

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a dark grey armchair. The woman, on the left, has long blonde hair and is wearing a white lace-trimmed top. The man, on the right, is shirtless, has a beard, and is wearing blue denim jeans with a large tear on the knee. He has extensive tattoos on his right arm and chest. They are looking at each other with affection. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**DIRTY LITTLE
VOW**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LISA RENEE
JONES**

Table of Contents

Dirty Little Vow
Dear Readers
Chapter Fifty-Three of Book Two
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Be the first to know!
The Necklace Trilogy
Also by Lisa Renee Jones
About Lisa Renee Jones

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DIRTY LITTLE VOW

Book Three in the Tyler & Bella Trilogy

BY LISA RENEE JONES

DEAR READERS

It's finally time for the conclusion of Tyler and Bella's story. You know I always like to bring you back up to speed so here are a few notes to help!

Tyler Hawk is the principal for Hawk Legal, which caters to musicians, authors, and celebrities. If elected to do so, Hawk Legal also plays the role of agent for its clients. Bella works for Tyler. She is an attorney and agent, and she brought her brother to Hawk. Her brother, Dash, is a famous author, who is an ex-FBI agent, who writes about an assassin he really hunted. Dash and Tyler formed a friendship. There are all kinds of reasons that make Tyler and Bella off-limits to each other, but the chemistry was always there. Tyler was a man who no woman enchanted until Bella came along, and despite staying hands off, no other woman would ever have a chance with him.

Then Tyler's father died. That's a whole other story that would be a spoiler to the Necklace Trilogy that came before this series so I won't talk about those details. But Tyler's father was an asshole to Tyler and he wanted to stick it to him one more time. He made Tyler's inheritance based on a condition of his will. Tyler had to marry by a certain time or he would lose the company, and the stockholders would take over. If the stockholders found out about the will, that too, would be a problem, and they could come after the company. If Tyler tried to go to court over the will, his father's attorney would release details of a scandal that would ruin Tyler, disbar him, and destroy the company. Way, way back, Tyler sat second chair to his father on a criminal case. Hawk Legal, at one point, handled criminal cases. His father claims he broke the law to get a member of the Allen family out of a murder conviction. The Allen family is a dangerous, powerful family, even more so than the Hawk family. To expose his father's actions on that case, which Tyler doesn't know anything about, could ruin the Hawk name and disbar Tyler himself, and stir up trouble with the Allen family.

But Tyler's father is dead. He knew when he wrote the will, he had nothing else to lose if it came to this.

Tyler can't even find the old case file so he starts digging into the Allen family because he's not sure his father isn't bluffing. He's also certain his father left him at least one more surprise to bite him in the butt. That surprise, in his mind, has to be connected to the Allen family. But the bottom line is that the easiest path to get out of this is for Tyler to find a wife. He needs a

fiancée and an extended engagement, per the will, first.

Meanwhile, the only woman on Tyler's mind is Bella, who is off-limits, but the attraction between them is hot and real.

The tension between them grows and they are hot one minute and cold the next, and that created a thin line between love and hate. The hate was winning, and that hate is exactly what pushed them over the edge. One night at the office, they had a confrontation, and they crossed the line, without going to the point of no return. However, they may as well have had sex. Nothing would ever be the same between them again.

The love-hate thing they have going on magnifies. They wanted each other. They are angry it isn't an option to actually act on these feelings and the universe is not on the side of their resistance. The two of them are forced to travel together to LA to negotiate a film deal for Dash, as they are in need of a good cop/bad cop routine. While there, they keep on fighting, right on into bed. Not only do they sleep together, they spend a weekend in bed together. But this is not just sex. They really want more—both of them—which is all new to Tyler.

But there is a big complication. Really big.

The will. He needs to marry.

He tells Bella what is going on, and that he's trying to get out of it. Ultimately, after much stressing over this, he knows Bella is the right fiancée. She is wealthy herself, without any need to work, but of course, her career matters to her. She would never screw him over. But if he asks her to do this, he'd be screwing her. She'd feel the world thought she slept her way to the top. Still, he has to ask her to do this for one reason—he can't ask someone else when he's in love with her. He can't have someone else on his arm and in his bed.

She's angry though, when he asks. Furious. And that's because he didn't ASK. He just presents her with a contract as if she were a business transaction. Needless to say, we all know the two face a challenge, but Tyler was not going to back down. He is trying to protect Bella but admittedly presents it in a horrible way. The two eventually work it out, especially when Tyler decides he just won't agree to the terms of the will. He's not about to pick another woman. There is only one woman for him. That's when Bella can't take it. She won't let him do this to himself or the company. She loves him too. And her brother, Dash, gives her good feedback. She's earned respect with her work. No one will really think she slept her way to the top.

The two come together in love and solving a problem, but Tyler has it in his mind his father has a gotcha planned. He keeps hunting for the case that is being held over him and researches the family in question. He needs another out just in case the partners come after him over the delay. What delay? He is required by the will to be publicly engaged for a certain period of time before marrying and fully claiming his stock.

The books end on a couple of big cliffhangers. The partners appear to come after Tyler and the crime family confronts Bella at gunpoint.

I'll start with those two scenes to bring you fully back into the story.

Happy reading!

—Lisa

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE OF BOOK TWO BELLA

Something is coming.

Something very bad.

I bounce through a few weeks of my official engagement to Tyler, where on the surface I'm living in a bubble of wonderful—a fairy tale where I find my prince charming, but deep down in my gut I can sense the calm before the storm.

I don't shake the idea that trouble is brewing, but I do enjoy this time with Tyler.

Starting with the wedding announcement that has everyone talking.

For a week solid, clients call, studios call, the staff gossip and many of them come to me to see my ring. When I'm asked how it happened, I tell them the truth. It happened over time. Remarkably the whispers are more about my ring than me sleeping with the boss. There is approval for our new couple status, and even more about how different Tyler is with me by his side.

Apparently, he only scowls half the time now.

I smile most of the time. The truth is, I'm different with Tyler by my side as well. Happier. More fulfilled. As cheesy as it might sound, I really do feel that together we are two halves of one whole.

Unfortunately, we have made very little progress when it comes to the will. Tyler worries about the partners, he worries about another will surfacing that is not in our favor. The more he talks about all the head games his father played with him, the more I worry he's right.

We've gone through all the Allen client information we can locate though and found nothing of substance, but Tyler is determined to go through every file in storage despite them stretching a timeline of a decade plus. It's an incredible number of files the firm has handled over time, and between Tyler's obsession with the threat of the Allen family case, and his relentless pursuit of another will, his life and work has been disrupted in a mammoth

way.

Along the way, Tyler hires a new secretary and fully moves into my place, and places his apartment on the rental market, with the intent to use it as an investment property. We've truly settled in together at the house, made it ours, not mine, and in the process, Molly has grown like a weed.

It's three weeks after our official engagement announcement that I decide Tyler needs an intervention. He has to take a break from everything to do with the will and run his company. One morning, I wake to find Tyler missing. With a groan, I eye the clock, to read the early hour of six am. *He's not resting*, I think. Not ever. This has to stop.

I roll out of bed, wrap myself in my robe, and shove my feet in fuzzy slippers, no doubt where to find Tyler and I don't have to go far. I exit the bedroom, pad down the hallway to his new office area and step into the doorway to find him shirtless, in his PJ bottoms, and sitting on the cozy brown chair to the right of the desk.

There's a stack of files in his lap.

"How's it going?" I ask.

He glances up, his eyes warming on me, before his mood transforms to stony cold frustration, his lips pressed together. "The same. It's the same, Bella." His voice is etched in utter frustration and it's hard to see the man I love struggling to claim the control he feels he's lost.

I close the space between us and slide to my knees in front of him, setting the files on the arm of the chair. "Just take a week off," I plea. "You'll see this thing with your father through different eyes, if you set it away."

"What if we don't have a week?"

"You originally thought that finding this second will you're sure exists—"

"It does. He would never come at me without a contingency plan."

"Come at you? You originally thought the second will ended the challenge. You'd inherit and all of this was over. Now your mentality has flipped. Now you think it's something that can be used against you. Why?"

"You knew my father, Bella."

It's really all he has to say. He's right. There's no telling what he might have done to trap Tyler, but I also can't help but believe we're missing a clue. When I bring this up to Tyler, he assures me he has someone digging around. "Is that smart? Because if your someone digs around in the Allen family business, that feels dangerous."

"He's ex-CIA. He knows what to do to stay off the radar." He stands up.

“I made coffee.”

In other words, no, he will not take a break.

“No to your stubbornness, Tyler. No to coffee. We need-”

He scoops me up and starts walking to the bedroom, where we will not go back to bed, at least not to sleep. This isn't the break I had in mind, but it'll do for now.

Tyler and I ride into work together, and I'm immediately pulled to my office for a studio call. When it's over, Tyler's obsession with the will is back on my mind and drives me to take actions and try to help. I pull up company records and then call Hawk Senior's retired secretary, Claire, hoping she can offer insight into where we might find an important document her old boss left behind. “Tyler's mother threw out almost everything of his father's,” I explain “There's a document that's missing we really need for litigation. Do you know where he might have kept personal items that I might recover?”

“That his wife wouldn't be able to get to? Probably his private club, the Brook Club, but the police most likely cleared out his locker long before now. I told them about it, too.”

It's not the news I'm hoping for, but at some point, surely Tyler can claim anything the police confiscated. Or not. The man did commit murder.

When I hang up with Claire, I dial Tyler. “Your dad had a locker at the Brook Club. Did you know that?”

He appears in my doorway with his phone in hand. We both disconnect and he shuts the door. “How do you know that?”

“I called his old assistant and told her we were looking for a document that is missing pertaining to a litigation. But she also said she told the police about it, so it might be gone.” I glance at my watch. “I'm meeting a client at the bookstore to review a contract over coffee. I need to go.” I grab my purse and round the desk and stop in front of him. “Withers has to know the truth about all the gotcha plans your father has for you, Tyler. Why not force him to tell you?”

“How?”

“You're resourceful. Figure it out. I know you can. I'll be back soon.”

He walks me to the elevator, but he's clearly distracted and barely vocal, still wrapped up in this problem and I have a sense of a storm cloud hovering over us, on the verge of a tornado. I'm suddenly extremely happy we're

headed to my father's rescheduled race this weekend. Tyler needs that break I begged him to take and this trip will force that on him.

I kiss him goodbye, wave as the elevator closes, but not before I spy one last glance at the man I love's haunted eyes, the lines of his handsome face pulled tight.

This has to end. I have to do something to help make that happen.

I just don't know what.

A few minutes later, I step onto the sidewalk, rushing to my meeting. I'm halfway there when a tall, good-looking Black man in an extremely expensive suit steps in my path.

"Hello, Bella," he says, a hint of perhaps a British accent in his deep voice.

I blink. "Do I know you?"

He lifts his jacket and displays a weapon. "No. But you're about to know me quite well. I'm going to need you to come with me."

TYLER

I've barely stepped back into my office after walking Bella to the elevator when one of the partners appears in my doorway. "We'd like to talk to you, Tyler."

"Who is we?"

"The partners. We're in the conference room."

This is not good, I think, and despite Gavin's recent good behavior, I can't help but think he's somehow involved. One thing is for sure, I'm not following this asshole ordering me around like he actually has that right or like a puppy who can be taught commands. I cannot. "I'll be right there," I say.

He hesitates and doesn't seem to know what to do because he's no man at all. And anyone who thinks they have balls enough to cross me, won't have any when I'm done with them. I stand up and walk to the conference room to find every single partner at the table. None of them will exist when I'm done with them. I step to the head of the table and sit down.

"What is this about?"

"We'd like to talk about your father's will." This from the little bitch who

thought he was a brave leader when he came and fetched me from my office.
He won't be brave when I'm done with him.

CHAPTER ONE

BELLA

I'm remarkably calm for a woman who's just now coming to grips with the fact that I'm standing in downtown Nashville, not two blocks from Hawk Legal, while apparently being abducted. The fact that my potential captor is a refined, good-looking Black man in a ridiculously expensive suit, who speaks with what sounds like an English accent, pretty much tells me all I need to know.

He's a professional, and for some reason, I'm allowing that to translate to him being just another attorney or agent, but he's not one of us. He's probably not an attorney at all. His job isn't legal or literary. It's criminal.

And still, my heart is steady and calm, and my adrenaline has yet to go bonkers. In contrast, mere weeks back, when facing down a studio head, battling for my brother's TV deal, my heart was nearly bursting from my chest. I really don't know why other than the fact that I'm the daughter of a daredevil NASCAR driver, and thanks to him, there's a gun in my purse I know how to handle.

"I'm going to need you to come with me, Bella," he repeats, a hint of impatience inking his otherwise refined tone.

"You know who I am," I observe. "Can I ask who you are?" I sound polite, but then so does he. It really does feel like Hollywood. Everyone smiles to your face, but the minute you walk out of the room, the red carpet is pulled from right beneath your feet. Which is why you handle your business with a contract, unless of course, there's a gun involved.

"Who I am doesn't matter," he replies, and I'm now certain he has an English accent, or perhaps Australian. "You, Bella, are the person who matters right now."

It's easy to assume this problem before me is connected to Tyler and his father's will, but with the big stars and powerful executives I deal with, I can't be sure. "You mean your employer is the one who matters," I say, digging for facts. "I'm going to take a swing and guess that's the Allen family."

His lips quirk, and his eyes—a shade I can only call steely gray—glinting with amusement. "Let's go have a little chat."

Blood rushes in my ears. The moment I leave this public place is the moment I may never see the light of a new day. “Where?” I ask, stalling, mentally processing what to do next. Scream? Reach for my weapon? Run?

“Not far,” he says, catching my elbow. “Let’s walk.”

I plant my feet.

His energy bristles. “It’s in Tyler’s best interest that we chat, Bella, and I’d like to think between the two of us, we can keep it nice and professional.”

Professional.

I’m good at reading between the lines. That word is meant to be a warning. He’ll kill me if it’s necessary, but it’s not just me he’s threatened. It’s Tyler, and that’s when reality hits. This is real. The danger is real.

He starts walking, still touching my arm, and this time, I fall into step with him, expecting to be shoved into a car, or worse, *the trunk* of a car, but that’s not how this plays out at all. We travel a few blocks, “not far” as he himself stated, when he directs us to a corner bar that I’ve walked past many a time but have never actually been inside.

My mind is back in a race, calculating a plan. I’ll ask to go to the bathroom, and text the name of the bar to Tyler. No, Dash. I’ll text Dash. Tyler will lose his shit over this. Dash is former FBI. He’ll be cool under pressure. He’ll get me back before Tyler ever has the chance to fret. And if “Oliver” gets smart and takes my phone, I can write a note in the bathroom to ask for help.

Maybe.

It’s an option.

But once we’re at the door, it’s with a stab to my heart that I realize there’s no name anywhere to be found to identify the establishment. My new “friend” pulls the door open and motions me inside. I step into a rather cozy, but extremely dimly lit spot, with high-back booths framing a bar. My captor steps to my side and motions toward the other side of the room.

I start walking again, and now I’m feeling the adrenaline. It’s darting through my blood, hyping me up, and I’m not sure why now, and not the moment I knew I was being abducted. I’m in a public place, not that trunk of a car I’d feared but then, there’s more to this stop than meets the eye. This location is obviously planned for a reason; perhaps he owns it, or the Allen family owns it. In which case, this would be a perfect location to kill me. The staff could clean up. He’d never even get blood on his fancy suit.

My fingers curl in my palms, and I’m thinking about my weapon again. I

could reach for it, just go for it, and this would end one way or the other in a matter of minutes. But what if this man, whoever he is, really does merely want to talk? Okay, not merely. Maybe he wants to scare us all to death while talking? If I reach for my weapon, this could get deadly, when it might otherwise simply be frightening and unreasonable.

I try to think about what my brother would do, what his stories say to do, what he has told me to do, and I'm pretty sure I should have screamed when we were outside, but at what cost to Tyler or even Dash? I should have reached for my gun in public, but I did not. Am I stupid? I think I am right now. My father and brother will torment me over how I've handled this.

If I survive it.

I draw in a breath at the idea, holding it, dreading what might come next.

Our destination is the farthest booth in the rear of the building, where the bar hides us from view of the front door. *The perfect place to kill me*, I think again. And clearly, he's not worried about who might walk in. The staff probably locked up after we entered. He motions for me to sit with my back to the door. Once I've settled onto the leather bench, I'm aware now that the high backs create the illusion of a secret hiding spot. A place where only we know what happens next.

Oliver joins me, claiming a position directly across from me. "This is cozy, isn't it?"

Cozy is not a word I'd expect to come from such an intensely male and formal man such as this one, therefore the word sounds patronizing at best, threatening at worst. He leans into the aisle and motions to someone, which can't be good either. With a leap of my heart, I unzip my purse, but before I can reach for my weapon, my moment has passed.

Oliver straightens to face me again, my spine is stiff with yet another rip of anticipation. Who is joining us? Who did he just invite to be a part of my "talking to"? That's when a pale-skinned mid-fifties woman steps to our side, an apron around her waist. "Sorry. I didn't see you come in. Can I get y'all some drinks?"

"The lady likes lemon drops," my abductor states before arching a brow at me. "Unless you'd prefer a Bloody Mary?"

Unease settles low in my belly at the mention of the two drinks I favor, which is no doubt his way of letting me know he's been watching and studying me. "I'll pass," I reply tightly. "Thanks."

"Two Bloody Marys," Oliver orders, his eyes locked with mine before he

glances at the waitress. “And some of that amazing spinach artichoke dip you make here.”

“Coming right up,” she replies and hurries off.

“Who are you?” I demand, deciding there is strength in confrontation, and I need to show strength. This table has to be a negotiation like any other, with the endgame being a peaceful resolution.

“Call me Oliver,” he urges.

“Oliver,” I repeat. “It doesn’t suit you.”

