

Emma sighed, leaning her head back against the mirrored wall of the elevator as she tried to ignore her own reflection. She already knew how exhausted she must look after such a long day. The bag on her shoulder was heavy with printouts she had to take home, and she was frustrated at the prospect of another late evening spent poring over numbers until her eyes went blurry.

When she started this job, Emma thought that being a financial analyst at one of the top firms in Silicon Valley would be exciting. After all, she'd studied corporate accounting, and it sounded like fun work, helping new startups make the most of their money. Instead, it turned out to be mostly drudgery, checking over other people's work and making sure the giant quarterly reports were free of typos and calculation errors.

The elevator opened and she made her way through the lobby of the towering skyscraper, giving a tired nod to Clive the security officer as she stepped out onto Mission Street. As much as she appreciated Clive's friendly face, the fact that she was so familiar with the building's evening staff was just another reminder that she spent more time at the office than at home. It had been ages since she had her neighbors over for some wine, but she'd certainly downed plenty of late night coffees by herself, hunched over her work computer scrolling through spreadsheets.

It was already dark out, and Mission Street was starting to light up with the evening crowd - casually dressed techies waiting in line for exclusive clubs, gaggles of local hipsters smoking under neon signs, the rattle and rumble of trolleys full of drunken revelers.

Emma turned a corner onto a quieter block, debating whether to hail a cab or just finish walking home. The weather was nice enough, but her bag was so weighed down with work printouts that she worried her shoulder might be sore by the time she made it down the hill to her apartment.

As she slowed down to shift the bag to her other shoulder, Emma noticed a little bar with a sleek, golden sign declaring it the NORTH STAR BAR. Inside, she could see people gathered around tall tables, laughing and holding delicious looking cocktails.

Stopping for a moment, Emma considered her options. She could do what she did every single night, and go straight home for yet another night of boring work on her own...or she could do something completely out of character, but very tempting. She could walk into the North Star, alone, take a spot at the bar, and see where the evening would take her.

Before she could talk herself out of the impulse, Emma crossed the street and pushed open the door to the North Star. One of her favorite songs was playing, which she took as a good omen. She headed straight to the bar and scanned the menu of cocktail specials on a miniature chalkboard. As someone who loved unique craft cocktails, she was excited to see some unusual concoctions on the menu.

“One Ginger-Chili Mojito, please,” she said, sliding into a barstool and setting her bag on her lap.

Maybe it was the weight of the bag, or just the strange feeling of being alone in a bar that she hadn’t planned to visit until a few seconds ago, but Emma started to feel a bit anxious. What was she even doing here? Would she have enough time to get her work done if she spent her evening here?

Emma needed something to do, and the only thing she could think of was the work she had brought with her. She pulled one stack of papers out and set it on the bar, telling herself that she could have the best of both worlds if she stayed in the fun, cheery atmosphere of the bar while finishing her work.

The bartender did give her a funny look when he dropped off her cocktail, but Emma did her best to ignore it. She sipped her drink, which was just as delightfully spicy as she’d hoped it be, swirling the candied ginger and jalapeno garnishes with her straw as she flipped through the pages.

The bar was filling up, the conversation around her getting louder. The drink was not only delicious, but starting to make her feel warm and relaxed. Emma leaned in closer to her papers, trying to stay on task. It immediately became impossible to focus, however, when a frothing puddle of beer spilled over her stack of papers.

“Aaah!” Emma jolted to her senses as she rushed to snatch the now soggy mess up off the bar and keep the beer from drenching everything else.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” The voice, which had a soft accent that Emma couldn’t quite place, belonged to a handsome man who was currently grabbing handfuls of napkins and doing his best to mop up the mess.

“It’s alright,” Emma said, reaching for her own handful of napkins. To her surprise, she actually meant it. Typically, she’d be completely freaked out to have her work destroyed like that, but something about the man’s kind smile, and the cocktail she’d mostly finished, made it easy to stay relaxed.

“Hey, let me buy you another beer, since my papers so rudely drank all of yours,” Emma offered, once they’d cleaned up the worst of it.

“No, no, you don’t have to,” he protested, but Emma was already leaning over the bar, calling out to get the bartender’s attention.

“Another one of what he’s having, a second chili whatever for me, and -” she held up the sodden stack of papers - “do you have a garbage can I could toss this in?”

“Thank you,” he said, once the bartender had brought their drinks and the sodden papers had been disposed of. “I do apologize, again, for ruining your...what was that, actually?”

Emma rolled her eyes as she sipped her drink. “Just some work.”

“Work? Who brings work to a bar?”

At that, Emma had to laugh. “I do, apparently. But I should be thanking you, honestly, for rescuing me from all that. I’m Emma, by the way.”

“Stefan.” He held his hand out for her to shake, a charmingly formal gesture.

