



Chapter One

The man was a tyrant.

Harlow Carlson grumbled under her breath as she climbed out of her Uber and hurried down the sidewalk.

San Francisco was draped in darkness. It was almost nine o'clock at night, and here she was, heading back into the office.

Because her boss was a workaholic control freak who never slept.

She mentally added arrogant, demanding, and bossy to Easton Norcross' personality faults.

Harlow had been his executive assistant for two weeks. The man had a mind like a steel trap, and never stopped. It was probably why he was a gazillionaire.

She sniffed. She usually worked for Tenneson Industries, a Norcross Inc. subsidiary, and loved her boss, Meredith Webster. When Easton's usual assistant, Mrs. Skilton, went on leave due to the birth of her grandchild, the imposing woman had selected Harlow to stand in for her.

"Easton needs someone who can keep up with him. Someone smart, with a spine." The older, gray-haired woman had rolled her eyes. "And who won't throw herself at him."

"As if I'd do that," Harlow muttered. The man might be sex in a suit, but usually, she just wanted to stab him in the eye with her stylus.

She approached the front door of the gleaming office building. Norcross Inc. was housed on two of the upper floors, with killer views of the city and San Francisco Bay.

Harlow pulled out her access card from her glittery, red Roger Vivier clutch. She'd bought it at a little secondhand boutique she'd discovered on Chestnut Street. The bag made her smile

every time she held it, and it matched her little red dress perfectly.

Easton's text telling her to get back to the office to find the missing paperwork he needed for an early-morning call with London had interrupted her date.

She swiped the card. The reader beeped and the glass door slid open.

It had been the most boring date she'd ever been on, so her overbearing boss had done her a favor, but she wasn't telling him that. Her heels clicked on the marble floor.

She and Michael had sparked about as much chemistry as a couple of wet sponges. Harlow sighed. It'd been so long since any man had been near her lady parts that she'd suffered through the dinner longer than she should have.

Note to self: no more blind dates set up by her mother.

Harlow shrugged off her coat. The security guard at the desk stood. "Good evening, Ms. Carlson."

She threw her coat over her arm. "Hi, Joe."

The older man's eyes widened. "You look like a million bucks tonight."

She smiled. "Why, thank you." Her red dress had long sleeves, a deep V neckline, and hugged her curves. It was also short.

"What brings you back tonight?" Joe asked.

"I was on a date before the Grand Master snapped his fingers."

Joe's lips twitched. "He works late a lot. Don't let him keep you too long."

"I won't." The elevator doors closed. One thing she'd learned—it paid to stand toe-to-toe with Easton Norcross, or he'd run right over you. The man radiated "I'm in charge" vibes every second of every day.

Growing up, she'd thought her dad had the same "man in charge" aura, but Charles Carlson

was nowhere in Easton's league.

Thoughts of her dad made her stomach tie up in little knots.

Two days ago, he'd left her a worrying, cryptic message.

Her father was a successful local businessman, who, even though he was retired, still kept busy with a few investment projects. Her mom kept busy lunching with friends, going on yoga retreats, and sitting on lots of charity boards. Eleanor Carlson had never met a charity she didn't want to support.

That niggle of worry in Harlow's belly grew. Something was going on with her dad. He'd left her a message saying that he had some trouble, but then he'd told her not to worry. He hadn't sounded like himself.

Since then, she couldn't track him down. He hadn't returned her messages, and her mom said he was working late. Harlow got the feeling he was avoiding her.

Charles Carlson had fully expected his daughters to attend college, launch fantastic careers, and marry socially acceptable men.

So far, he was exceptionally disappointed. Neither Harlow, nor her younger sister, Scarlett, were anywhere close to married.

Harlow had suffered through a boring law degree, before realizing she wanted to be an executive assistant. She loved organizing, solving problems, juggling issues, and finding effective, efficient solutions. She thrived on it and it fed her soul.

She'd been organizing her family for as long as she could remember. As a teenager, she'd helped her father with his work as a side job. And her sister was ten years younger than Harlow, so she'd helped her mother a lot when the new baby had arrived.

When she'd first told her father that she wasn't going to practice law, he'd lost it. "No child of

mine will be a lowly assistant.”

Harlow snorted. She was well aware good assistants kept the business world running. Her father’s included.

The elevator slowed and she straightened her shoulders. She knew a brilliant executive assistant was worth their weight in gold. She was well-paid, and that helped with her ultimate goal—buying her own house.