He doesn’t bite on my effort to get him talking, replying as if I had not spoken. “I want you to pull out your cellphone and hand it to me.”

Not yet, I think. “And if I don’t?” I challenge.

“Again, this is in the best interest of Tyler.”

My lips press together, and my heart thunders in my chest. *I don’t need my phone*, I remind myself. I have a sweet little Smith and Wesson tucked away in my bag. Almost as if he’s read my mind, he says, “It’s also in your best interest to leave your weapon in your purse. I don’t need you to hand it to me, but I do need you to be smart enough to stay alive. If I die, the people I work for will stop playing nice. And believe me, I’m the nicest this gets, Bella.”

Acid burns the back of my throat, and I decide his version of nice is likely the promise to kill you but make it fast and clean. After all, he wouldn’t want to bloody up his expensive suit.

I reach into my purse and offer him my phone. He doesn’t reach for it. Instead, he commands, “Unlock it.”

My jaw clenches. “Why?”

“Unlock it,” he repeats, his tone low but taut as a rubber band about to pop you right in the face.

I have no idea what he’s about to do, but it can’t be good. I unlock the phone and fight the urge to rebelliously text Dash, right here in front of him, everything inside me warns against it. I’m trembling inside when he motions for me to hand over my cell, but somehow my hand is steady when I drop it in his palm. He snaps a photo of me, and then starts typing. He dramatically taps a button, clearly wanting me to know he’s sent a message, before he removes my SIM card, and sets my phone face down at elbow length to himself.

My fingers curl on my knee beneath the table. “What did you just do?”

“I let Tyler know you’ll be late.”

I scream in my head.

No. No. No.

And yet, it's done. Tyler is about thirty seconds from losing his mind.

The waitress appears and sets chips and waters down in front of us. "Drinks coming right up," she says and walks away.

"Oliver" drops my SIM card in the water and then laces his fingers in front of him. "Now we won't be rushed. You can enjoy your drink."

I tamp down on my emotions and with good reason. Everything about his demeanor is calculated and I must meet that energy with my own. "What is this game you're playing?"

"One where you walk out of here alive with a new friend who might be an asset one day, should you need me."

"Because kidnapping me is how you make friends?" I challenge.

"I let you keep your weapon for a reason. I'd like this conversation to feel it's on even ground, a mutual meeting of the minds, meaningful in his content. Alternatively, this chat of ours can turn dark and nasty and do so in a blink of an eye. I don't think you're stupid enough to let that happen though, now, are you?"

The waitress reappears and our drinks are set in front of us, as is the dip. After a brief exchange between her and Oliver, we're left alone. He wants to play this game, and I decide doing so works for me. He talks. I find out things.

"Where are you from?" I ask. "England? Australia?"

"England. Home of James Bond. You know he isn't big on killing people. It's a necessity of his job at times. Call it the English way. Let's talk about why Tyler Hawk has been asking the wrong questions about the wrong people."

CHAPTER TWO

TYLER

“We’d like to talk about your father’s will.”

This from the dweeb who dared pull me into the conference room with the idea of ambushing me with a room full of partners. He’s a fool for forgetting one very important detail. I’m at the front of the room and head of the table for a reason. Not one of the thirty people in this room is in charge, but I am.

“Yes,” I say, “let’s talk about my father’s will.” I cut my gaze and speak to the room. “I am the principal and that will not change. But to be transparent, one of the terms of my inheritance was that I marry. Of course, we all know I’m good enough to beat that in court, but no, I’m not fighting it. Let me be clear. I’m not just engaged to Bella, I’m in love with Bella. She makes me a better person. She makes me a better leader. Would she marry me today if I ask her to? Yes. But I won’t. We’re going to plan one hell of a wedding because it’s what she deserves. Any questions?”

The room is silent, seconds ticking by before Sharon, one of the partners, says, “I believe him.”

Laura, another partner sitting next to her, chimes in, “I believe him.”

“Agreed.” This from Ned Riley, one of the senior partners.

From there, the entire room sounds off in agreement except for two people. The dweeb and a partner sitting next to him, who was most likely in the middle of this plan to take me down, right along with Gavin. I don’t so much as look at either of them. Control is everything. That’s what my father used to tell me but more so taught me, with his recent actions. The man cheated on my mother, killed the employee he was fucking to keep her from telling my mother, and then ended up dead.

He didn’t have one inkling of the control he swore was always his and in the palm of his ruddy little hand.

Control *is everything* and he forgot that somewhere along the way.

I press my hands on the sleek surface of the conference table, lean in closer to the group and say, “If no one has anything else, then let’s all go finish off what is headed toward a record-breaking month, and show everyone who we are, and that’s the best in the business. This sends the right message to our clients, studios, and publishers. We’re here to stay. This is not

the time to fight among ourselves and screw that up.”

Murmurs of approval fill the room, and with that, I say, “Meeting adjourned,” before heading toward the door.

I don’t look back. I don’t look at my phone. I walk at an even pace.

Control is everything.

It’s not until I’m in my office with the door shut that I dare breathe, shoving a rough hand through my hair and cursing. Gavin did this. He’s done. So are the two in the meeting who conjured up trouble. I walk to my desk, sit down, and pull out my phone to dial Bella, the one person I consider a confidant. There’s a message from her waiting on me and I retrieve it to find a photo of her and a message: *This is Oliver, and I represent the Allen family. Bella and I will be negotiating for the next few hours. She’ll be in touch when we come to terms. Don’t fret, Tyler Hawk. I’m a professional. I assure you she’s safe in my skilled hands.*

CHAPTER THREE

TYLER

Bella doesn't have time for me to be weak right now, which is why I allow myself about three seconds to freak the fuck out, and then it's all about actions that protect Bella. I run a rough hand through my hair and then check the time on the message, which is now twenty minutes old. That's way too long for me to feel good about the timeline and what could have happened to her between then and now. Dark thoughts start to form in my mind, and I quash them. They serve no productive purpose. They do not help Bella.

Hoping like hell for an answer, I dial Bella's phone, only to have it go straight to voicemail, her voice telling me to "leave a message" slices through my body and it might as well be steel on bone. I want to hit something right now, and I have to calm myself the fuck down. Action is what gets Bella back, the right kind of action.

Calm.

Cool.

Calculated.

I don't even consider calling the cops, who could either trigger the situation and they'll damn sure slow it down. And while I'm quite clear on Dash's FBI background, I'm also all too aware of the fact that he will come at this just as emotionally as me, and I'm barely holding my own shit together. I can't control him and me right now. My man, my fixer, is another story. Thank fuck Dierk is ex-CIA and on my payroll. As a giant plus right about now, I trust him. I screenshot the message from "Oliver" and send it to him.

The timing of my being pulled into that meeting and Bella's abduction does not sit well. *Gavin*, I think. He's behind all of this. I grab my phone on my desk, and buzz Sara, my new secretary. "Have security take Gavin McCloud into custody. He's not to leave until I question him."

"Understood," she replies. "I'll handle it immediately."

"Once security has him locked down, they need to call me. Then, and only then, have human resources process his exit, per his employment contract termination clause."

"Understood," she assures me again. "I'll update you in five minutes."

Just like that, we disconnect. And Sara officially earns an "A" for asking

absolutely no questions.

My cellphone buzzes with Dierk's number and I answer without prelude, "What do you know?"

"Nothing aside from the fact that her phone's not pinging. The last location she pinged was a few blocks from your offices."

It's not the answer I want from him. "I think it's the Allen family."

"That's an easy assumption to make," he agrees. "Give me a few minutes to look at the camera feed and process where I think we go from here. Have you called her brother?"

"No. He'll lose his shit."

"He's ex-FBI. He's not going to lose his shit until she's safe. And as to this being the Allen family? Taking Dash's sister seems a stupid move. You don't walk away from that without ensuring the wrong attention for the rest of your life. It's hard for me to believe the Allen family would be that stupid."

"And yet, I'm telling you, that's what they did."

"Call Dash. Time is critical. Between his resources and mine, we'll have a better chance of finding her before it's too late."

Too late.

Two words that when put together, cut me into tiny pieces inside. "I'm starting with Gavin. I got confronted by the partners right as she was taken. It feels connected."

"And you think he's behind it?"

"My gut says he is. Security is rounding him up."

"Which is fine. Talk to him, but call Dash first. I'm hanging up to work. Don't dismiss me on this, Tyler. Time matters." He disconnects.

I curse and dial Dash. He answers on the first ring. "What's up, Tyler?"

"I have a problem. *We* have a problem."

"We?"

"I've been digging into the Allen family. They're—"

"I know who they are. How do they translate to 'we have a problem'?"

"Hold on. I'm sending you a text." I remove the phone from my ear and shoot a copy of the text to Dash.

I give him about ten seconds and then say, "You have it?"

He's remarkably calm as he says, "I have it. What do you know?"

"I think Gavin, my legal counsel, is involved. It's all connected to my father's will."

“Which I’ve heard plenty about. Bella and Allie talk. A lot.”

“I’m aware. I have security taking Gavin into custody with the intent of talking to him.”

“Wait on me. I’m already walking out the door. What else?”

“I have a contractor who’s ex-CIA. He told me he can work with you, and he suggested it was a smart move. Her phone’s not pinging.”

“Text me his number. I’ll be there in five. I need to make a few calls.” He disconnects.

I walk to the credenza on the far wall, pull out a drawer and remove a gun safe, which is protected by a lock. I type in the code, remove the Glock inside, and load ammo. Thank fuck I’m trained, but my biggest fear right now is not finding Bella or her attackers.

My mind flashes back to just this morning. I’d woken up holding her, and just laid there thinking about how lucky I am to have Bella in my life. And how did this become my life, and why did I wait so long to make her mine? We’d made love—not fucked, *made love*—and then we’d shared some new coffee flavor she’d ordered. She’d watched me in anticipation as I sipped the blend and smiled when I’d approved. Never in my life did I think I’d share little moments like that with a woman and hunger for more. I love Bella like I didn’t know I could love. I should never have opened the can of worms that was the Allen family. I was so damn obsessed over what my father might throw at us, that I didn’t think about the danger I was creating for me and anyone I care about. I did this to her. I created this problem.

My gut feeling told me this was coming.

I was right last night.

CHAPTER FOUR

TYLER

Last night...

The room isn't quite as dark as my father's heart was when he was living, moonlight streaming through the windows of the bedroom I now share with Bella. I never thought I'd share a bed, let alone a life with a woman, but Bella has changed me, and for the good in every way.

I sit in the chair in the corner with the pup knocked out at my feet, a pair of loose-fitting sweats pulled over my naked body, and a drink in my hand. Just a few feet away, Bella is sleeping like an angel in the bed, her long, blonde hair draped over my pillowcase. I should be in the bed with her, holding her, but all I can think about is my father's will and his trickery. There is no way he'll allow me to just be happy with a woman and inherit, no matter what his will might have indicated. Not that I believe he thought me any more capable of love than himself, but he was anything but short-sighted. He'd have a plan to ensure no matter where I turned his hell waited on me. There has been no time in my life that he ever just let me just be happy, and the wake of his death is no different.

Bella makes me happy.

He'll have a plan to destroy her, because her demise is my demise.

I have to protect her. I have to find out what devious plan my father has for me and do so now. With a flip of my wrist, I down my drink and refill my glass. The pooch whimpers for my attention, and I give her a rub. Damn, I love this dog. How did I go from alone and liking it that way to *this*? Of course, Bella is the reason.

As if she hears her name in my mind, she shifts in the bed and rolls over, her hands reaching for me before she murmurs, "Tyler," and sits up.

"I'm here," I say, and she blinks into the darkness.

I know the moment her vision adjusts to the darkness and her eyes land on me. It's damn near impossible to believe just how much I feel for this woman. How aware I am of her, not just physically but emotionally.

"I see," she murmurs softly.

"What does that mean, Bella?" I set my glass down on the table next to me.

It's empty, of course, but I'm no alcoholic. Dash tried to shove me into that box, and so did Bella at one point, but I couldn't even find peace in a mind-numbing addiction. There was no escape, until I found Bella. No, until Bella became mine. Years of knowing her and not daring to touch her about drove me insane.

Literally, I almost lost my mind a few times.

She throws the blanket aside, settles her feet on the floor, and my T-shirt she's taken to wearing every night slides down her body. There's something about her in my shirt, as if she needs me touching her at all times.

I sure as fuck want to touch her, to lose myself and all this bullshit by burying myself inside her, but damn it, it's not that simple. Not tonight. Not when there's a clawing sensation inside me that tells me that I'm going to hurt her, or she's going to get hurt because of me. Logically, I know this is my father screwing with my head. He was a pro manipulator, and I was his favorite victim. My hands press to my thighs, and I silently curse in my mind, that's all about the maze I'm navigating with an invisible game board.

Bella settles on her knees in front of me, staring up at me with those sky-blue eyes that can't be muted by shadows when they're imprinted on my mind. "Hi," she murmurs.

Normally I'd say "Hi" back and tease her about a greeting right here in our bedroom but right now, her raspy, sleep-laden voice slides through me, and it is, as she is, the light in the darkness that is the soul of my father's son. How could my soul be anything but dark when my father was a monster who is still my flesh and blood? But while yes, Bella is the light that I desperately needed in my life, darkness eventually devours the light, and that means her.

Bella's hands come down on my legs, and I'm already hot and hard, with nothing but a pair of sweatpants and my T-shirt between us.

"Tyler?"

There's a question in her voice now, which says she knows me as well as I know her. Hell, she's the only person in my lifetime who has really known me. And she's aware I'm not in a good place right now. She also knows to let me talk when I'm ready. That's why the question.

But I'm not ready.

Tension knots my shoulders and the muscle in my jaw pulses.

I can smell her. I can damn near taste her, and the need I feel for this woman possesses a living, breathing life of its own. How do I walk away from Bella when she's this much a part of me?

That question represents the proverbial crocodile infested waters my father wanted to leave me to swim in after his death. It's all about the torment my father would want me to feel.

CHAPTER FIVE

TYLER

“Bella,” I murmur softly, and every emotion I feel is laced in that one word, in *her name*.

Her arm lifts and she reaches for me, and I find myself consumed by a sense of anticipation no other woman has even come close to creating in me. A moment later, her palm settles on my cheek and her touch is like a cool breeze in the burning hell that is my father’s making. Or maybe it’s my own. I let this happen. I didn’t have control. And the truth is, I was never worthy of Bella, but it doesn’t seem to matter.

I lean into her touch. I’m greedy where Bella is concerned, proven by the fact that I ever touched her in the first place when I had no right. She was my employee and Dash’s sister, but she was always so damn close, so damn out of reach, and yet so tempting. And that’s how I fell in love with her. I got to know her long before I ever touched her.

As she starts to pull back my hand covers hers, not ready for her to move it, not ready to allow her to leave. The day she does, the day that nightmare becomes a reality, will destroy me. “I should never have pulled you into this, Bella.”

“You didn’t pull me in, Tyler. I came willingly and you know it.”

“If I’d never touched you—”

“We were *always* going to end up here. Because this is where we belong. Together, Tyler, and we will be okay.”

She stands and I catch her waist, holding onto her and resting my forehead on her chest. She feels right in my arms and in my life, but I am my father’s son. And while I know I am not him, his fuck-ups want to become my fuck-ups. And right now, holding Bella, I’m worried for her and I don’t remember ever being this worried about anyone else in my life.

Her fingers tangle in my hair and my gaze lifts to hers. “What’s happening right now?”

“He might be dead, but he fucks with my head. What if I’m just like him?”

“You’re not like him, Tyler. I’ve known you for years and we spent hours upon hours talking when we were just employee and employer. And friends. We were always friends. I know you. So, I repeat, you are *not* like him.”

“I’m sure my mother thought he was perfect when she met him, too.”

“Stop doing this, Tyler. That’s a command.”

I pull back slightly and narrow my eyes. “A *command*?”

“Yes. A command. I don’t understand why you’re doing this right now. You beat him. You’re not just doing what he wanted, you’re doing what *you want*. We have each other. The company will thrive under you. We have this beautiful puppy at our feet, and we have each other.”

“Which is why I’m worried,” I explain.

Her brow furrows. “What does that even mean?”

“He always has a contingency plan. If one thing doesn’t break me, another will.”

“He thought getting married would torture you. *You won, Tyler.*”

“You’re seeing what’s on the surface, not what’s below. If he plans something that hurts you, I can’t even kill the bastard. If you get harmed—”

She presses her mouth to mine, and just that easily, I forget why I’m awake, if not just to feel her close and fuck her until she’s so damn sated she can’t help but sleep. Proof that my sense of right and wrong with Bella is present but muted to the point that it might as well be nonexistent. My arm wraps around her waist, tugging her closer. She reads what I’m asking for and climbs on top of me, her legs straddling my hips where I sit in an oversized, cushioned chair.

She catches the hem of her shirt—my shirt—and drags it over her head and tosses it aside. I don’t even have time to appreciate how gorgeous and perfect her body is before she’s wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning into me.

My fingers tangle in her hair and I drag my mouth to her mouth. “You know what I need right now.”

“Tell me,” she murmurs. “And then I’ll let you know if you have permission.”

CHAPTER SIX

BELLA

Sex is always Tyler's outlet. It's how he deals with the demons that haunt him, the demons I blame his parents for creating in him. It's how he controls life. It's always been how he controls life. And to Tyler, control is everything. It's his escape. And he needs an escape right now, a way out of his own head, but even after I've offered him the kind of sexy challenge that would normally distract him, at least for a little while, his will to worry is impenetrable.

For several beats, Tyler just sits there with me naked and on top of him, unmoving. He doesn't touch me. He doesn't kiss me. He just stares at me without seeing me or us. There's a tic in his jaw, tension radiating off of him, and burrowing inside me. He's out of his mind over his father, certain he will somehow reach up from his grave and kill me as he did Allison. I was certain I was inviting that wild, dark side of Tyler to fuck all his torment away, if only for tonight.

I ease back from where I lean into him. "Tyler?"

