace me in no time."

I wasn't sure whether I owed my slight breathlessness to the cold lingering I felt in my lungs or the full impact of standing so close to him.

I wasn't interested in Christian romantically. I wasn't interested in

*anyone* romantically; between the magazine and my blog, I didn't have time to even think about dating.

But that didn't mean I was immune to his presence.

Something flared bright in those whiskey eyes before it cooled. "Likely not."

The mild breathlessness transformed into something heavier that strangled my voice.

Every sentence out of his mouth was a code I couldn't crack, imbued with a hidden meaning only he was privy to while I was left to scramble in the dark.

I'd talked to Christian three times in my life: once when I signed my lease, once in passing at Bridget's wedding, and once when we discussed my sans-Jules rent situation.

All three times, I'd left more unsettled than before.

*What were we talking about again?*

It'd been less than a minute since Christian's response, but that minute had stretched so slow it might as well have been an eternity.

"Christian."

A deep, slightly accented voice slashed the thread holding our suspended moment aloft.

Time snapped back to its usual cadence, and my breath expelled in one sharp rush before I turned my head.

Tall. Dark hair. Olive skin.

The newcomer wasn't as classically good-looking as Christian, but he filled out the lines of his Delamonte suit with so much raw masculinity it was difficult to look away.

"I hope I'm not interrupting." Delamonte Suit flicked a glance in my direction.

I'd never been super attracted to older men, and he had to be in his mid to late thirties, but *wow*.

"Not at all. You're right on time." A hint of irritation hardened Christian's otherwise smooth reply. He stepped in front of me, blocking me from Delamonte Suit's view and vice versa.

The other man raised an eyebrow before his mask of indifference fell away to reveal a smirk.

He stepped around Christian, so deliberately it was almost like he was taunting him, and held out his hand. "Dante Russo."

"Stella Alonso."

I expected him to shake my hand, but to my surprise, he raised it and brushed his mouth across my knuckles instead.

Coming from anyone else, it would've been cheesy, but a tingle of pleasure erupted.

Maybe it was the accent. I had a weakness for all things Italian.

"Dante." Beneath the calm surface of Christian's voice lay a razored edge that was sharp enough to cut through bone. "We're late for our meeting."

Dante appeared unfazed. His hand lingered on mine for an extra second before he released it.

"It was lovely to meet you, Stella. I'm sure I'll see you around again." His rich drawl contained a hint of laughter.

I suspected his amusement was directed not at me but toward the man watching us with ice in his eyes.

"Thank you. It was nice meeting you too." I almost smiled at Dante, but something told me that wouldn't be a smart move right now. "Have a good night." I glanced at Christian. "Good night, Mr. Harper. Thank you for the ride."

I injected a playful lilt into my voice, hoping the callback to our absurd formality earlier would crack his granite expression.

But it didn't so much as flicker as he inclined his head. "Good night, Ms. Alonso."

Okay then.

I left Christian and Dante in the lobby, the subjects of more than a few admiring stares from passersby, and took the elevator up to my apartment. Given DC's building height limit, it was as close to a penthouse as I could get without moving into Christian's eleventh floor abode above mine.