“Pleased to meet you, Stefan.” Emma took the opportunity to size him up. He had dark hair, well tamed curls that fell over olive skin, mesmerizing hazel eyes, and a bright smile. She couldn’t help but notice that he was also dressed sharply in a crisp blazer and tailored jeans - certainly not a standard hoodie-wearing tech dude from the area.

“Is that really a chili pepper in your drink?” Stefan peered curiously at the garnish in her drink. “I saw it on the menu, but couldn’t believe anyone actually wanted a spicy drink.”

Emma grinned, swirling the ice around with her straw. “Yeah, it’s a jalapeño. I like things a little bit hot.” She slid the drink over to him. “Wanna try it?”

Though his expression was skeptical, Stefan lifted the glass and wrapped his lips around the straw, taking in a tiny sip. Instantly, he pulled his face away, sputtering and coughing. “Oh, that’s horrible!”

Emma took her cocktail back, laughing. “Guess it’s not for everyone,” she said, pulling out the now alcohol-soaked piece of ginger and popping it in her mouth.

“I’ll stick with my beer, thank you.” Stefan took a huge gulp of his beer, making a show of his relief at soothing the chili cocktail’s burn.

“Boring,” Emma teased. “No surprise it’s the preferred drink of finance spreadsheets. No spice, no kick, no fun.”

“Hey!” Stefan pouted. “I can be fun.”

“I don’t know,” Emma said, “hard to believe, if you can have anything in common with my work. It doesn’t get much more boring than that.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Ugh.” Emma rolled her eyes again, draining the rest of her cocktail. “The worst.”

“What do you do, that you find so miserable?”

“I’m a financial analyst at Broward and Waller, over on Mission,” she said, wondering whether it would be wise to order a third drink. “Basically, I help companies figure out where they’re making money, and where they’re losing it, and whether the people who set their budgets are doing a good job.”

“That doesn’t sound so uninteresting,” Stefan said. His tone was gentle, curious - not argumentative. “What got you into this career in the first place?”

Emma hadn’t actually opened up to anyone about her job woes, not wanting to admit to her friends that her fancy corporate job was making her miserable, and not even knowing what she wanted to do about it. But it was surprisingly easy to talk to Stefan.

“I thought I wanted to help people grow their businesses,” she explained, fidgeting with her straw. “It sounded so cool, taking a tiny startup with a few small investments and turning it into a billion dollar company.”

“That does sound like fun,” Stefan agreed. “I’ve known some money magicians in my day, guys who can turn the tiniest investment into something that ends up serving many people. It’s amazing. Sometimes I have to see the sheets myself to believe it. Takes a special touch to do that.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Emma smiled. Stefan got her - he understood why accounting and finance could be interesting. A lot of people’s eyes just glazed over when she talked about her work.

“But your current work...it’s not like that?”

“Not really.” Emma glanced around the bar, making sure she wasn’t within earshot of any coworkers or entrepreneurs whose companies she worked for. “It’s mostly just checking other people’s work, redoing calculations, getting things ready to present. I don’t get to make any investment calls or even give any advice, most of the time.”

“Ah.” Stefan waved the bartender over, ordering more drinks for both of them. He even asked for extra chili in hers, flashing her a cheeky smile as he did so. When he was done, he turned back to Emma. “What would you want to be doing, if you could do anything you want?”

Emma thought for a second. It had been a while since anyone asked her a question like that. “I guess I’d still want to work with small businesses, entrepreneurs, maybe non-profits. Helping them manage and grow their money, but creatively. Get them invested in things that fit their company’s values, help them be the first to get in on new funding avenues.”

“That does sound much better,” he said. “Why don’t you leave, and pursue something like that?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” she mumbled. “It’s hard, you know, leaving something with a secure paycheck, not really sure what you’re doing next.”

Emma was grateful for the interruption of the bartender returning with their drinks. Her new drink was certainly stronger on the jalapeño, and she could feel her cheeks going pink. Stefan had noticed, too, and was giving her a satisfied grin. His delight only intensified when she let out a cough, despite her best efforts.

“How’s that for a little kick?”

Emma shrugged. “It’s alright. Here, have a taste.” Matching his mischievous smile, she pushed the glass in his direction.

“I have a better idea,” Stefan said. He leaned in close, taking Emma’s chin gently in one hand, and kissed her.

The tingle of the chili pepper was still on her lips, its heat enfolding both of them as Stefan’s tongue danced toward hers. She met him with parted lips, pulling him into a deep kiss. His hands found her hips, lifting her from the barstool until both were standing, Emma leaned against him, her hands pressed against the smooth fabric of his blazer.