He doesn't react, and suddenly, I know what is going on. Suddenly, I know he's convinced himself he needs to create distance between us to protect me, and it pisses me off, but more so, it cuts me open. It hurts, really, really badly. I lean into him, my hands planted on his shoulders. "Stop what you're doing right now. *Just stop.*"

"Bella—"

His tone, his guilty expression, says it all. I was right. "I can't, Tyler," I murmur with my heart in my throat. "I really can't do this." I try to climb off of him, but he holds onto me.

I shove against him. "Let me go, Tyler. That's what you want anyway."

His arms snake around my waist. My hands are forced back onto his shoulders, and while I try to shove his hard body away from mine, I fail. "Stop. Let me go."

"You stop, Bella. Just stop."

"Seriously, Tyler," I can feel tears piercing my eyes, which only serves to anger me more. I don't cry—it's not what the daughter who lost a mother and fears for her NASCAR driver father does. People like me learn to be tough,

learn how to block things out, but I swear this man has the power to make me cry rivers and bleed oceans. “I can’t do this. You never wanted a girlfriend, let alone a bride. Your father knew that. He won. I lost.”

“Bella, baby. That is not what is going on. I don’t want out.”

“Let me up, Tyler. How many times do I have to say it? Let. Me. Up.”

“Please don’t make me do that,” he says, and the “please” is what gets to me.

Tyler doesn’t say please. That word gives me pause, and I curl my fingers on his shoulders, but I’m not calm, not one little bit. “Please what, Tyler? Please can you get out of this? Please can you—”

His fingers curl on my neck, under my hair, and he pulls my mouth just above his. “Please listen to me,” he says, and his hand covers my breast, sending a spiral of sensations through my body.

“I can’t do that with your hand on my breast,” I whisper.

“Yes, you can because my hand on your gorgeous breast tells a story you need to hear. I want you. I *need* you. I love you like I didn’t know I could love, Bella. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Are you? Or are you—”

His fingers twine in my hair, an erotic tug to his grip that has me gasping with the bite it creates. “You know why it took me so long to touch you?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Because I knew I’d never stop.” He’s barely spoken the words before he’s pulled my mouth to his, and he’s kissing me with possessive demand. And I can taste that part of him I once thought I’d never know. The part of him that lies beneath the hard, dirty-talking, sexy leader of Hawk Legal. The part of him that is human and fallible but somehow perfect in every way. And beyond all logic, I forgive him for the wall he slammed between us, if only for a moment, thankfully it was more a flimsy veil than it was steel.

But what if it’s steel next time? On second thought, I need to know he has the room to think, and that he chooses what he wants, what he really wants, not what is forced upon him by a legal document. I need to know that’s us. I part our lips, tearing my mouth from his. “I should give you space to think.”

“Do you know what happens when you give a man like me space he doesn’t want? You end up against your office door with your leg over my shoulder and me on my knees. I’m not walking away from you, Bella. And I’m not letting you walk away, either.”

The fingers of my hand splay on his cheek where they have somehow

landed, the heat in my belly sliding lower, but I still manage to push back. “You can stay on your knees and make me beg every day, but if I don’t think you really want to be with me, Tyler, I’ll walk away.”

His fingers twine in my hair and he tugs me closer, the bite erotic, shocking me into a gasp. “Try to run, baby. I will chase you across the world.” His tone is sandpaper rough and etched in emotion that is as arousing as it is convincing. But is it real? That’s the question, and I don’t know how to find the truth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BELLA

Before I can even think about what to say to Tyler, he drags my mouth to his and kisses me like there is no tomorrow. Like I'm leaving him or he's leaving me and I don't like it. I want to tell him so, I want to tell him all the reasons why, but his tongue...his tongue is magic, and his hand is still on my breast.

I moan with the taste of man and whiskey, and sink into the kiss, every ounce of anger and hurt transforming into need and hunger. Tyler catches my hands and presses them behind me, and onto his legs, the very act thrusting my breasts in the air. He pulls my hips forward, effectively deeming me captive and at his mercy.

I am no longer naked and ignored. His eyes are ravenous, his fingers plucking at my nipples, and I can barely take the trembling ache in my sex where I need him. Where I know he will never allow himself to be right now. Because it's about control. He felt me pull away. He felt he lost his place with me, and he wants it back. He lost nothing. I'm so here. I was always here, just afraid I was alone.

And then, Lord, help me, his mouth is on my nipple, his tongue twirling and teasing before he begins a deep suckle. One of his hands does a seductive slide down my body, and I'm panting when his fingers slip between my thighs, twirling my clit. I arch into the touch, and he rewards me by stroking my sex, and then slipping into me.

"You want me to lick you here, baby?"

This baby thing is not new, but for reasons I can't explain, tonight it's ridiculously arousing. Or maybe that's just his fingers. I nod, my teeth scraping my bottom lip and he says, "Come to me, lift your hips."

More than happy to oblige, I try, I do, but I can't get to him with my hands behind my back and all my weight on them as well. I collapse and moan. Tyler literally pulls me forward and up, until I'm lying flat on his lap and my legs are around his neck. Never in my life—oh...his mouth closes down on me and in this position, I feel vulnerable and completely and totally owned. His mouth and tongue are everything, and my hands try to grab onto something, but there's really nothing in reach. I'm so there already that I

tense up and swear ten seconds later I'm quaking with such fierceness, I feel the orgasm in every part of me.

When it ends, I sink down as low as my angle allows and pant out a breath. Tyler somehow lifts me—I don't even know how from where I'm resting—and the next thing I know, I'm on my back on our mattress, and when I lift up on my elbows, he's standing at the end of the bed, shoving down his pajama pants. And then he's naked, and Tyler is simply a perfect specimen of man, all long lines of sinewy muscle, with his thick erection jutting forward, thickly veined with his arousal. My mouth is officially parched with anticipation, not to mention, all the panting I was doing in his lap.

When his knees hit the mattress I sit up, catching his erection in my hand and leaning into him to lick the tip.

He groans in reaction and catches my head, surprising me when he tilts my face to his and says, "Not now," his mouth covering mine, kissing me deeply, the taste of whiskey now salty and sweet. When our lips part, he says, "That's you on my tongue, Bella, where you belong." And then I'm on my back again, and he's spreading my legs, settling between my thighs. The heavy weight of him pressing me deeper into the mattress as erotic as it gets. The feel of his cock pressed against my sex driving me wild.

His fingers dive into my hair, his eyes seeking mine as he forces my gaze to his, a mix of turbulent emotions and hot coals in his eyes as he says, "I need you, woman. How do you not know that by now? How could you think —"

I lift up and press my lips to his before I say, "Talk later. Please. I need—"

His mouth is on mine again, devouring me with a kiss that is everything and not enough. My body clenches, and I'm near desperate. I've had an orgasm without him inside me, and I need that problem remedied and I need it now. "Tyler," I murmur, and he slides a hand under my backside, angling my hips, and then slides inside me, driving hard as he does.

I'm back to gasping—this night is turning me into an expert gasper and my panting is top-notch, for sure. But how can I not do both? He's so very hard and thick, and every nerve ending in my sex is alive and performing exceptionally well. Or this is another of those maybes...maybe it's just him. I'm affected by Tyler, emotionally and physically, and the combination is explosive.

"Holy fuck, you feel good, Bella."

He leans in and catches my lip with his teeth, nipping it to the point that I yelp but then his tongue is there, laving the ache away. At the same time, he eases out of me, and when I arch upward, trying to bring him back, he trusts hard. He's all about my legs tonight, because he folds them into my chest and presses them to his.

His hands come down on my thighs and then he's driving into me. God, yes. More. Deeper. It's like he can hear what I'm saying in my head and it's a whirlwind of just wild, hot, body-to-body sensations until he's quaking, and I'm trembling again. Moments later, my legs are down with his body pressed to mine, and his hands framing my face.

"I love you, Bella." He buries his face in my neck and says, "Don't give up on me."

I catch his hair in my fingers and pull his gaze to mine. "Give up on you? Why would I ever give up on you?"

His lips press together, and he rolls to his back, staring up at the ceiling. "My first reaction to trouble is to pull back."

I lay there and digest those words. "Why?"

He looks over at me. "Because I don't know what else to do, and it's not a familiar or comfortable feeling."

This answer twists me in knots. I sit up and stare down at him. "I can't be in this relationship if your answer when things get hard is to split us up. Commitment isn't easy for me. I saw what it did to my father, losing my mother. I'm scared enough." I try to move away, and he pulls me down with him, on my side, and him on his, facing me, his leg draping over mine.

"You're reading me wrong. I'm afraid of losing you forever, Bella. I'm afraid of you getting hurt. I can't lose you." His words are ripped from deep inside and etched in torment. "I can't lose you," he adds.

Realization and acceptance slide over me, and my hand goes to his face. He's trying to control anything he can to protect me. "I'm not going anywhere. Not now. Not short-term. Not ever. We do this together, wherever your father's will leads us. And then we live happily ever after."

"Do you think that ever happens?"

"My parents—"

"Your mother—"

"It's like the Luke Combs' song my father told me just recently reminds him of my mother. *Even if I knew the day we met you'd be the reason this heart breaks. Oh, I'd love you anyway.* If he'd have known he'd lose her one

day, he'd still have done it anyway. Nothing is for sure, Tyler. I said I'd never take the risk, but I am willing now, for you. Are you for me?"

"Every moment of my life, Bella."

"Then no matter what happens, we have each other."

Sometime later, we're under the blankets with me resting on his chest, and I can hear him thinking. He still can't rest. He's still not okay. And that means we're still not okay. I snuggle in closer to him and vow to hold on tighter, as tight as I have to, to get us to the other side of the hell his father has forced on him all his life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BELLA

I wake the next morning to a slice of light through the window, and Molly whining for a potty break. Tyler is also wrapped around me, unmoving and holding me so tightly, I can't get up. "Tyler," I murmur. "Tyler, the puppy." I try to move, but he's not having it.

He groans and says, "I got her," and then he's gone, rolling away from me and climbing out of bed. I twist around to watch him pull on his pajama bottoms and then kneel down to love on the puppy.

A moment later, the two are gone, leaving me with a warm sensation in my chest and a twist in my belly. He'd be a good father, but no one would ever convince him of such a thing. He believes he's his father's son, and therefore destined to be a monster. It's why last night happened. He's too easily convinced I'm better off without him, and I feel like there is nothing but time that will show him otherwise. We just need this mess with the will to end.

And I'd go to the courthouse and marry him today, and do so in a heartbeat if I could, just to end this mess with his inheritance now. I don't need a big wedding or drawn-out engagement. But what either of us wants doesn't matter. His father made sure to drag this process out with a forced extended engagement that can't even be our own choice. And I'm not surprised one bit. He ensured lots of time for Tyler to feel unstable and unsettled.

I toss away the blanket, walk into the bathroom to brush my teeth, and throw on some shorts and a tank, before donning my fluffy slippers. Tyler still isn't back when I'm done, and I seek him out, locating him in the kitchen where he's busy making the coffee I was about to make myself. At present, he's filling the carafe with water, his shoulders bunching, flexing as he does, and aside from the fact that the man looks good—he always looks good—that tension is a sign his stress is not gone.

"I got it," I say quickly, before he can add the grounds. "I bought some new coffee I want to make."

He turns off the water. "I can do it. Where is it?"

"I know you have to be in early today. Go shower. I'll bring you a cup."

He places the carafe on the coffee maker and pulls me to him before kissing my temple. “I’ll start by brushing my teeth and then kiss you properly.”

“You did plenty of that last night.”

“About last night...”

“It’s over. Go. Get ready.”

He hesitates but ultimately, he walks away. I grab the bag of chocolate brownie coffee, get it brewing, and then love on Molly. Our pot brews super-fast, so I’ve barely had my fill of morning puppy-loving when it’s ready. I quickly doctor two cups the way we each like it, sample the product, and give it a thumbs up. With both mugs in hand, I seek out Tyler, finding him standing in the shower, water already off, with a towel wrapped around his waist. He’s speedy when he wants to be.

“Perfect timing,” I say, setting his cup on the counter.

He steps out onto the bathroom rug and grabs the cup, sipping. “It tastes like a brownie.”

“Yes, yes, it does. Do you like it?” A question I ask because he’s a basic grounds kind of guy.

“I actually do, but don’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my bastard image.”

I push myself up and sit on the counter. “I think you did that when you announced you love me enough to marry me.”

My cellphone rings and I purse my lips. “Only my father or brother would call me this early. I’m guessing my father. He always forgets what time zone he’s in.” I rush to the bedside table and sure enough, it’s my father.

I’m up early enough to spend fifteen minutes chatting with him, and promising to bring Tyler to his upcoming expedition race in Dallas that was rescheduled. When we disconnect, I walk back into the bathroom to remind Tyler about the race, and when he’s not in the bathroom, I step into the closet doorway and say, “My dad’s really excited about you coming to his race and —” I freeze when I realize he’s fully dressed in one of his custom blue suits, but he’s sitting on the bench, head down, with his tie hanging loose.

Warnings go off in my head. I was right about the tension in his shoulders while he was at the kitchen counter this morning. Last night isn’t over. He still wants to leave. “What’s going on?” I ask, my throat raw, my words raspy.

He lifts his head, his blue eyes tormented by shadows, and says, “I’m looking forward to your father’s race, Bella.”

I blink, confused as heck right about now. “Those words don’t compute. Not when I found you like...this. *What is going on?*”

He uncurls his perfect body, standing, before he closes the space between us but he doesn’t touch me. His hands plant on the door trim on either side of me. I stand there, waiting for him to speak, studying the handsome, tightly drawn lines of his face and holding my breath. Seconds tick by and just like last night, I find myself pressing him. “Tyler?”

“I can’t shake the feeling I had last night, like something bad is going to happen. I’ve never had a gut feeling this strong that was wrong, but I also never thought I’d really be lucky enough to call you mine. Maybe it’s my fucked up past. You were able to experience your parents living a happy life together before your mother died. I only saw marginally suppressed anger in mine. If I’m being objective, it could just be that.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, because while I can guess, I want him to tell me what he feels. “Just be *that?*”

“Maybe I don’t know how to be happy because until you, I’ve never *been happy*. And I don’t want you—and us—taken away from me, and my instinct is to find a way to control that idea and stop it from happening.”

“And yet you wanted to leave last night?”

“I need to know you are on this Earth alive and well. That’s all that was.”

My heart squeezes with the roughly drawn words, and the sincere torment in his eyes. I step into him and catch the lapels of his jacket. “Leaving me isn’t the way to do that.”

“I was never going to leave you. Convince you to let me hide you away somewhere until this is over, yes, but not leave you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Not to hide. Not to leave your side. I have a job. We have a life and a furry daughter.”

He cups my face and says, “I know we do. And I love this life with you, Bella.”

My hands go to his wrist. “Then just live inside it.”

“I’m trying. If I could just smash this feeling, I would be.”

“How about some whiskey in your coffee?”

His thumb strokes my cheek, a tender touch that leaves goosebumps on my skin. “If only it were that easy, baby.”

I don’t know what to say at this point. He’s *not* going to shake this, not overnight. Maybe not until this mess with the will is over. “I think our trip to see my father will be good for us both.” I catch his tie. “Let me do this for

you.”

He gives a nod and I make fast work of perfecting his knot. I run my hand down the silk and then walk to his tie drawer to remove a pin. “How’d you learn to do that?”

I turn to find him beside me, and I fix the pin inside the silk. “My mom had lots of formal events and my dad could never get his tie right.”

“I really am looking forward to spending time with him.”

“As a bonus, it will be a good photo op and we are supposed to have a high-profile engagement.” I scrape my teeth on my lips and tilt my chin up to meet his stare. “For the record, I’d marry you today if we didn’t have to wait.”

“Why don’t we?”

“Why don’t we what?”

“Get married now. No one has to know. It’s just for us. We’ll do the whole formal thing nine months from now.”

“Why?”

“Then if something happens—”

“Oh my God, Tyler.” I poke his chest and then point at the door. “Go to work. Go, before I get angry. Stop putting this crazy stuff in the universe.”

“Bella—”

“Go, Tyler.”

He grabs me and kisses the heck out of me until I’m breathless and panting. “I’m going to work.” He releases me and walks out of the closet.

I stand there all of a few beats before I rush after him, catching up to him right when he reaches the door. “Tyler!” And when he turns to look at me, I say, “I love you.”

He smiles the kind of smile that melts me where I stand. A genuine, charming smile and says, “Which makes me the luckiest man alive. Don’t think anything I’ve said makes me forget that. I love you, baby. See you at the office.”

And with that, he leaves. Molly jumps up on my leg and I kneel to offer her pets, but my mind is on Tyler. He’s a broken man, beaten by his past, by his father, but he hides behind a shell of arrogance, using control like an armor of sorts. It’s a bit like me pushing everyone away because I’m afraid of getting close to anyone.

This reminds me of something my father said to me at my mother’s funeral. *She was a part of me*, he’d said. *When I was down, she lifted me up.*

When she was down, I lifted her up. I don't know how to do alone anymore.

I've never forgotten his pain that day, or his struggle for months after her death. The depth of his grief was destructive. I thought I might lose him too. Subconsciously, I think I decided never to get that close to anyone. But it's too late. I'm there with Tyler, and way past turning back.

It's strange though. Despite everything that happened last night and this morning,

I'm not afraid now.

CHAPTER NINE

BELLA

Present...

Oliver watches me with intelligent, calculating eyes probably meant to unnerve me, but I've sat across from too many powerful people doing the same as he is now, to fluster so easily. I'm less worried about me and more worried about Tyler.

Did they take him, too? No, I remind myself of the photo Oliver sent Tyler of me. He—they, this horrible family—are tormenting him with me, and my heart hurts for the man I love. This has to be destroying him and the truth is, I don't know if he'll recover, not where the two of us are concerned, but I can't think about that now. I have to stay in the moment.