She felt a giddy little feeling. Harlow wanted to own a lovely San Francisco home all of her own. She wanted to renovate. Decorate. She was a closet reno-show addict. She had a burning need to knock down some walls and gut some bathrooms.

She grinned to herself.

She was so good at her job that she had earned the dubious prize of working for Easton for the foreseeable future.

The elevator doors opened. The main office level was shadowed, the lights on low. Pushing worry for her dad away, she strode forward. She’d pin him down eventually.

The carpet muffled the sound of her steps. There were lights on in Easton’s office.

Maybe the man was part machine?

She passed her own desk. It was exactly how she’d left it several hours earlier. Mostly clear, with a few neat, organized piles.

She paused in the doorway.

Against her will, her belly tightened. The man might be a tyrant, but she was female enough to admit he was a mouthwatering one.

Especially like this.

Usually, Easton wore perfectly tailored suits. He was always pressed, looking gorgeous and

intimidating.

Right now, he was in off mode. Or as off as he got.

His dark suit jacket hung over the back of his executive desk chair. He still wore the white shirt he'd had on today, but now the sleeves were rolled up, and the top two buttons were undone. All of that revealed the ink that was usually kept hidden.

Harlow's pulse skipped a beat, her mouth suddenly dry. Intricate, black designs coiled around his muscled forearms, and there was the hint of more on his chest.

Oh, no. No. No. No. She wasn't giving this any air time.

For now, Easton Norcross was her boss. She couldn't, *wouldn't*, entertain any attraction to him.

She hadn't made a noise, but his head lifted. Instincts honed from his time in the military.

Harlow lifted her chin. It would have been really nice if the universe could have made his face less gorgeous. His Italian-American heritage was stamped all over his features. He was a little too rugged to be strictly handsome. A strong jaw, clean-shaven in the morning, was now covered in a dark, five-o'clock shadow. His eyes were a deep, cobalt blue, and his ink-black hair was just a little longer than what you'd expect from a successful businessman.

That sharp gaze roamed over her, then flicked back to her face.

"A little overdressed for the office, Ms. Carlson."

Ignoring the deep drawl, Harlow strode in and dumped her coat and clutch on one of the guest chairs in front of Easton's lake-sized desk of polished teak.

"I'm not supposed to be in the office," she said sharply. "I'm supposed to be finishing my date, but I'm employed by a workaholic."

Dark brows drew down. "Date?"

“Yes, you know, man, woman, dinner.”

His gaze dropped to her legs. “And a little more than dinner if that dress is anything to go by.”

“There is nothing wrong with my dress.” She strode around his desk. She wasn’t letting him intimidate her. “And my date is none of your business.” She started scanning the desk for the missing files. “I left those reports right on your desk. What have you done with them?”

He looked up at her. She caught a faint whiff of his cologne—crisp and sexy, with a spicy undertone.

Dammit. Focus, Harlow.

There were no files on his desk, just one hot boss leaning against it.

“Ms. Carlson.” His fingers wrapped around her arm.

The heat of his touch ran through her. She sucked in a breath.

“Anyone who works for me is very much my business.”

Easton watched Harlow’s blue-green eyes fire.

She didn’t pull back. No, one thing he’d learned about Harlow Carlson over the last few weeks since she’d become the bane of his existence, was that she rarely did the expected.

She leaned closer, rifling through the papers on his desk.

“You might think you’re in charge of the world, Mr. Norcross, but you aren’t.”

Fuck. Easton finally confronted the fact that anytime this woman called him Mr. Norcross, he got hard.

She was dressed like a man’s fantasy. Her gorgeous curves were packed into a fire-engine-red dress. Her silky, blonde hair was piled up on her head; strands of it escaped to tease the slender line of her neck.

“I’m in charge of my little piece of the world,” he drawled.

She cocked her hip. “You aren’t in charge of *people*.”

He sat back in his chair, not examining why trading barbs with Harlow woke something up inside him.

Since he’d left the Army, Easton had thrown himself into business. It had given him purpose.

And kept the dark memories at bay.

He worked hard, played when he had the time, and put in extra effort to control his little part of the world.

“I’m in charge of a lot of people,” he countered. “You seem to be the only one who has trouble with my orders.”

She smiled. “Which is why you keep me around.”

“I’m going to fire you and send you back to Meredith, as soon as I find a competent replacement.”

Harlow made a sound, completely unconcerned. Of course, he’d threatened to fire her multiple times a day ever since she started with him. Nothing rattled the woman.

Except the message she’d gotten two days ago. She’d been pale, upset, and refused to tell him what was going on.