He smelled incredible - like cedarwood and cologne, with a hint of cold beer that helped cool off the chili's lingering heat. Despite the passion of the kiss, Stefan remained a perfect gentleman, guiding instead of pushing, his arms wrapped around her, holding her up as she nearly melted into his embrace.

"Wow," Emma breathed once their lips finally parted.

Stefan smiled down at her, planting another gentle kiss on her cheek before murmuring in her ear. "Your drink is a bit too hot for me, but I'd still love another taste."

This time, Emma initiated, reaching up to thread her fingers through his curls and pull him down into another deep kiss. She closed her eyes, letting herself fall into the sensation of Stefan's lips on hers, his strong hands, the softness of her hair.

Just as they were finishing their second kiss, a popular dance song came over the speakers, and the bar's patrons started to make their way onto dance floor. "Come dance with me," Emma said, taking Stefan's hands in hers and tugging him toward the open area that was quickly filling with other couples and groups dancing along to the music.

But Stefan looked distracted, his eye caught by something out the bar's window. Emma followed his gaze and saw a stern looking man with a buzz cut, wearing a dark suit and standing next to a black car. Stefan sighed. "I'm afraid I have to go now - lots to do. Not all of us can bring our work to a bar," he said playfully.

At the mention of his own work, Emma realized that she actually had no idea who this guy was. "I'm so sorry, I've been so rude - all this evening we've been talking about me and my job, and I never even asked what you do!"

This seemed to amuse Stefan, who dipped down for another kiss before answering. "I'm Stefan Bauman, prince of Andbraus. I'm here to speak with tech leaders about an infrastructure project in my country."

"You're - what?" Emma tried to keep her jaw from dropping in shock. He was a prince!?

“I’ve had an absolutely lovely evening with you, dear Emma.” His accent was a bit stronger now, as if he had been deliberately keeping some kind of secret. He took Emma’s hand in his and kissed it, his hazel eyes never leaving hers, before disappearing out of the bar and into the waiting car.

Emma had an even harder time paying attention at work the next day. All she could think of was Stefan, his eyes, flecked through with green and gold, as they met hers. And his smell, which she figured must have been some cologne so expensive she hadn’t even heard of it. Most of all, she thought about the kiss they had shared, the press of his body against hers, his steady breaths, the way he’d held her close with warm, strong hands.

A prince! It was hard to believe. She read a little bit about Andbrarus online, letting herself imagine what it might be like to visit there, to stay in castles and tour stately gardens, all with Stefan at her side.

Emma was getting very far ahead of herself, she knew. Stefan had, like a fairytale prince, disappeared on her early in the evening, not leaving a phone number or any other way of contacting him. Did princes even use phones?

No, it was likely that she’d never see Stefan again. Still, their conversation the night before had made her wonder about something else. What if she actually left this job, with all the stability and career security it offered, and chased after her true dreams?

It would be foolish, she told herself. Of course he would encourage her to take risks and follow her passions - he was a prince! He had no idea what it was like to pay down student debt, or to worry about health insurance. Much smarter to stay at Broward and Waller, buckle down, and wait for an opportunity to move up the corporate ladder.

Still, it felt nearly impossible to get anything done, with her mind swirling. Between memories of the incredible kiss, fantasies about European adventures, and questions about whether this job really was right for her, she could hardly get through half the spreadsheets she’d already finished the night before.

Right after lunch - which she ate at her desk, trying to make up for time lost to daydreams - her desk phone lit up, letting her know she had an internal call from the lobby's front desk.

"Hello, Miss. Hartley?" The receptionist sounded perky, yet bored. "You have a visitor downstairs."

On her way down, Emma did her best to stay calm. Surely it was just a package being dropped off, or a client who got lost on their way up to her floor. If she let herself hope that it was Stefan, then she'd be crushed when the elevator doors opened to reveal a bike courier or a confused startup founder.

She couldn't help but break into a massive grin when she saw Prince Stefan himself, standing in the lobby of her building, holding a slim bouquet of golden flowers.

"My conference finished early," he explained, before giving Emma a chaste kiss. "I heard there's a beautiful drive up north of here, along the ocean, so I rented a car and hoped you'd join me for a seaside drive."

Through the glass doors of the lobby, Emma could see a sparkling silver Jaguar convertible. It would be perfect for Highway 1. She could almost feel the wind in her hair, almost smell the fresh ocean air.

"I'd love to," Emma said, "but...I still have to work to do. I don't think I can just leave in the middle of the day."

"Yes, that's something else I wanted to speak with you about. As part of the infrastructure program for my country, we're looking for someone who can guide growing businesses and help local entrepreneurs in Andbrarus become more competitive. Would you be interested?"

It took all of Emma's self control not to start jumping up and down in the lobby. Instead, she just turned to the receptionist. "Kelly, please let Mr. Broward know I won't be back for the rest of the day. Tomorrow, I can come clean out my desk."