"I've read your brother's books," Oliver, if that's really even his name, comments oh so casually, and then sips his Bloody Mary, which throws him off his intended game. He points at his glass. "I didn't think I liked these, but it's pretty good." He sips again. "Or not. I still think I need a bourbon." He motions to the waitress, I assume. I can't see anything over the high booth.

She appears beside us, and he says, "Macallan 25 neat. Hell, just bring the bottle."

Her brow lifts. "It's expensive."

"So is dying without living. I'll take the bottle."

"All right," she says and walks away, while he refocuses on me. "You're not drinking."

I lift the glass and sip. "Happy?"

"Not with one sip. You're on edge and there's no reason to be on edge. We're talking while using our chat to send Tyler a message. Leave us alone, we leave you alone. Nobody has to die today."

No one has to die today, but they could. That's the message. Maybe I should cower, but the longer I sit here, the stronger I feel and I am my brother's sister. I've heard his stories and certainly if anyone has read his books, it's me. *Fear serves no productive purpose*, is one of his favorite sayings, both in his novels and in his life.

Calmer now and confident in my conversational skills, I charge forward, driving the conversation my way. "Did you read my brother's books before

or after you decided to kidnap me?” I ask, sipping my drink that is far more tomato juice than it is vodka, which I can handle without saying or doing something stupid.

He laces his fingers in front of him. “This isn’t a kidnapping. It’s a conversation.”

“Then I can leave?”

“Not yet.”

My lips press together. “Then it’s a kidnapping.”

He studies me a moment and then says, “Okay, you can leave.”

I blink. Did he just say I can leave? He did, but it’s a trick. I can feel it. I don’t move, and sure enough, he adds, “And I wish you and Tyler good luck navigating the Allen family and most importantly, their anger.”

And there it is. What I knew had to be coming. “Blackmail is not any better than kidnapping.”

“Is that what this is?” he asks. “Or is it a negotiation?”

“What are we negotiating?” I ask.

The waitress sets his bottle on the table, filling his glass before she seems to sense now is not a time for her and conversation. She walks away. Oliver sips his drink and says, “Weren’t we talking about your brother’s books? I think you asked when I read them. For me, it’s more about what they spoke to me.”

My brows dip. “Spoke to you?”

“You’re an agent. Don’t books speak to you?”

I don’t care to discuss my personal duties or opinions with this man. “What is your point?”

“I read Dash’s books before I ever knew you existed. I looked him up. I studied him. I admired him. I know how he is. I know what he’s done. I know he’s looking for you right now. I’m not looking to make an enemy out of him or Tyler. I just want to talk.”

I have a momentary flash of Tyler sipping our new chocolate coffee this morning and smiling at the taste.

I’d been ridiculously overjoyed at his reaction, with good reason. He’s lived behind a wall of seven layers of stone, where the alpha male in him would never drink chocolate coffee, but now he does. And now, I no longer have to shove aside that wall that was pure stone. Stone created by everyone in his life being out for themselves. They were never on his side in life, but rather against him. He never gave anyone a chance to be different until me.

I need to get back to him. And we need to just do as he suggested and get married, end this. We'll get past the engagement period in court. I know we will and then this is over. I should have pushed this, but I can't. Tyler is afraid his father's attorney will release the case file related to the Allen family and ruin all of us.

"Bella?"

At Oliver's prodding, I blink him back into view. "What are we negotiating?" I repeat.

"Both our best interests."

"All right then, let's talk about our best interests."

"I'm listening."

"Tyler's father represented the Allen family way back in the past."

"As did Tyler," he states.

"He was second chair, young, and left out of the loop."

"That's no excuse under the law, but then you know that. You're an attorney. I also do believe that if Tyler questioned this case, he'd open the door to every case Hawk Legal ever handled being challenged. Therefore, I'd caution him not to charge into 'do good' land and start trouble."

"Tyler doesn't want to challenge the case. His father used his will to threaten him with this case."

His eyes narrow sharply. "What does that even mean?"

"He stipulated that if Tyler doesn't marry in a certain period of time after a highly public engagement, he won't inherit. If Tyler fights this stipulation, his attorney, who happens to work for your clients, will release that case file."

"Then tell Tyler to suck it up and get married."

"It's not that simple. If it were, he and I would already have married, but Tyler's father liked to mess with Tyler's head. He was jealous of him. Tyler's certain that no matter what he does, his father has a gotcha planned." I don't pause. I keep pushing to get all I have to say out before he shuts me down. "The thing is, his father never thought Tyler would fall in love and happily marry. I feel like the gotcha got turned around, but Tyler just isn't sure."

He downs the rest of his whiskey in his glass. "What does Tyler think is going to happen?"

"He doesn't know, but what if the case file is released anyway? He can't find it anywhere. The way I look at it, this makes us allies, not enemies. We should have just come to you in the first place."

“Why didn’t you?”

“Tyler wanted to handle this and end it without trouble.”

“He failed,” he says, refiling his glass. “He failed in a big way. Proven by the fact that I’m involved.” He sets the glass down and leans close. “You do understand that when I’m involved, it’s bad. Very bad. Don’t you, Bella?”

CHAPTER TEN

TYLER

I'm pacing my office, waiting on confirmation that Gavin is in custody, when my cellphone rings with Kent's number on caller ID. Kent, being my head of security. I answer with, "Do you have him?"

"He left the building about thirty minutes ago."

Which would be right when I was called into that partner meeting, I think.

"Do you want us to strip his credentials?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I want the bastard to dare to walk back in our door."

"I'll make sure he's escorted to security if he's that stupid. What else can I do?"

"Come to my office." I hang up and walk to the window, fingers curling in my palms, my mind flashing back to the first big deal Bella had closed here at the company. She'd literally caught up with me as I stepped inside the elevator.

"I just sold Dash's book. Or books. Seven figures, Tyler. Seven figures!" The doors had shut, and she'd flung her arms around me and hugged me, holding onto me, in fact.

My cock had been at attention before I'd even processed what was happening. Her perfect body and soft curves were pressed against me of her own free will, and I was swimming in lust and the scent of her floral perfume.

"Thank you, Tyler," she'd said, and then tilted her chin up to look at me.

That's when what she'd done had hit her. Her eyes had gone wide, and she'd gone, "Oh, God. Sorry." She'd pushed away from me, and placed space between us, holding up her hands. "That was highly inappropriate. I'm so sorry. I was just...excited. And impossibly proud of myself. I haven't even told Dash, and I'm bursting with the joy of it all."

I'd just looked at her—the flush of her cheeks, the part of her lush lips, the blue of her eyes the color of a tropical sea—while telling myself not to grab her and kiss the hell out of her.

"Tyler?" she'd prodded.

I'd blinked myself fully into this moment, not the one where her breasts had been pressed against me, and replied with, "Why did you thank me, Bella? You made this happen."

“You gave me the opportunity. You trained me. My God, Tyler, you spent hours talking through my questions with me. Do I need to go on? My thank you was and is sincere.”

“You did this, Bella. Not me. You’ve proven yourself an asset to this company and your brother’s career. Which frankly shocks me, considering you don’t have to work.”

“Neither do you.”

The elevator had opened, and one of the front desk girls had been standing there. We hadn’t even pushed the button to go down. She’d looked between us and then said, “I can wait for the next car.”

Bella had used her comment to flee. “No. I’m getting off. He’s going down, I believe.” She’d exited the car then and she hadn’t dared look at me, because we’d both known there was more between us, something taboo that could never be acted upon.

But we did.

And she saved me in every possible way. Now, I have to save her, the way she did me.

There is no other outcome that is acceptable.

There is no other outcome I will survive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TYLER

Five minutes later, Kent—a man who stands six feet four, and walks around with as much muscle as a bodybuilder shoved in a suit—enters my office, with a scowl on his hard face. That scowl and those hard features got him the job as head of security. It intimidates people into calming the hell down which in turn, means he isn't forced to resort to violence. Today, Kent can be as violent as he fucking wants to be, if it gets Bella back.

“What’s going on?” he asks, his voice low, despite the fact that we’re standing in the center of my office with the door shut.

I might have hired him for his scowl, but I’ve kept him for five years based on his skills and discretion. I open my mouth to fill him in when my door bursts open and Dash appears in the archway. He’s a big guy as well, athletic, and always dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, paired with boots. He’s also good-looking, famous, talented, and rich enough to have every woman in the building panting over him, which is clearly how he got past my new secretary.

“Where is Gavin?” he demands, stepping inside and slamming the door shut. He motions toward Kent, who he’s met at several company events. “Do you have him in custody?”

“He left the building by the time Tyler called me,” he explains. “And that’s all I know.”

“Bella’s been taken,” I say, handing him my phone with the text message. “My private security contractor is checking the exterior cameras.”

Kent curses and scrubs his jaw. “Holy hell. I’ll have my team review the security footage to see if he followed Bella out of the building. Are we calling the police?”

I eye Dash who shakes his head. “Not yet. They’re like iron shackles, we can’t afford right now. Speed matters.”

“Agreed,” I say, and I motion to Kent. “Get us an update and let me and Dash talk.”

He gives a nod and walks away. The minute he’s gone and we’re alone, Dash steps in front of me. “I talked with your man, Dierk,” he says. “Whoever took her knew where to walk to avoid being caught on camera. He

lost her about two blocks away. He has his men scouring the area for her and Gavin.”

“Does he even know what Gavin looks like?”

“He pulled up his driver’s license while we were on the phone. I have a couple friends from the agency at work, too.”

I can officially size him up as calm. A whole lot calmer than I expected and feel.

“Time is critical but so is knowledge,” he adds. “You have it. I do not. Tell me everything. Start with the Allen family, who Dierk tells me you both think is involved.”

If only it were so simple, I think. I feel as if I’m standing in quicksand and sinking fast. I rotate to sit on the edge of my desk, my jaw clenching. “I’m assuming it’s them,” I confirm. “But I don’t know.” I glance up at him. “That’s the problem. *I don’t know*, Dash.”

He’s directly in front of me again, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “If that’s where your head went, it’s a solid start. Talk to me. Leave out nothing. Start with what you think I know and tell me anyway.”

“I’ll start with what you don’t know. Bella is why no one else would do. The moment I met her, she was the only perfect woman walking this Earth.”

“I know, Tyler. I always had an idea, but I see what you have between you.”

“My father is between us. You know he was a bastard, always coming at me, and death didn’t end that obsession. He didn’t just dictate my wedding, and length of engagement. He stipulated the recourse should I fight his will in court. If I take action, his attorney will go public with a case I second-chaired that he said showed misconduct. In other words, my license could be revoked, every case the firm handled would be questioned, and we’d be sued by dozens of people.”

“That case related to the Allen family,” he assumes. “But isn’t that a non-issue considering you and Bella are in love and getting married?”

“That’s what Bella said. She thinks I got one over on my father because I fell in love and want to get married.”

His eyes narrow. “But you don’t?”

“I want to believe she’s right, but my gut says no. And my gut is solid. It’s telling me my father always had a gotcha puzzle. He expected me to figure it out as a way to prove myself worthy. I’m telling you, Dash. He didn’t bring up the Allen case for no reason.”

“And you started digging around?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Are you fucking crazy? They’re practically the mob, Tyler.”

“Dierk is ex-CIA. I used him for that reason, but ignorance is not a win.”

“Yeah, well, the Allen family is on the FBI’s radar and has been for years. That’s not comforting and while I lean toward you being right, that this is about them, tunnel vision is also dangerous. Very quickly, spit out at least one more option. If it’s not the Allen family, who did this?”

“An angry client, but no one comes to mind.”

“One more.”

A thought hits me and it’s not a good one. “My father could have hired the law firm to spook away anyone who agreed to marry me, thus the long engagement.”

“Would he hurt her?”

“I would have said no a year ago, but he killed Allison. If he paid enough, could he have her killed? Could he have hired a professional?”

“Do you really think he hated you that much?”

“Yes. For all I know it’s all connected. He claims he got the Allen family off by withholding evidence. Maybe they’re coming after her, not because I’m digging around, but because he paid them to do it. Or they owed him.”

“How far would he go to hurt you?”

“If you’re circling back to will they kill her? My father dated the same woman I dated and then killed her to shut her up. He was crazy enough to do just about anything. We need to find Bella and find her now.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

TYLER

Death is a monster that guts you and ravages you, inside and out. I've felt its icy touch close around my throat and it is the most brutal grip of any I have ever felt. First with Allison, the woman who I dated and then who dated my father. The woman he killed. Then with my father. I cared for her. I hated him.

I love Bella.

I'm suffocating in the idea of her not coming home, and Dash is staring at me with hell burning in his eyes. "I don't like where my head is going right now," he says.

"I'm right there with you," I assure him.

"Who can call this off, whatever *this is*?" he asks.

"My dead father."

"Who else? His attorney? Reach out to whoever that is."

"Here's the interesting part about this entire fucked up situation," I say on that dirty little topic. "My father's attorney—yes, the one handling the will—has worked for the Allen family. This information brought to me, and now you, compliments of Dierk. This is all connected. That very same attorney is the one threatening, on my father's behalf, to release the Allen case file, which for the record, makes me believe there is no case file. I sure as fuck can't find it."

"Then it's all smoke and no flames?"

"Rarely was my father mere smoke, as proven by him killing Allison to shut her up and keep her from talking to my mother." I grab my phone and dial the law office of Jones, Jackson, and Withers. "But let's see what the old buzzard has to say." The line rings and when the receptionist answers, I ask for Withers. "He's already gone for the day," she says.

"Call him," I say. "Tell him Tyler Hawk called, and if anything happens to Bella, I will never stop coming for him. He knows what's going on. I know he knows. I also know he's involved." I disconnect.

"Do you think he'll call?" Dash asks.

"I have no fucking clue. He's part of a game a dead man is playing. Frankly, all that matters to me right now is that Bella doesn't end up in a

grave too.” I dial Dierk on speaker, and when he answers, I say, “I’m with Dash. Anything?”

“Nothing worth hearing,” he replies. “We’re still going through the feed. I have my team looking for suspicious behavior and actions, even beyond Gavin himself. Anything from your people, Dash?”

“Nothing,” he says. “But it’s only been fifteen minutes that feels like a lifetime since I spoke to them.”

“Do we know where Gavin is right now?” I ask.

“We’re pinging his phone now. I’ll text you his location the minute I have it. More soon.” He disconnects and I curse.

“I haven’t actually called Gavin myself. Holy hell, how stupid am I?” I punch in his auto-dial and allow the line to ring on speakerphone. He shockingly answers on the first ring.

“Where the hell are you?” I ask.

“I’m at the courthouse. I know a lady in records. I trust her. She’s going to dig in the archives for the case file and no, it won’t get back to anyone. She’s a family friend, and I don’t know why I didn’t think of her in the first place.”

Dash squints in a “what the fuck?” expression and I’m right there with him. He appears oblivious to everything that’s happened. I’m not sure I believe him. “When will you be back here?”

“I just finished up. I’m headed back. Why? What happened now?”

“Meet me Cupcakes and Books in fifteen minutes.” I disconnect and eye Dash. “He’s just the kind of arrogant prick who would stand in front of me and lie.”

“But will he stand in front of both of us and lie?”

“While wetting his pants,” I assure him, and text Dierk: *I’m meeting Gavin in fifteen minutes at Cupcakes and Books, if he shows. Send one of your men but have him stand down until I say otherwise.*

I slide my phone into my pocket. “Dierk is sending one of his men to meet us in case we need him. If we find out that Gavin’s a part of this, he might not live to see another day if I don’t have someone to intervene.”

“Amen to that, brother,” Dash replies. “Amen to that.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TYLER

With Dash to my right, we walk toward the coffee shop in silence, both of us striding long and heavy, and for my part, my mood is as stormy as the weather. The day is chilly. The strong smell of rain permeates the air, the heavy, gray-stained clouds above promising a downpour, but any bad weather we might endure is nothing compared to the turbulence of my clearly unchecked emotions. For a man who is all about control, the idea that Gavin is my best next step in Bella's return is as good as quicksand under my feet. I'm drowning in her absence, our lack of answers and options, and downright suffocating in guilt.

We pass a jewelry store where Bella often sneaks peeks at the sparkling gemstones in the window, and it's like a stab in my gut. Her birthday is almost here, and I just bought her a necklace she's admired from that store. If I never get to give it to her...I stop myself from going there. I *will* give it to her. I'm just letting this walk fuck with me. And how can I not? At least several times a week, Bella makes this trip to Cupcakes and Books, as she most likely did today. Even now I scan the area, looking for her, a desperation in me that is nothing I have ever known, but everything consuming me right here, right now. Dash curses next to me, and I follow his gaze to a blonde female on the opposite side of the street, a flicker of hope filling me until I realize what he obviously already has. She's not Bella.

We're both praying she will step out of some quaint little store, as she would call it, and the world would be right again.

Dash's cellphone rings and I glance over at the exact moment he eyes his screen and declines the call before shooting off a text message. "That was Allie," he informs me, casting me side-eye.

Allie being his wife and my employee, as well as Bella's close friend. "I'm not telling her what's going on," he adds. "Not yet. She'll freak out and get in the middle of this, and I don't need her in the line of fire. I won't put her in danger, too."

But I put Bella in danger.

Intentional or not, that's the implication of the words that just came out of his mouth. The moment I crossed the taboo line with Bella—my employee,

his sister—I made her a target of my enemies, the biggest of which was my father. *Still* is my father. It's as if he is reaching out of his grave and wrapping his hand around her throat, and choking the life out of me, with her.

She has always been the perfect woman who deserved better than me and my fucked-up family. I knew that. I knew, and I went there with her anyway. If I'm honest, despite three years of trying to prove myself wrong, I was always going to go there with Bella.