It was eating at him. He’d find out. He always got what he wanted.

Although, she seemed fine tonight, and far too edible in that red dress. He scowled. He hated that she’s worn it for some schmuck.

“I left the files right here.” She slapped the desk and her gaze narrowed. “Did you move them to mess with me?”

He raised a brow. “Yes, I wanted your delightful company at—” he looked at his Rolex “—

9:25 at night.”

She made a harrumphing sound and moved to the sleek credenza against the wall. Her curvy form was silhouetted by the lights of San Francisco through his floor-to-ceiling windows. She leaned over the credenza, her dress hugging her ass.

Easton’s hands clenched on his pen, and his hard cock throbbed.

She *worked* for him. Even if it was only temporary, she was off limits.

And besides, she drove him crazy. She’d do the same in bed.

Or bent over his desk.

Shit.

“Here.” She lifted a file triumphantly.

“The cleaners were in here when I left to grab some dinner,” he said.

Harlow slapped a hand on her chest...which made him notice the swell of her breasts.

Fuck. Get a grip, Norcross.

“You stopped work to eat?” she said. “It’s a miracle.”

He shot her a look. She was a first-class smartass. He took the file from her.

“I’m sorry I had to call you in.” He wasn’t really.

She sighed. “It’s okay. The date was a bust anyway.” She circled the desk and grabbed her coat and bag. “Right, good luck with your meeting in the morning.” She shuddered. “I wouldn’t wake up at 4:30 AM for anything, even to make millions of dollars.”

“Tens of millions of dollars.”

She rolled her pretty, blue-green eyes. He still hadn’t decided if they were blue or green, since they seemed to change colors.

Easton’s head filled with a few ways he’d happily wake her up that early. He gripped the edge

of the desk. He had to get this incendiary desire under control.

“Okay, Mr. Heart-Attack-Waiting-to-Happen, I’m out of here.”

He rose. “How are you getting home?”

“Uber.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she called back.

“No.”

She spun and rested her hands on her hips. “I’ve gotten Ubers for years. I’ve also been an adult for years, too. That means I make my own decisions.”

“I’m leaving now. I’ll drop you at home.”

She dragged in a breath. “No.”

Easton grabbed his own jacket and shrugged into it. He looked up to find her staring at his chest. While she was distracted, he took her coat and held it out for her.

She shot him a disgruntled look, then turned and slipped into her coat. “You are so annoyingly bossy.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not even sorry.”

He paused. “Not really.” He stepped closer and her perfume hit him. It was a blend of something musky and sexy, with an undertone that was pure Harlow. “I’m dropping you off at home. I dragged you in here, it’s the least I can do.”

“Fine. But only because I love your car.” They headed toward the elevator.

They zoomed down to the parking garage and he led her to his gunmetal-gray Aston Martin Superleggera. When he opened the door, she slid in, flashing a lot of long leg.

He stared at the concrete ceiling and prayed for a break. Then he circled the car and slid in. The engine started with a purr.

He looked over. She was snuggling into the seat, stroking the leather.

Releasing a sharp breath, he imagined her stroking other things. With a mental curse, he roared out of the underground parking

“Do you know where I live?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Of course, you do. Control Freak Norcross doesn’t leave anything to chance.”

His hands flexed on the wheel. “I like control. It’s better than chaos.”

She made a rude noise. “You can’t control everything, Mr. Norcross. Life doesn’t work like that.”

“Easton. I think you should start calling me Easton when you berate me.”

He felt her looking at him.

“Fine. Easton.”

“And I’ve been in lots of uncontrolled situations...people died.” Shit, why had he said that? He looked straight ahead through the windshield.

She was silent for a moment. “You’re talking about the Army?”

Easton gave her a tight nod, then dragged in a breath. “I know I’m not in a war zone anymore.”

“Do you?” she asked quietly.

He turned a corner, the sports car hugging the turn. He headed to Haight-Asbury where Harlow’s apartment was.

“Yes,” he replied. “But if you can control your environment, it’s better. Safer. More likely to

give you the results you want.”

Shocking him, she reached out and touched his thigh. “You don’t have to be ‘on’ all the time, Easton.”

The touch was electric. His hands flexed on the wheel. But she was wrong—he did. He didn’t know how to switch off.

He pulled onto her street.

“You can drop me at the corner,” she said.

“I’m walking you to your door.”

“No, you’re not.” Her chin lifted. “I’m going to help you loosen up that control. Drop me at the corner.”

Easton scowled. *Fuck that.* He’d drop her off, then shadow her until she made it inside.