My mind travels back in time to the night I'd met her. She'd applied for a job as an attorney, willing to learn and take on agenting duties. My assistant had quickly figured out who her mother was or had been—the founder of Alice's Home Shopping Network. Bella didn't need a job. I was skeptical but intrigued. But I'd been buried in work, too buried for anything but an after-hours interview. It was almost six in the evening when Bella had arrived to meet with me, the day winding down, the office clearing out even if I was not. When my secretary announced Bella and led her into my office, I'd instinctively stood up, and the minute my eyes had landed on her, I felt the punch in my gut. There stood a petite, beautiful little blonde goddess with lush curves and sea-blue eyes, who despite her tiny stature, oozed as much pride and confidence as her CEO mother once had.

She'd enchanted me when I'd have sworn that to be an impossible task. After all, at that point in my life, I'd had my share of gorgeous women, even intelligent, gorgeous women, but they all saw me as their money ticket, their ride to comfort and a luxurious life. But Bella was different. She had her own money, a famous NASCAR driver for a father, and a mother who set the standard all women wanted to live up to in business. She didn't need my money. She didn't need to work. And yet, she came out fighting for the job and for her own individual success.

I can't even remember how many late nights over the past three years she's knocked on my door and poked her head in when no one else dared disturb me. "Can I run a negotiation by you?" she'd ask.

I came to look forward to those late evenings, but I never asked her to drinks or dinner. I never touched her. I never crossed a line. I wanted to, but looking back, my restraint with Bella was miraculous. That is, until my father died, and she showed up at my apartment.

It was the night that everything changed between Bella and me in ways I'm not even sure she fully understood.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TYLER

That night, the night that ultimately changed everything between me and Bella, I'd been coming out of my own skin, tormented by both my father's life and death when my doorbell had rung. The next thing I'd known, there Bella was, standing at my door, trying to get me to not only let her in, but invite her to stay. And she did. She made me watch a damn chick flick and all I could do was sit there and think about stripping her naked and taking her to my bed.

Impossibly, at some point, I'd dozed off, almost as if she was as much the adrenaline in my blood as she was the salve to my soul. While I was out, she'd apparently chosen to enter my bedroom to use my bathroom. Adrenaline had surged through me with the realization that her actions were filled with intent. She knew she was pushing me, and at a time that I was standing on the edge of a cliff, barely hanging on, and trying to convince the world nothing was further from the truth.

I'd been hot and hard with a strong dose of furious, and my mind goes back to that night, reliving the confrontation that should have ended us before we started. I remember looking around the living room, the scent of her—all sweet and floral—everywhere around me while she was nowhere to be found.

I'd figured out pretty quickly she was in my bedroom, or rather, my bathroom, and the way she was tempting me, pushing me, and on the day of my father's memorial, had sent me over the edge.

I'd stepped to the door and knocked, the thundering of my fist on the wood no match for the pounding in my chest or the throbbing of my cock. The door had swung open, and Bella had appeared, still fully dressed. Not that I expected her to be naked or in lingerie, but there had been no doubt that night she'd meant to tempt me. The sexual tension between us by that point—and well before that night—had been palpable, and there was no easy way for me to do the right thing in the state of mind I'd been in. The truth is, the mix of disappointment and relief I'd felt had not been pleasant nor had it done anything to eliminate my anger, but rather spiked it right over the top.

I'd come at her hard and fast. "What are you doing in my bedroom?"

Her beautiful blue eyes had gone wide, a blush rushing over her otherwise

pale skin, creating a blood-red stain that traveled down her neckline and disappeared under her clothing. I'd really wanted to know just how far down that color had traveled.

She'd stumbled over her reply. "Ah—I couldn't figure out where the guest bathroom was. I had to go badly and...I'm sorry."

We'd both known it had been a bullshit answer. There was a guest bathroom right beside my bedroom door. She'd wanted to check out my room. Maybe she'd even wanted me to find her in there, which now, I can say, she most certainly did. "Coming here was not a smart decision," I'd reprimanded. "You need to leave."

"You're being a jerk," she'd snapped, and I swear I'd gotten harder, as if that were even humanly possible. I'd been hard as steel already.

"Yes, well, you can choose if you hate me before or after your legs are wrapped around my neck, Bella. Because that's what's going to happen if you don't leave now." I'd taken an intentional step backward, which had been an invitation for her to exit the room.

In typical Bella rebellion, her spine had straightened, and her chin had lifted. "We're friends."

Oh, that had set me off, but then we'd been one big time bomb ready to explode. "Friends don't fuck, and that's exactly where my head is right now. I told you. You have two options—"

"I heard you," she'd interrupted, a whip to her tone. "I don't need to hear it again. I'll leave. You're being *a bastard*."

"Because I am a bastard, Bella," I'd reminded her, no denial in me. After all, my prick of a father had just killed a woman I'd once dated before ending up dead himself. "You've been warned," I'd added, "I won't warn you again."

That's when she'd stepped out of the bathroom and stopped in front of me. *Stopped*. No running away. No desire to escape me. I'd been so close to pulling her to me, to fucking away all my pain and torment right then and there, only it would have destroyed us and that friendship she'd declared. The way my father destroyed everyone around him.

But she hadn't swung the bat I'd handed her. "I said, you're *being* a bastard," she'd rebutted, "not that you *are* one. It's too bad you don't understand the difference." With that, she'd marched out of the room, and without turning, I'd known when she'd exited the bedroom. I'd felt the shift in the air. Beyond reason then and now, I've always felt when Bella came or

left a room. I'd saved her that night, protected her from me and the ruin that would be our hook-up, but not forever.

My selfishness won.

After that night, she was mine. There was no other way it could end.

And now, she's paying the price.

We're coming up the side of Cupcakes and Books when my gaze lifts to land on Gavin as he crosses the road and heads in this direction. The rush of adrenaline that overtakes me is as potent as anything I have ever felt. He's a part of this, and I see nothing but fury. He is not making it into the bookstore, he is going to take me to Bella.

"Gavin!" I call, and when his attention turns in our direction, he looks between Dash and me, and there is trepidation in his stare.

That's all it takes to push me over the edge. The minute he joins us, all restraint is lost. I grab him and throw him against the wall, his briefcase crashing to the ground, my hands on his shoulders. "Where is Bella?" I demand.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TYLER

“What the hell, Tyler?” Gavin demands.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Dash murmurs, stepping close to me. “You’re getting attention we don’t need.”

He better be playing good cop/bad cop, I think, or he’s next to hit the wall and my fist. I cast him a side-eye. “Don’t make me regret calling you, Dash. He knows where she is.”

“What the hell, Tyler?” Gavin asks. “Come on, man. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“If the police get involved,” Dash warns, “this becomes a shit show, and we risk never getting her back. Let him go, Tyler. He’s here. He’s willing to talk. That’s what matters.”

Gavin’s hands are up in surrender mode. “I really don’t know what this is, Tyler, but I’m on your side. I’ve always been on your side.”

“Tyler!” Dash snaps. “Let him go. *Now*. There are people watching us.”

The spike of adrenaline running through me is like hot lava, thickening in my veins. *Control*, I remind myself. It might be my father’s lesson, but also one he seemed to think I learned too well. He was always trying to break me. He’s still trying to break me, and I won’t let it happen.

I might want to throttle Gavin, but I force myself to let him go and take a step backward. “Now start talking, Gavin,” Dash orders, picking up his briefcase and handing it to him.

Gavin snaps it out of Dash’s hand and slides it over his shoulder, his teeth grinding. “I don’t know how many ways I can say *I don’t know what the fuck is going on*.”

I reject his bullshit. “Playing stupid is an easy way to end up back against the wall,” I say. “The partners called an emergency meeting and questioned me over the will and my controlling interest. The minute I shut that crap down with the validity of my relationship with Bella and returned to my desk, I got this.” I remove my phone from my pocket, pull up the message, and hold out my phone.

He stares at the message and his eyes go wide. “Oh, shit. Oh, shit.” He looks between us. “You can’t think I’m in on this.” His attention settles on

me. “Tyler, I’m a pain in your ass, but with good intentions. I don’t want you to lose the company.”

“You mean you don’t want to lose your position in the company.”

“Of course, I don’t,” he admits. “And that means you retain your holding. I’m not in a better position with you gone. Why do you think I went to the courthouse today? You finally sealed the deal with Bella, but you’re still so damn certain that your father has a surprise planned, it’s making me nervous.”

“And yet, up to this point you didn’t want to talk about the Allen family,” I point out.

“It’s not that simple, Tyler,” he replies.

“No?” I challenge. “Why not?”

“Let’s go inside and talk,” Dash interjects. “We still have an audience from several directions.”

“I’m fine with that,” Gavin replies. “If Tyler is willing.”

“I’d rather you just spit it out, but yeah,” I say, “I’ll go inside, but know this: if I figure out you had something to do with this, you might not leave the building alive. You still want to go inside?”

“I do,” he says without hesitation, “because everything I did that pissed you off was done because it’s my job to do right by you, even if you’re stubborn enough to hate me for it.”

He speaks every word of that statement while looking me in the eye. Liars don’t look you in the eye. Fuck me. He might not know where she is, and where does that leave us? “Let’s go talk now and quickly.”

“Yes,” Dash agrees. “Quickly.”

I take another step backward, just far enough to allow him to rotate and start walking. “You first,” I say, my lips thinning. “I promise to be right behind you.”

There is a flicker of discomfort in his eyes that tells me nothing. If I had Dash and me breathing down my throat, I wouldn’t be half as submissive as he’s being right now. And Gavin isn’t a guy I’d call submissive. That could mean any number of things, which I’ll figure out inside. He rotates on his heel and starts walking.

I can feel Dash compelling me to look at him, but fuck that shit. I’m waiting for Gavin to start running and show me he’s a little bitch. Then it’s gloves off and screw whoever is watching. I can feel the pump of adrenaline start to flow again. I want him to run. I take a step forward. Dash catches my

arm. “He’s not going to run,” he murmurs softly. “I don’t think he’s a part of this, which means we’re wasting time with him. We need to find out fast and move on.”

It’s not what I want to hear, and I’m not nearly as convinced as he is that Gavin is innocent of wrongdoing. Dash might be a former FBI agent, but I’ve known Gavin for years, and as of late, seen how he’s pushed me to act in his self-interest. I jerk my arm from his and start walking. Gavin is in my sights. He’s all we have right now, and I’m not ready to write him off.

Dash curses and falls into step with me, right as Gavin turns the corner. I’m pumped up and ready to take him down when the doors chime as he enters the bakery side of the store. I’m actually disappointed. I want to hit someone, and he is as good as anyone right now. I follow him inside. Adrianna, one of the owners, is behind the counter and waves in my direction.

Gavin pauses and glances back at us as Dash halts by my side and motions to his favorite corner table. “I’m going to find out if they’ve seen Bella,” I say, not bothering to wait for an answer. I stride to the counter, only to be greeted by Adrianna. She’s a pretty woman, with warm mahogany skin and a beautiful smile she offers me now.

“How are you, Tyler?”

“Have you seen Bella today?”

“No. Why? Is she—I mean, why are you even asking that question?”

“Just call me if she shows up. It’s important.”

Her brows furrow. “Everything okay?”

“No. Everything is not okay. Tell the staff, too.”

“Yes. Yes, okay. Do you need anything at your table?”

“Nothing.” I pull out my money clip and stick a hundred-dollar bill in the tip jar. “For taking up your space.” I give her a nod and turn back to the seating area, to where Dash and Gavin are sitting face-to-face, and glance at my watch.

It’s been almost two hours since that text message. What if two hours and ten minutes is when her captor kills her?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TYLER

I walk back to the table and watch as Dash takes a call, which of course, is about Bella. My pace quickens, urgency driving my steps. Whatever he knows, I need to know. When I arrive at the table, I slide into the seat that places me in the middle of Dash and Gavin. Dash ends the call and flicks me a look. “No word on Bella. Nothing on the cameras my guys can find that Dierk’s did not, but they’ve connected now and they’re sharing resources.” He then glances, oh so casually at Gavin, and asks, “Do you own a burner phone, Gavin?”

Dash is intelligent, a man who writes bestselling novels, but it’s easy to read his past on the pages of his books. He stood toe-to-toe with the most lethal of killers every day of his life until he left the FBI. He’s smooth and knows how to take people off guard, and based on his question directed at Gavin, I want to know what was said on that phone call with his people more than ever.

I angle toward Gavin. “Yes, Gavin,” I say, “do you own a burner phone?”

Gavin bristles. “I don’t own a burner phone because my work is legit, and I’m not involved in any of this.” He shifts toward me as if he’s inviting me to read him. “The Allen family is trouble. I never liked the idea of you digging around in their history and this—what is happening now—is why. They have a reputation for making people pay for crossing them.”

“And yet you went to the courthouse to get that file,” I point out.

“You weren’t letting it go. And the more I thought about the Allen family, it made no sense to me that we couldn’t find the file that pertains to this case your father is threatening you with. I asked a favor from a friend to help us compare what we have to what is on record.”

“And?” I ask.

“If any case file exists, it’s been wiped from the archives.”

I sit back and breathe out. “Damn it.”

Dash glances between us. “What does that mean to both of you?”

I look skyward and then eye Dash. “It means most likely there were some underhanded actions on the case and my father, who believed in leverage, expected the Allen family would make the files disappear.”

Dash turns his attention to Gavin. "Did they?"

"I'd bet Hawk Senior beat them to it. Then he held them captive if they ever tried to cross him."

"He was smoother than that," I argue. "He would have stolen the file, handed it to them, and kept a copy. He'd have sworn he did not, but they'd suspect he did."

"And when you started nosing around," Gavin follows, "they weren't having it. I'm telling you, they did this. They have Bella. Has there been any communication? Have they asked for the file?"

"Nothing," I say. "Not one damn little thing. And as for the Allen family and your assumptions, Gavin, why would I need to nose around if I had that file? I don't think anyone but Withers has any ideas what is really going on right now."

"Maybe," Dash concludes, "but Dierk's good. I knew that about three minutes into my call with him. I don't think he'd get busted nosing around. Maybe the Allen family doesn't even know we're nosing around, but rather believes that you inherited that file, and they want it back."

"Back to Withers," Gavin interjects. "The man works with the Allen family. He has a direct conflict of interest. I don't think he'd go down the path we're assuming he's traveling, no matter the money involved. He'd risk losing his license."

"He handed me the letter that my father made part of the will threatening me with the Allen family."

"Was it sealed?" he challenges. "If it was, he may not have even known what was inside. What if your father is just playing you all around?" He taps the table. "Before you reply to that, I'm swinging back to the partner meeting and how it was timed to be held right when Bella was taken."

"Meaning what?" Dash asks.

"If we're looking for motive, the content of that meeting proves motive." His attention shifts to me. "Who benefits if you don't inherit that stock?"

"The partners," I answer easily, because it's nothing that hasn't crossed my mind, though I still think my father is ultimately behind this.

"Right," he says, "and you just told them, all of them, that Bella is the ticket to you securing your role long term. They must have already known that. You walked out of that boardroom, and your ability to claim your rightful inheritance was immediately threatened because you no longer have Bella. She's gone and I'm betting one of the partners made her gone."

It's all I can do not to launch myself at him.

Did he really just suggest one of the partners had Bella killed?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TYLER

Gavin takes one look at me, his eyes going wide as he clearly reads the thunder in my expression. His hands fly up. “Okay, I went to a bad place just now and I did not mean to do that. They probably want to scare you and her.”

Dash’s lips set grimly. “We have to think through all possibilities, but I have to reject any idea she’s not coming home. That’s not how this works. That’s not how we get her back. That said, the partners’ involvement is a logical takeaway under the circumstances. I need to call my guys and I’ll loop in Dierk as well, and make sure they’re looking at this as well.” He drags himself to his feet, a heaviness to his body, as he walks away. He is cool and calm on the outside, but inside, he’s coming unglued.

“I’m not involved, Tyler,” Gavin repeats, drawing my attention back to him. “I might come at you with a stubborn, hard attitude, but it’s the only way to work with a true leader who holds firm to his beliefs, and that’s you.”

“Don’t suck up, Gavin,” I snap. “I’m not in the mood.”

“I’m not sucking up. I’m letting you know where I’m coming from with you, because that’s clearly made you feel I wasn’t on your side. And I’m not suggesting Bella is dead. Yes, I’m repeating myself, but I need you to hear me. I think they want to scare you both. Think about it. They forced you to declare Bella’s importance to you in the meeting.”

“And if we break up,” I follow, “and I suddenly present someone else, it leaves room for the partners to challenge the validity of the relationship and my inheritance.”

“Yes. Exactly. Though from what I read, there’s no stipulation of love in the will.”

“Then you just destroyed your own theory.”

“No,” he argues. “I think a challenge is a challenge, and the right judge, or the wrong judge, depending on how you look at it, could allow your power to be questioned. You should have called me the minute you got called into that meeting. You used to trust me.”

He’s not wrong, but he’s not back inside my trust circle by a long shot. “Someone told the partners about the will.”

“And you think it was me? Seriously, Tyler? I could lose my law license

for breaking attorney/client privilege. What we discuss has that attorney/client privilege. For all we know, your father had Withers deliver each partner the terms of your inheritance upon his death. He could have done the same with the Allen family. Was there a clear leader in the meeting?”

“The short guy with the fucked-up name.”

“Raider?”

“Yeah. Him. There were two others, Jack and Terrance, who seemed to be with him. The rest of the partners were quick to want to stand with me, though loyalty can be deceptive.”

“Those three are the weakest partners we have. I’ve always thought they were weird picks on your father’s part. They’re slimy. I’d have Dash tell your people about them.”

Once again, he’s not wrong. I snag my phone and text both Dash and Dierk at the same time with the names and the details of my concerns. When I’m done, I set my phone on the table and glance up to find Dash walking toward the bathroom. That’s when my phone buzzes with a text message and my adrenaline surges. Logically, it’s Dierk replying to my message, but for reasons I cannot explain, I know it’s more. I know this message is about Bella.

Dread crawls through me, no, it slithers through me, a poisonous snake ready to strike.

I pick up my phone to find a text from an unknown caller. I suck in a thick breath when I open it to find a photo of Bella, anger etched on her beautiful face, alight in her eyes, as if she hates being used, and underneath the image, the message reads: *She’s an intelligent, beautiful woman. You’re a lucky man, Tyler Hawk. That doesn’t have to change.*

I don’t give my emotions time to consume me or evolve. I screenshot the message and send it to Dash and Dierk, with the number on the caller ID. I’m sure it’s a burner phone, but sometimes they can be traced to a purchase point where cameras exist.

“What just happened?” Gavin asks.

It’s as if he’s speaking inside a tunnel. His voice is distant, an echo in a far-off place as my mind chases something I cannot quite put my finger on. I reply to the message: *What kind of game is this? What do you want?*

More soon, is the reply.

Nothing more.

I try to dial the number and it goes straight to voicemail. I curse and stand up. Gavin stands with me, and asks again, “What just happened?”

I hand him my phone, barely seeing him. I’m replaying the exchange in my mind. *She’s alive*, I think. That is, if that picture was just taken. The message indicates she is.

“I know where this is,” Gavin announces. “I know the seat.”

I blink him into view. “What? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a bar a few blocks from here. Tyler, I know where this is.”

My scalp throbs with the insistence of the blood rushing through me. “Take me there. Now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TYLER

I'm at the door of Cupcakes and Books about to exit when Dash catches up to me. "Where are you going?"

"Check your messages," I say, irritated at his question and the delay he's causing. "We're going to get Bella."

"I recognized the location that picture of Bella was taken in," Gavin chimes in to explain, as if I wasn't about to plant my fist in his face fifteen minutes ago. The man is nothing if not resilient. "Really a picture on the back wall. If she'd been angled another direction, I'd have never figured it out."

"Which wasn't an accident. That picture on the wall wasn't in the first photo. That's because they didn't want us to find them, but now they do. Our tech guys can do image searches and find a place of just that much. They know that, whoever the fuck they are. Which could mean all kinds of things, and not many of them are good. Dierk's men are meeting us there." He motions to Gavin. "You stay. We don't need you getting shot and then suing us."

"If I sue you, I lose my job," Gavin replies. "That's not on the agenda. I'm not staying behind. I know the exact location. Do you?"

Dash's lips thin. "When we get there, you stay outside." He eyes us both. "We walk. Don't run, and that means you, Tyler. I know you want to get her back and so do I, but if we spook them, they'll flee with her or worse, kill her."

"Stop suggesting they'll kill her." I glance between them. "Both of you."

"You think I want to hear that any more than you?" Dash snaps back. "But it's reality."

"We need to move," I say and reach for the door.

He catches my arm. "Wait. Listen to me."

"Get your hands off me, Dash, or I swear to God, I will flatten you. I'm hanging on by a thread here."

"Hang on tighter and *just wait*." His hand falls away from my arm and not a second too soon. "They expect us," he adds. "If we walk together, we draw attention we don't want. Gavin leads the way. I'll fall back and follow him. Tyler, you're on the opposite side of the street." He glances toward Gavin.

“When you reach the destination stop at the door and pretend to change your mind and walk onward. Are we on the same page?”

Gavin nods, while I’m repeating in my head, “*They’ll flee with her or worse, kill her.*” “What’s the name of the bar?” I ask.

“I don’t remember,” Gavin replies. “I’ve been inside for a couple happy hours, but the sign is either non-existent or too small to notice. But I know where I’m going. It’s in between a bank and a salad joint.”

I have no idea where he’s talking about, and that’s the only reason I’m not out that door right now, me, alone and charging down the street to rescue my woman. Everything inside me screams, *run to Bella, get to Bella, and do it now*, and yet somehow, I manage to allow Gavin to exit the store without me.

“Keep that mighty control of yours in place,” Dash orders. “We’re close to getting her back.” He doesn’t wait for my reply. He turns and exits the door, and I don’t hesitate to follow.

I step outside to a low-hanging sun, and crowds that are dissipating and moving north, toward Broadway, where the bars and parties dominate after hours and weekends. Cutting right, I cross the street on a walkway and don’t stop until I’m on the opposite sidewalk, with Dash in my sights. I’ve been all about adrenaline the past two hours but it’s over the top now, a drug driving me forward, my energy barely contained. I’m coming out of my own skin.

Miraculously, my pace is even and intentionally slower than Dash’s, but it’s a mammoth effort not to throw caution to the wind and go rogue. I force myself to think, not react to the buzz of my energy. Dash is a former FBI agent. He’s faced-off with hitmen and killers. He knows what he’s doing, and he loves Bella. He’s not just her brother, he’s her best friend aside from me. That’s what makes what I have with Bella so unique to me. I can lust after her and still see her as a confidant. And now that I’m using my brain, not my emotions, I know that losing the control I’ve always known to be an asset isn’t in Bella’s favor.

Cool.

Calm

Calculated.

That’s how I get Bella back, and then I’ll make whoever did this pay the price and I won’t stop until they do.

I catch sight of Gavin, who seems to actually be on our side, though I’m not objective about anything right now. He appears to be helping, and how he handles himself right here and right now will go a long way in how I judge

him as a friend or enemy.

My mind shoots right past my evaluation of Gavin and back to Bella, conjuring another flash of her this morning, how intensely she'd watched me sample the new coffee, how easily she'd lit up over my approval. I never knew how important those little things shared with someone else mattered. I never dreamt I could look forward to sharing coffee in the morning, choosing what we're eating for dinner, or sex in the shower that ends with us laughing in bed...not until Bella. She has changed me. She has fulfilled me. But I swear to the good Lord above, that if she is taken from me, every part of me that is my father will go after those involved. I will not stop until they suffer.

Gavin stops in front of a building, and I spy the bank right next to it. I eye Dash, and he motions me to join him. I cross in between cars and fall into pace with him. At this point, Gavin walks away, just as directed. I glance at Dash. "Where are Dierk's men?"

"I told them to stay close but stand down and be ready."

"What about a back door?"

"I'm going to the rear," he says. "You go in the front. They'll expect you. They might not expect me."

"Then I'm going in." I start to move.

"Wait!" he barks out.

"On what?" I demand.

"Don't reach for a weapon or overreact. I'll be there. I'll back you up."

"I've got this." I step around him and head for the door, the swooshing of my heart in my ears, energy pinging through my body.

Calm the fuck down, I mentally chide myself. *Calm down.*

Control.

I reach for the gold handle entry to the bar and yank the door open. I enter to find a room with a bar as the centerpiece and high-back booths lining the walls. At first glance, there is no one in the place, but the height of those booths and the way they wind the bar make that an impossible assumption.

A server walks in my direction. "Sit anywhere and I'll be right with you."

"I'm looking for a pretty blonde. I'm meeting her."

"Oh, right. She's in the very back booth." She points to my right.

I'm already walking, my footsteps hitting the carpeted floor with the force of a furious man on a mission. I check every booth as I pass with no luck, turning a corner with one, two, and then the final third booth. It's empty, and that realization is a punch in the gut, but there is an envelope that reads

“Tyler” on the outside in Bella’s handwriting, perched in front of a drinking glass.

Fear is not an emotion I am familiar with on any level, not for a very long time, but fear is a living, breathing beast inside me in this moment. I snatch it up and pull a card from the inside that reads:

A formal meeting will be held at the Allen residence in exactly forty-five minutes.

—*Bella*

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TYLER

I stare down at that note written in Bella's delicate script, and the room spins around me. It's her writing but not her words, which means she was alive when she wrote it and under duress though I have no doubt Bella has a calm head on her shoulders. I have to assume this is some kind of ransom exchange, but if I let myself think too hard, those thoughts are going no place good. Bella has a level head. She'll be smart. She'll stay alive. I sink into the cushion of the booth, and I can smell her sweet, floral perfume, realization crashing over me. She was just here. She's close. I stand up and walk toward the rear exit sign.

"Tyler."

Dash appears in front of me, inside the hallway I'm about to enter, and one look at my face and he says, "She's gone."

"Yes," I confirm, my voice raw, the words rasping from my throat. "But she's not been gone for long." I shove the note at him. "She was just here. I can still smell her perfume. We need to check the area. Now."

He eyes the note and gives a nod. "Yes, go. I'll help, but I'm calling Dierk's men and talking to the staff here."

I'm already moving, walking down a short hallway, a mix of emotions driving my steps until I exit into the alleyway. I jerk my gaze left and right and there is nothing but a narrow path just big enough for a vehicle, and there's nothing to be seen. They would have had a car waiting back here. She's gone. I know she's gone, but I have to keep looking.

My cellphone rings and I snatch it from my pocket, grappling with razor-sharp emotions mixed with dread as I bring the screen into view to find an "Unknown Caller" identification. Aware this is Bella's kidnapper, I answer with, "Where is she?"

"Tyler."

At the sound of Bella's voice, relief floods the despair I've been living with these past two hours and washes it away, if only momentarily. *She's alive.* "Bella, baby. Where are you?" I ask, and I swear for the first time in my entire life my voice cracks. "I'll come get you now."

"You can't," she whispers, and every emotion I feel is magnified by ten

with the distress I hear in her voice. “Looking for me is a waste of time too. I’m okay and they want you to go to the meeting.”

They want me to go. She didn’t tell me she wants me to go. “Will you be there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m not harmed. I just want to come home, you know?”

Talk about being punched in the gut. She wants to come home, *our home*. And I don’t even know how to make it happen. “Baby, you *have* to come home. I can’t—”

“*Don’t*. You’re not talking to just me right now. Keep our personal stuff personal. I *need* you to do that.”

In other words, don’t make her a weakness they can further exploit. “Bella —”

“I have to go,” she says. “And so do you. The meeting starts soon.”
She disconnects.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BELLA

Hanging up, my throat is cotton and my belly a bed of blades.

Oliver lifts the phone out of my hand oh so gently, his entire persona that of a gentleman and yet, twenty minutes ago he proved that premise to be nothing but a perfect lie. At present, we're in the back of a black sedan with an angry-looking man with a smooshed face in the driver's seat, but back then we were still at the bar, still sitting in that high back booth with drinks and dip in front of us. It had all seemed so very civil.

Then he'd slid a notecard in front of me and offered me a pen. I'd just stared at the pen. "Take it," he'd ordered in a low voice that had crackled with authority.

I'd felt the strike of his sharpened energy, glanced up, and found his expression uncomfortably indiscernible but his eyes as chilly as an arctic night.

At that moment, I'd decided this pen was meant to write my suicide note, and a goodbye to Tyler. I'd shaken my head. "No. No, I don't think I feel up to taking dictation right now."

"Take it," he'd repeated and while his voice had not lifted, a brutal quality had etched in those two words, a bit how I believed a sword would flesh.

I'd taken the pen.

Approval had lit his dark eyes, but nothing about his mood had lightened. "Good," he'd said, a patronizing quality to his voice that demoted me more to pet than person. "Very good. Now, write what I say."

And so, I had.

When I was done, he'd said, "Feel free to add an I love you, or some sappy thing of sorts. Your preference. I don't pretend to know the inner workings of your romantic dialogue."

I'd seen that for what it was, what all of this is—a way to manipulate and control Tyler. I'd set the pen down and refused to participate beyond what was forced, but all that bravado faded the instant I'd heard Tyler's voice. *I just want to come home, you know?* I'd let myself become a weapon against Tyler, and the satisfied look on Oliver's face that hasn't faded since tells me I've performed to his expectations, but maybe not as much as he thinks.

I'd spoken the words *they want you to go to the meeting*, not *I want you to go to the meeting*, and gambled that Tyler knows me well enough to read between the lines. I do not want him to go to that meeting. I'm terrified he won't live to see tomorrow if he does. Maybe I won't either. Of course, there was the whole *I have to go and so do you. The meeting starts soon*, but that had been scripted. Oliver had literally written it on a piece of paper and held it up for me to read.

The driver eyes us in the rear-view mirror and says, "It's begun."

It's begun? I think. What does that mean? "What does that mean?" I ask. "What has begun?"

Oliver ignores me and speaks to the driver, "We're done. We're a go."

With that, the driver pulls us out into traffic, and I twist around to face Oliver, plastered against the opposite seat as far from him as I can get. I'd wanted to run or scream but never had the chance.

He'd propped that note up on the table, typed a message in his phone, and then ordered, "Let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere," I'd said.

He'd leaned in close. "I have a man who is much less civil than I am, Bella, watching Tyler and your brother." He'd held out his phone and showed me a time-stamped photo of the two of them and Gavin at the coffee shop.

I'd sucked in a breath and then demanded, "What is this?"

"You can relax," he'd assured me. "We won't hurt them, because frankly I love your brother's books, and it would be a shame to see him leave without finishing at least one more. And we need Tyler's cooperation."

I could barely breathe at that point, but I'd managed to push out my question. "Then why show me that photo?"

"Gavin's disposable. So is that pretty lady who owns the store. Come with me, help me get Tyler to the negotiation table, and everyone lives to eat another cupcake. They are really good cupcakes, worthy of life itself, don't you think?" He'd stood up. "Shall we?"

I'd wanted to scream. I'd wanted to grab a knife and stab him, and I've never felt a violent urge in my life. Instead, I'd grabbed my purse and stood up, calmly walking to the sedan where I sit now, terrified this is the place I will say goodbye to everyone and everything, because this is where I will die.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BELLA

“Bella.”

The muted, oh, so polite demand in Oliver’s voice forces me back to the moment—to the backseat of a sedan where I’m captive to a stranger with an agenda he has yet to share.

“You wanted to talk,” I say, fixing him with a burning stare full of accusation. “And yet that hasn’t happened. Why?”

“I decided we needed a more private place to chat, which is where we’re headed now. We’re going to pull up to the Four Seasons hotel where I’ve secured you a room.”

That announcement is as brutal as shattered glass raining down on me from the roof of the car might be, stabbing every part of me. That’s how trapped I feel right now, how tormented by what comes next. Nothing good happens when a woman is taken to a hotel room. “I’m not going inside a hotel room with you,” I say. “That will never happen.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asks.

“I’m not going into a hotel room with you or anyone with you,” I add, thinking about the driver with the smashed face.

Oliver offers me his phone, which I want to refuse, but curiosity and fear over what he might be showing me wins. I grab the phone from him and stare down at a photo of Tyler. He’s sitting in the booth at the bar, right where I’d been sitting, the lines of his handsome face sharp, his eyes tormented. But what stands out more than his pain is the fact that he’s being watched and doesn’t know it.

“We can get to him at any time,” he says. “Just like we got to you, Bella.”

I draw in a breath and toss the phone in his direction. I’m done being civil. “You’re an asshole.” I’m instantly irritated at myself for the action.

I showed a chink in my armor, and that means in Tyler’s as well.

Oliver doesn’t react or seem to notice my action. He simply retrieves his phone and says, “I’m really not. We’ll get through this, Bella, and do it without bloodshed. You and I are making that happen. Now,” he says, shifting his tone to what I can only call directional, “We’ll enter the hotel side-by-side and walk to the elevator. No need to feign being love interests as

we are not. This is a business transaction. Once we're in the room, we can chat freely without interruption, and I do believe as two intelligent people, we can find a path to peace."

The vehicle turns a corner and much to my distress, we're already pulling into the drive in front of the hotel where the valets work. I have no doubt he'd planned the timing of his announcement in a way that left me no time to fret or think my way out of this. If I don't go up to a room with Oliver, he's made the consequences clear, and they involve Tyler.

Tyler will get hurt.

I have to go with him.

But it will be okay, I tell myself. No matter what happens, as long as I live to see another day and so does Tyler, I'll be better off than my father, who lost the love of his life. I can do this.

For Tyler.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TYLER

I've started showing photos to strangers, asking if anyone has seen Bella, but I'm coming up with nothing. I end up back at the bar, where I find Dash standing with a bare faced woman, I guess to be mid-forties, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demand, joining them, my focus on Dash. "Have you been here the entire time?"

"This is Cheryl," Dash offers, motioning toward the woman, and ignoring my reprimand. "She's the waitress that served Bella and the man who was with her. She'd just gotten off shift when they left and came back to work to talk to us."

My throat is raw, and I feel as if I just swallowed a handful of blades. "You saw Bella?"

"I talked to her," Cheryl confirms but her brows dip. "Actually, I don't think she spoke. It was all the man with her."

"What did he look like?" Dash asks.

"Tall, regal-looking Black man," she says. "His suit was money, you know what I mean?" She motions to me. "Like yours. Money." She flicks her gaze between us. "He ordered for her. A Bloody Mary. He ordered one too, but then he asked for a bottle of Macallan 25. Like I said, he was money. He didn't drink it and that bottle was thousands. Paid though, and left me a huge tip."

I pull out my wallet. "What did you overhear?"

She waves off the hundred-dollar bill I offer her. "You don't need to give me that. The idea that I didn't know she needed help, guts me. The more I think about it, the more uncomfortable I believe she was. I really hate that it didn't click at the time." She shoves a lock of black hair behind her ear and hugs herself. "I really didn't hear much at all. The seat backs are high, but he did pay me extra to give the bus boy so he wouldn't clean up until someone came for the note. I didn't ask questions. I just thought y'all were late to the meeting or something."

"Have you ever seen him in here before?" Dash asks.

She shakes her head. "Never."

“Thank you,” he replies “If you think of anything else, I left my number with the manager.”

“Okay. Yes. I’ll head home then if it’s okay?”

Once the goodbye is complete, and she’s headed for the door, Dash’s phone buzzes with a message he glances at and sighs heavily. “There’s nothing on the street cameras. Whoever this is picked this location at least partially because of a blind spot that kept them off the radar. We’re going to have to go to this meeting, Tyler, and hope like hell Bella is there.”

“And if she’s not?”

“We’ll figure it out, and between the two of us, we won’t go to jail for whatever we decide we have to do.”

Now he’s talking my language. “I’m ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BELLA

My mind races with enough wicked speed and wild curves to rival my father's driving, but I still can't come up with a way out of going into the hotel room. Not and ensure I protect Tyler.

The doorman opens Oliver's side of the vehicle, and he exits the car first. My mind wants me to exit opposite and start screaming to such a point that it's all I can do to convince myself to slide in his direction. I draw in a breath and scoot toward the hotel, which means toward Oliver, reminding myself that I am armed with a handgun I know how to use. It's just a matter of choice and the consequences of using it that extends beyond me and the moment.

When I reach the edge of the seat and slide my legs around, Oliver offers me his hand like the perfect gentleman he is not. Just the idea of touching him turns my stomach, and I snub his offer of aid and push to my feet. It's then that I realize just how much time has passed since Oliver stopped me on the street, that story told by the dimness of the evening.

With a glance upward, I discover the sun has slipped beneath the horizon and as if driving home the late hour, a party bus rolls past the hotel, blasting loud music while a mix of laughter, shouts, and screams fills the air. If only I could get lost in a celebration and escape the hell that is this night. The doorman says something to Oliver I don't hear for the whooshing of blood in my ears, and the car we've just exited pulls away with the smushed face driver behind the wheel. At least there won't be two of them going upstairs with me, an idea that is bittersweet relief. There is still Oliver, and I have to tamp down on the horrible places my mind could travel right now about what comes next. Oliver palms the doorman a wad of cash, and I want to throw up. A wad like that is meant for one thing and one thing only: *hush money*.

Oliver turns his attention to me and motions me to the door. "Shall we?"

No, I think, but I start walking anyway, wondering if he's as smart as he thinks. We're on camera right now. Then again, a good tech guy could wipe that feed and for all I know, the Allen family has an interest in the hotel, or even just the staff could be enough.

The doors to the hotel open and we pass through side-by-side and enter a

giant lobby, shiny tiles beneath our feet. I scan the area, trying to gain as much information as I can. My life might depend on it. I realize now I've been in this place before, for an event, though it was years ago, and this means an inventory of my surroundings is critical.

To my right is the registration area. Six total stations, all with granite counters, but the two farthest from the door have humans attending them. To my left is a sitting area framed by decorative archways, a mock living room complete with bookshelves and a cozy fireplace inside. I could always hide behind one of the sofas if needed. Not ideal, but it's better than nothing.

Onward and again to my right, there's a long bar with plenty of seating clustered about as well. The bathroom signs point down a long hallway that tracks between the bar and registration. If I remember correctly, the ladies' room is huge, with about a dozen or more stalls and floor-to-ceiling heavy wooden doors. Not only would it be impossible to find me there, I could detour to the mens' room and hole up in a stall.

The elevator nook is coming up, but just beyond it, and in front of me is a coffee shop, while a restaurant sits across from it. I could head to the kitchen of either and ask for help. For that matter, I could hide behind the lobby bar and whisper to the bartenders to call Tyler. My options have run out. Oliver motions me toward the bank of elevators and I'm forced to cut in that direction while people exit several cars and others wait for higher levels along with us.

Us.

I hate that word right now.

It implies I'm with Oliver by choice, and yet, I guess I am. I chose to walk with him. I chose to wait for the elevator with him and as the doors open, I choose to allow him to wave me forward as I step inside. I do all of this for Tyler. My stubborn, stubborn man, who will never forgive me for putting him over me. But I would never forgive myself for doing this any other way.

Oliver joins me in the car, and a huge group of people follow him, to the point we're sardines in a can. Somehow, Oliver is behind me, which is not where I'd prefer him. Especially when he leans around me, his body pressing to mine, to allow him to slide the key over the pad. "Punch twenty," he orders, and he's still right on top of me.

Even after I push the button, one of his hands settles on one of my shoulders and I'm ice about to break. I feel it happening. The elevator stops several times. His hand never moves. When our floor arrives, the car is still

mostly full, as it seems everyone is headed to some bar.

“Excuse me,” I say, easing through the crowd and the movement forces the removal of Oliver’s hand from my body but the question is: for how long?

This thought has me chasing the curves of a racetrack again with my mind. *I have a gun*, I remind myself yet again, and that can’t be for naught.

Once we’re in the room, I can pull my weapon and call for help and no one will know but me and him what’s happening. I can get to Tyler before he can get to his people to hurt Tyler. The very idea of such an action has my nerves rattling my bones, but I really have nothing to lose. I have to do this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BELLA

I step into the hallway, my bravado firmly in place.

The time for action is almost here, just not quite yet. Soon, really soon. We must enter the room, and he must shut the door before I can draw my weapon on him.

Oliver steps to my side, eyes a key, and motions toward the right. “This way, Bella.” His lips curve. “Did you know that Bella means pretty in Italian and beautiful in Spanish?”

My fingers curl into my palms. “So my father tells me.”

“Right. The badass NASCAR driver. You come from a life filled with overachievers. I’m sorry about your mother. I read all about her. She was magnificent.”

“You did a lot of research on me, didn’t you?”

“It’s my job to know everyone I negotiate with.”

“What exactly are we negotiating?”

His lips quirk. “Let’s go chat about that.” He motions down the hallway. “I do believe we’re the last door.”

Of course, I think. The furthest from the elevator.

He starts walking, and I fall into step with him, that nervous energy I’ve been experiencing pretty much singing a dramatic song now, something from a horror movie. He reaches the door—we reach the door—and steel slides into place, right where my spine straightens. I am my mother’s daughter, and she would never allow herself to be intimidated. If my father were in danger, she’d save him, just as he’d save her if the situation was reversed. I’m letting fear for Tyler be fear in general.

No more.

Oliver kicks the door open and before it can shut, props it open with his foot. He motions me forward and right when I walk past him, he snags my purse. I catch it, hold onto it, and whirl around to face him, determined to pull my handgun but it’s impossible. His giant hand is covering the opening.

“You know I’m not letting you in the room with your handgun within reach. That’s not the way we have a productive conversation. Let go of the purse.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ve told you. You’re free to leave, Bella. Staying is your choice.”

“But if I don’t, you’ll kill Tyler,” I snap, and my heart is racing so fast, my temples throb. “Isn’t that right?”

His eyes darken, jaw sharpening. “I never said any such thing.”

“We both know you implied it.”

He releases my purse. “If you come in with me, I need you to leave your purse at the door while you join me in the sitting area. Otherwise, tell your brother I’m a fan.”

Now, he’s threatened Dash as well, and my defeat is obvious. I could run to the front desk and try to get to Tyler and Dash fast enough, but his confidence says I will fail. I drop my purse and shove through the door, entering the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BELLA

Once I'm inside the room, I cross through a foyer and enter what turns out to be a suite, with a full kitchen and living area as my welcome, offering a margin of relief. I'm not in a cramped space with a bed as the centerpiece. This space is luxurious and includes three elegant chairs framing a shiplap wall with a big screen TV as the centerpiece.

Just behind that seating area is a full living room facing a city view of twinkling lights. A view to die for, some might say, perhaps quite literally in my case. I head in that direction, as far away from Oliver as I can, but I do so with slow, steady steps. At this point, I'm psyching myself out, pretending that I'm walking into the biggest negotiation of my life, tamping down my nervous energy. I must think logically. I must operate with a clear head, but still, my thoughts are off the deep end.

What if he tells me I have to have sex with him to save Tyler? What am I going to do? I need a plan, and my mind needs to work in that direction.

I rotate to place the city view at my back and him to my front.

He saunters to the shiny black and brown swirled bar attached to the wood wall and opens a bottle of whiskey sitting on top. The fact that it exists when it would not be a standard perk of even a high-end suite leads me to believe he's been staying here, or he came here earlier to prepare for whatever this is. "Whiskey?" he asks.

I'm officially irritated. He's playing games again, trying to unnerve me. "I prefer a clear head for negotiations. If you do not, that's your preference."

His lips quirk and he fills a glass, recapping the bottle before he moves in my direction with a predatory swagger that makes me want to back away but I don't. *Show strength*, I tell myself. He rounds the couch and motions for me to sit in the chair to his right while he claims the couch, making no effort to be near me.

Maybe he does just want to talk?

It might be me and my wishful thinking, but at this moment, I dare to think he might, and either way, all I can do is go with the flow. I sit. He sips his drink and glances over at me. "Now we've removed the distractions. I don't have to look over my shoulder. You aren't constantly looking for the

person who's going to swoop in and rescue you." He sets his glass down. "Let's get to it."

"All right," I say. "What is it you want?" It's a loaded question, but it's the one I need answered.

"You know what's interesting to me?" he asks. "I thought your relationship with Tyler was a business deal, but it doesn't quite compute. You're loaded. You're as rich as him, if not richer."

Alarm bells go off. "Do you want money? Is that what you're telling me?"

"I don't want or need your money, nor do my clients. My point is you're with him by choice. You care about him. From what I can see, he cares about you."

Which makes me leverage, I think. It makes me Tyler's weakness.

"What's his intent with the Allen family?" he asks.

"He has no intent at all but to leave them alone."

"His father didn't," he comments. "And he's the heir to his father's empire."

"He is nothing like his father or I wouldn't be marrying him," I counter.

"His father was a brutal bastard who killed a woman. That has to worry you. How much of his father is in him?"

I bristle in Tyler's defense. "He's not his father. He proves that every day of his life, and if you ask anyone who works for Hawk Legal, they'd agree. You should be talking to him, not me."

"My client and your future husband can meet and greet any which way they so wish, but not until Tyler hands over the files he inherited."

"And I'm the leverage to make that happen," I assume, my pulse kicking up a beat.

"Obviously."

"Well then, we have a problem. I know for a fact that Tyler doesn't have any documents pertaining to the Allen family."

"And you know that how?"

"I know."

Amusement lights his eyes. "A man like Tyler Hawk has secrets. That's not a maybe, that's reality."

In other words, he believes Tyler lied to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BELLA

He's wrong.

Tyler is not lying to me, and whatever secrets he possesses are mine now, too.

Which leaves me in an awkward position on top of an already dangerous situation.

I debate what I can or cannot say and decide there's really no other way to do this but go all in. "I know because his father's will used the Allen family as a threat against Tyler. He's searched high and low for any documentation that could set him free."

Oliver lifts his glass and sips. "I'll bite," he says, but he sounds bored, like he doesn't really feel I have anything to offer. I'm merely a means to make Tyler talk. Still, he adds, "Explain."

I tell him everything—about the will, the marriage, Tyler and me falling in love, and how that makes beating his father feel too easy to him. I tell him about the Allen family trial. When I'm done, he stares at me with a hooded gaze, time ticking by in eternal moments before he finally says, "I believe you, but I'm back to my original question. Where's the file?"

"Tyler barely remembers the case. He doesn't even know if there was wrongdoing attached. We can't find the records. So, we have to ask, does it even exist?"

"Yes." That's all he offers.

"You can't just say 'yes' with no justification for that answer. Tyler wants the threat of the file removed as much as you do."

"Who's handling the will?"

"Dan Withers, who's done work for your client as well, which makes this entire situation a conflict of interest for him. That said, it's possible Tyler's father gave him nothing more than a sealed folder with the information. He may not know what he's involved in at all."

"Then Withers has the file," he assumes.

"Maybe." My brows dip. "Though the will states that he'd release the information to the press should Tyler dispute the marriage. That means he'd see the information and realize the conflict of interest and be forced to step

aside.” My spine stiffens. “That could get the stipulations in the will thrown out.”

He removes his cellphone and punches in a number and the call rings on speakerphone. “Oliver,” a man greets.

“Withers,” Oliver answers, his eyes meeting mine. “I understand you’re handling the will for the Hawk estate.”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that matter.”

“Then let me be clear. That document dump you’re threatening to release is related to the Allen family. Were you aware of that fact?”

He’s silent a beat, then another. “I was not, but of course, that makes the execution of the will a conflict of interest.”

“Blackmail should have made it a conflict of interest, so we’re not going to pretend you didn’t do it for the money. Or that you’re not lying right now about your knowledge level.”

“I didn’t know,” he says quickly. “I swear to God.”

“God can’t help you if you fuck me right now. It would not be in your best interest to release that file, and the family does not appreciate being used as leverage. They’re angry and so I’m angry. You know what happens when I get angry.”

“Yes. Yes, I do.” His voice sounds strained. “What do you want me to do?”

“Go to your office and leave the file on the desk then accidentally leave the door open. As for the Hawk inheritance, negotiate the terms and get that family the fuck off our backs.”

“I can only do what the will tells me to do.”

“Make this go away,” he instructs. “I don’t really care how, just do it.” He disconnects and his eyes glint with amber flecks.

He’s angry, all right, and his attention is now directed at me. “Don’t move,” he orders, and he pushes to his feet, walks to the bar, reaches over the counter, and before he ever turns, I’m fighting the urge to stand up.

Somehow, I muster the willpower to remain in my seat.

When he faces me again, he has a roll of tape in his hand and now I stand, my heart racing in my throat. He’s either going to rape me or kill me or both, and I make the decision right now to fight, and fight with all I have in me.

I might die, but he’s going to lose an eye in the process.

He reenters the sitting area and sits back down on the couch, setting the tape on the table in front of him, in between us. After which, he removes his

Glock from the holster under his jacket, but it gets worse. He pulls out a silencer and screws it onto the barrel before setting his weapon on the table next to the tape.

My heart lurches and I launch myself to my feet.

He's about to kill me. I'm about to die. I have to run for my gun. No. I can't make it. I could tackle him. My high heel could make a weapon and—

“Sit,” he orders, and while I consider refusing, without my own firearm, I have no choice but to do exactly as he commands.

Once again, I sit, hoping I can get him talking, and buy time, to think my way out of this. “I thought we solved this problem,” I say.

“I'm not convinced there's not another file, one your future husband holds as ammunition against my client. Tyler's father didn't love anyone but himself. There was leverage with him. You were right. Tyler's different. He loves you.” And then he echoes the very thought I'd had a few minutes before, “You're his weak spot. That means you can't leave. Not yet. Not until he's received the message loud and clear.”

“What message?”

“Protecting my client protects you.” He reaches for his glass, downs the content, and then says. “Take whatever you have on under your skirt off. Hose, panties, whatever. Take it off.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TYLER

“I’ll drive,” Dash says as we step outside the bar, the night cloaking the city but not my anger or fear for Bella. We’ve searched everywhere for Bella to no avail and the very idea that she is gone and I will never see her again, is gutting me.

“I’ll drive,” Dash announces. “I’ve got a stockpile of weapons in my trunk.”

And that statement right there is just one reason I didn’t want to call Dash. His first reaction to everything is to punch his way out of it, or in this case, shoot his way out of it, and it’s not always the right answer. At least, not until we have Bella back. Then, as far as I’m concerned, someone is paying for this and paying dearly. “You weren’t invited to the meeting, and I’m already packing.”

“They know you won’t come alone. They know you’ll bring me. Let’s go.”

He starts walking, and now I’m the one catching his arm and I do so with a hard, firm grip, only releasing him when he rotates to face me. “We’re killing valuable time,” he snaps.

“How do we know you coming along won’t trigger them?” I challenge. “The very fact that you’re ex-FBI could set them off.”

There’s a tic in his jaw. “If they were worried about who or what I am, they wouldn’t have touched Bella. And how do we know they won’t just kill you when you get there?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “You’re in love with my sister. They know it. They’ll damn sure use that against you.”

“She’s your blood, Dash.” I inhale and exhale a heavy breath. “They have us both by the balls.”

“At least together one of us should be thinking logically at all times. Or not, and we’re fucked.”

I grunt. “I think we’re fucked.”

“Either way, I’m coming with you,” he insists.

I hesitate, but the truth is Dash and I share similar demons, and that likeness contributes to our bond, which is at times angrier than it is friendly. We both know the darkness in the other, but I’m not sure that’s a bad thing

right now. I give a nod. “Where’s your car?”

“At your office.”

In unison we head in that direction and a few minutes later, we’re at the trunk of his sports car where he lifts a flap and displays an armory. “What the fuck?” I ask. “Are you secretly still working for the government?”

“I write fictional books inspired by a real assassin who as of late, appears to be obsessed with me. He’s protective. Hell, he saved Allie’s life when your father came at her, but people like him can turn on you like a light switch.”

“I haven’t given that as much thought as it deserves.”

“I live in fear for Allie to the point I’ve been losing sleep. I have to go after him, but that’s another story for another time. Right now, we need Bella back.” He shoves a knife in his boot. “They’ll find most of your weapons. If you pack enough, they won’t find them all.”

It’s sound logic I hope we don’t need. I follow his lead and I’ve just finished turning a five-thousand-dollar suit into a coat of arms when Gavin shows up, puffing air. “You cannot go to this meeting without me present. I promise you, the Allen family will have their attorney present.”

“If this was a professional meeting, they wouldn’t have kidnapped Bella,” I say. “You’re not coming, Gavin, but stay close to your phone. If I need you, I’ll call.”

“Agreed,” Dash says. “This is a family matter now.” He slams the trunk shut. “We got this.”

Dash and I share a look and then once again, turn in unison and walk toward the doors of the vehicle, him to the driver’s seat, me to the passenger seat—it is his car, after all. Not to mention, I’m so on edge, my nerves jumping about beneath my skin and crawling around everywhere, to the point I’m liable to run someone off the road if they get in the way right now.

I climb inside and Gavin is at my door arguing with me. I shut the door and shut him up. Dash joins me and does the same. I glance at my watch. “We need to move. We have twenty minutes.”

“Do we know where we’re going? I assume you do since you’ve been digging around in these people’s lives.”

I shoot him a bullet stare. “Fuck you, Dash. I was trying to protect Bella.”

“Don’t be sensitive. I didn’t say you weren’t.”

I hit his navigation control and speak the address. “Drive,” I snap, as if his GPS were him.

He shifts into reverse, pulls us out of the spot, and drives.

The silence is not comfortable.

I did dig into the Allen family's lives, but they were being held over my head. A gauntlet about to fall and not just on me, but also Bella which drives my thoughts to a very bad place. Maybe my father has taunted me to go after the Allen family knowing full well it would backfire. And it has. On Bella.

Ten minutes later we're stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, and I'm losing my mind. We're going to be late to the meeting," I murmur. "Too damn late for comfort." I glance at my watch and grimace. "We might need to leave your car and walk the rest of the way."

"Chill, man. My gut says they want something from you. They won't take what is yours. Favors don't work that way." He glances over at me and motions to the GPS and taps the screen. "Traffic breaks in about three minutes."

I check my phone for messages and find none, and it feels like there is a blade inside me cutting me to pieces, one vital organ at a time. The idea of never seeing her again is shredding me. "I never meant to touch her," I say, my throat raw with emotion. "Want to? Yes. Intend to? Never. Even after she threw her arms around me in excitement, my hands stayed by my side. She pushed me. She tempted me."

"Do I really want to hear this?" Dash growls.

"Yes. You need to hear it. She came to my apartment the day of my father's memorial."

"Do I really want to hear this?" Dash asks again. "She's my sister."

I push onward as if he hasn't spoken. "Not even then, with her there, in my own domain, in the middle of hell burning me alive, did I touch her. I treated her like shit that night to make her hate me. *To protect her.*"

"And yet you still ended up together," Dash comments. "How?"

"After that night at my apartment, the tension between us was off the charts. Something had shifted. One of our clients hit on her, I got protective, we fought, and you know where this ends. Here. Right here, with her in the line of fire because I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I did this to her." The words wrench from deep inside me.

"I've never seen Bella as happy as she is with you, Tyler. You didn't do this to her. The Allen family did this to her." The traffic starts to move, and he accelerates.

The Allen family did this to her.

The words radiate through me and scream of a lie.

Bella is only on their radar because I put her there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BELLA

Take whatever you have on under your skirt off. Hose, panties, whatever. Take it off...

I'm gaping at Oliver's command, on my feet and ready to fight, my heart beating so fast I think I might have a heart attack. This is my biggest fear, the nightmare I knew would come true when I entered this room.

"I swear," I declare, my voice trembling, "at a minimum, you lose an eye trying to undress me."

He levels a cold, gray stare on me. "I don't have to rape a woman to get a woman." He motions toward me. "I'm going to tape your hands to ensure you can't leave the room, and because I'm *a nice guy*, I'm trying to spare you peeing all over yourself when you have to go to the bathroom. You'll be here for hours." He pushes to his feet, his expression foul as he steps closer. "Keep your panties on for all I care." He motions for me to hurry up. "Put your damn hands out in front of you."

I blink. What is happening right now? He just wants me to be able to go to the bathroom. Who thinks of something like that? And do I dare believe the answer is him because he's that considerate? If I let him tie my hands...

"Decision time," he announces. "Either I stay here and babysit you to ensure you don't leave, or I tie you up, and go to the meeting Tyler is having with my client right now. But I stress here, that if I'm in that meeting, I can try to influence the outcome. I can tell him I believe your claim that Tyler does not have the file. In other words, my client should back the fuck off and leave you both alone."

"You don't need to babysit me or tie me up. I'll stay. I swear. I want you to go help end this."

"Leaving you here, without typing you up, is never going to happen. You're tied up or I stay."

"If you trust me about the file—"

"If you leave before it's approved, I could be the one who ends up dead."

My lips purse. "I find that hard to believe."

His brow arches. "Is it?"

I swallow the cotton in my throat, my belly clenching. These people

kidnapped me. They're willing to go pretty far to make a point. Maybe it's not so impossible to believe. "How do I know you'll leave after you tie me up?"

His expression is pure irritation, his eyes glinting steel. "Make a decision. Am I staying or going?"

I'm as unsteady in my decision as a boat on choppy waters, but for reasons I can't explain, I don't believe he means me harm. On the other hand, I do believe he wants to put an end to this struggle. "How many hours will I have to stay?"

"Depends on how much they buy into what I'm selling."

"The truth isn't long and drawn out. We don't have anything to give them."

"Hands."

I hesitate but I lift my arms in front of me. Now, he's the one hesitating. "Sure you don't want to take off your panties? It's going to be a long few hours."

I purse my lips. "Fine. Turn around."

"Are you going to hit me?" he asks.

I laugh without humor. "It's not like I could do much damage."

"So don't try." He turns around.

I pull off my panties and toss them away because I don't want them between us. "Okay."

He rotates to face me again. "Hands," he orders again.

Once again, I hold them out and he starts wrapping me up and boy does he. Even my fingers are covered. I look like I have on the world's largest boxing gloves. "This sucks," I say. "What if I'm thirsty?"

"I brought a straw." He pulls it from his jacket. "I'll stick it in a glass of water."

Because he planned this. All of this. Maybe even the part where he pretends to be on my side now. He moves to the kitchen and the end result is a glass of water and a straw, as promised. After which, he points to the spot where there should be a phone. "They're gone. No phone in any room."

"Asshole," I murmur.

"I've been called worse." He points at me. "You owe me for treating me like I'm a pervert, by the way."

"You owe me for kidnapping me and leaving me like this."

"We'll call it even," he counters, and with that, he backs away, turns on

his heel and disappears down the hallway.

The door opens and I hear it slam shut, the sound jolting me, despite my expecting it. And it's a sound that is as much about freedom as it is captivity. I launch myself into action, rushing in that direction, and once I'm at the door, I try to move the handle. It won't work. My hands just can't get it to the right place. Neither can my elbow. I try again and again, until I'm groaning in utter frustration. I have to tell Tyler I'm okay. And Dash. God, I hope he called Dash, but the two of them together will be one big ball of testosterone, and testosterone loves to clash with testosterone.

My gaze lowers to my purse where it's been shoved against the wall. I kick it and try to get my phone out of it. If I can unlock my phone, Siri could call Tyler. My purse contents spill out and my gun slides to the ground. That's when I remember that I have no phone. Oliver floated it like a boat in a glass of water. Frustrated beyond belief, I start kicking the door and shouting, but this room is at the end of the hallway. No one is going to hear me.

My mind goes to the smoke detectors and I located it above me in the foyer. How do I set it off?

I'm instantly remembering an article I read about steam showers trigger smoke detectors. I hurry toward the bathroom and locate another smoke detector. Bingo. Hope forms. Now if I can get the shower on...only I try and fail. My hands are just too wrapped up and useless. Next idea. Find a sharp object to cut my hands free. This possibility leads me to the kitchen, where I'm utterly screwed. There is nothing sharp anywhere to be found. Even the counter itself is curved. I sink down to the floor in total, utter defeat. I'm trapped like a rat in a maze, and I'm terrified just thinking about what Tyler and Dash might be doing right now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TYLER

The Allen mansion isn't far from downtown Nashville and only about a mile from my parents' home, which is really my mother's home now. It's a neighborhood for the rich and famous I know well, I just don't want to live here. I will never live here. My choice of an apartment downtown was by design. It said bachelor, but the house I now share with Bella says home to me. She's home to me, and this world doesn't know what I would be like without her. The Allen family really does not want to know what I would be like without her.

Dash pulls up to the gate and reaches for the security button, allowing his finger to hang mid-air. "We need a plan." He glances over at me. "You have one? Because aside from beating everyone lifeless right now, I do not."

"I'm right there with you," I say, "but we both need to pull our shit together, at least for a few minutes."

"Yeah. A few minutes but that's about all they get." His energy is sharp, edgy, and his voice is taut. He's dying inside over fear for Bella just like me, but he's far more in control than I feel right now. He might talk about beating asses, but if not for him, who knows what I would have done to Gavin back at the coffee shop. He's smart and logical. He's connected. And he's a professional, with more experience dealing with life-and-death situations than any normal human being could fathom.

But we both know this is the tipping point to war.

It's time to face our enemies, and we both know that one wrong move could cost Bella her life.

Dash punches the buzzer, and the gates begin to open.

"And here we go," he murmurs as he shifts into Drive and we begin traveling down a winding driveway framed by perfectly manicured bushes. *How very my family*, I think. Everything on the outside reads like a fairy tale. The inside is a horror story. Exactly why Bella has never been to my family home, and I don't want her there. It's poison like my childhood, but in my rejection of my own history, it hits me that I've never even asked her about her childhood home.

"Did Bella grow up in a place like this?" I ask, glancing over at Dash.

His voice is tight, the thick muscles of his neck bunched up. He's worried. Really damn worried and that does not sit well. "Her parents were both famous in their own right," he replies. "She lived at a luxurious estate with a lot of security at all times."

"Did she like it?"

"Ask her when you see her, Tyler. We're getting her back."

The house comes into view, a white mansion with tall pillars at either side of the entrance. It's a place that fits that fairy tale façade and more so, reads like money. The people who live here have plenty of cash and clout they're obviously willing to throw around. I'm familiar with these types of power whores, experienced in negotiations that work their ego, and those skills need to shine today. They don't want the press or the scandal that Bella going missing would deliver. The very point in today's events is to protect their security and reputation. But as I know, and evidently, they do as well—a bluff can go a long way in a negotiation.

Dash pulls us up to the front of the entrance, right between those pillars, the path to the door at least twenty steps high, with two guys in suits at the top waiting on us. Guards. Security. Goons. Whatever you want to call them. They don't represent a willingness and expectation of violence, but rather a desire to avoid those things.

"I'm going to go in there and negotiate like this is a corporate meeting, but let's make a pact," I say, my teeth gritting, my gaze flicking his direction. "If we go down, we're taking as many of them with us as we can."

"You won't get an argument from me," he agrees, and in unison, we exit the car.

A minute later, we come back together at the bottom of the stairs and without looking at each other, we begin the walk up. Once we're at the top, the two assholes guarding the entrance offer us dead-eyed stares they must think make them look tough. Instead, they look like brainless puppets. The one closest to Dash says, "Just him. Not you."

Dash snorts out a laugh. "Think again. I'm coming in."

"It's him only or it's nobody," the same puppet states.

I cut Dash a look. "I'll go in. If I'm not out in twenty minutes, you know the plan."

His lips quirk, his eyes alight with approval. "Kill them and have my FBI friends cover it up. I approve." His attention slides back to puppet one. "He's first. I'll stand right here and wait."

The puppet on my side of the door punches in a code, and the door opens for my entry. I glance back to find Dash doing exactly what he declared his next move to be, which is no move at all. He's standing in front of puppet one just staring at him, but the impact is lost when the guy says, "Why are you familiar? Did I see you on TV?"

I leave Dash to his fan club and walk inside a rather sterile foyer, with shiny white tiles beneath my feet and, of course, a dramatic chandelier above. There always has to be a dramatic chandelier in these money mansions. A man in a suit with what I can only call a smashed-in face, steps in front of me. "We'll need to ask you to leave all weapons on the center table, Mr. Hawk."

It's an expected request and I remove the handgun under my jacket and set it on the table, holding out my hands. "Happy?"

He studies me several beats, a smirk forming on his naturally twisted mouth that says he's about to search me, but he does not. "I'm peachy," he replies, as if he's trying to be funny, but somehow that face just can't be laughed at. It's a face that has been beaten and brutalized, but he's still standing. I have a feeling the other guy is not. "Right this way," he adds, and he motions me down a long hallway.

And so, the negotiations begin, and I'm quite certain the next fifteen minutes will define my life in a way that might well be irreparable.

CHAPTER THIRTY

TYLER

The hallway I'm presently traveling is just more of the same shiny tiles and high-end molding, I'd noted in the foyer of the Allen home—flashy, but not much more. The sterile effect of a house that is for show versus a home decorated with love is something I could not understand until I spent time with Bella, intimate time in her personal space.

I'm a better man because of her, but if anyone in the Allen family thinks that makes me weaker, they're strategically challenged. I won't kill over a contract or even a seat at the head of the table that is my own birthright, but I will for Bella. But then, death might be too gentle. Sometimes being forced to live and suffer is a far better punishment. I'm not sure Bella really knows how dark I can get—how dark my family, maybe my genetics made me—and I don't want her to either. But these people today will know.

My walk ends as my path opens to a library that is typical of a home of this wealth and magnitude. There's a fireplace crackling for effect only, because it's not that damn cold. Bookshelves loaded with books frame the mantel, a desk sits in the far right of the room, and two high back chairs frame the fireplace.

But the center of my attention is the man I'd estimate to be my age or slightly older, who is standing in front of the flames, his suit impeccable, his hair a thick, light brown. "Welcome, Tyler," he greets, motioning me forward. "Please join me."

Welcome and please.

The bullshit is deep.

I close the space between us in a slow, even pace despite the impatience ticking in my jaw and zipping through my body. "Whiskey?" he asks, lifting his glass toward a bottle on the table that separates two wingback chairs, framing the fireplace.

I join him at the fireboard, and wave off the drink. "I'm going to need a cold shower if you keep roasting me with that fucking fire."

The man laughs and flips a switch just beside the mantel to turn it off. "It is a little hot. Our housekeeper gets cold and loves the damn heat this thing puts off." He sets his glass on the table by the bottle and offers me his hand.

“Name’s Knox.”

I ignore his hand and lock him in a direct stare. “I’m not big on the façade of a handshake nor am I my father. I have zero interest in the games apparently you and he enjoyed.”

His hand lowers. “Understood and respected. I do believe it was my father that sparred quite readily with Hawk Senior.”

“If I remember the file correctly, and I have a very good memory, your father died two years ago, and you are, in fact, in charge. Which makes you the man playing games.”

“I’m getting your attention,” he replies dryly. “It’s not a game. It’s a matter of survival of the fittest.”

My jaw tics. “You took Bella to get my attention,” I say flatly, but I don’t give him time to answer. “You turned a man who could be an ally into an enemy. I’m questioning how that’s a win for you.”

“Your father—”

“Is not me.”

“How would I know that?”

“Ask,” I bite out. “And the very fact that you didn’t think of that speaks to your character and defines mine with you.”

His eyes glint. “You’re digging around in my business.”

“My father threatened to release a case file that would ruin you and me. He also liked to play the games you’ve proven you play as well. I can’t find the file, and my memory of the trial is vague at best. All I’m trying to do is figure out if the damn file is even real.”

He turns my own question back on me. “Why not ask?”

“Your name is not trustworthy,” I reply instantly.

“Neither is yours, based on your connection to your father.”

“Not a reason to take Bella.”

“I never said I did.”

“Bullshit me and treat me like a fool, and I swear to God, I will walk out of the door, and go straight to the FBI. Is she okay?”

He doesn’t immediately respond, the lines of his face sharp, his jaw clenched, which tells me he’s trying to read me, and if he can’t, he’s a fool. I’m an open book of fucked-up and anger, which mixes together in what he should call poison. “Yes,” he says, no hesitation, “she’s safe. I mean no harm to Bella.”

“Then let her go.”

“She’s in a hotel room, *untouched*. I’ll give you a key when we’re done.”

“Hotel room?” My tone is an acid whip and I want to throttle him and throw him against the wall. “Why is my future wife in a hotel room? Who’s with her? Because he doesn’t have much longer to live if he touched her and neither do you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TYLER

“Then it’s true,” Knox observes. “You *do* love her.”

“Who’s with her?” I repeat, and my impatience is not his friend. He’ll find that out soon, perhaps not soon enough

“No one,” he replied. “She’s tied up.”

“You bastard,” I snap, and with the idea of her suffering, ropes on her arms and legs, I’m barely holding my fist by my side instead of planting it in his face. “What the fuck are you thinking?”

“She’s untouched. Nothing, and no one, has harmed her.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. She *has* been harmed, and if you think I will forget that ever in this lifetime, you’re wrong. You think the fact that I love someone makes me easier to manipulate? My father tried to find something to entertain him, and obviously your family did. This isn’t about entertainment to me. It’s about life to me, and she is my life. I will blow your world up, and mine along with it, to protect her and avenge her, so I suggest you start talking and make this right.”

He stares at me again, and while he might read as stone to anyone else, I can feel his unease, his certainty he’s made a wrong judgment. “Let’s sit.”

“Let’s not. Release Bella.”

“Let’s sit,” he bites out.

I don’t move.

“All right then,” he says. “We’ll stand. Yes, the file exists. I’ve got a copy. Your father had another copy. I assume you do now, as well. Give it to me, and I give you Bella. After which, we never have to talk again.”

“I don’t have the fucking file. Why do you think I’m looking for it? If I challenge the format of my father’s will, that file will be released to the public.”

“By who?”

“Withers.”

His eyes narrow. “Withers? He’s on our payroll.”

“I’m aware and to that point, my father’s will reads like a bluff, but per this conversation we’re having right now, you say it is not.”

“I don’t pretend to know your dead father’s intentions toward you, but I

know what they were toward me. He made a point of paying me a visit after my father's death."

"To what end?"

"To make sure I knew he could hurt the family."

I consider this premise and all I know about my father. Did he like games? Yes. Did he play them with no endgame? Never. "Why did he think your understanding of this matter and his extreme effort to solidify that threat necessary?"

His energy spikes, his expression indiscernible. "Why indeed?"

"That's not an answer."

"Yes, well it's not pleasant now, is it?"

"Let me be clear with you. Bella—"

"Is safe."

"And you are not until she's back by my side, and even then, I'm your new enemy."

"It doesn't have to be that way. I have a proposition for you, Tyler Hawk."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BELLA

The relief I feel about Oliver leaving without raping me or killing me is short lived.

What if Oliver comes back and he's been ordered to kill me?

I sit on the floor for about five minutes before I pull myself up and walk to the door and start pounding and yelling. It's really the only plan I can conjure right now, which isn't exactly a grand plan at all, but I can't do nothing. I try the door. I try random walls. And then I repeat. I've been at this for an hour, and my mind is starting to really mess with me.

What if Tyler is dead?

I'm queasy with the idea, and I just want to be back in time, back home earlier today, this morning, loving on Molly and trying a new coffee with Tyler. I want to plan my wedding, and not think about the will, or the reasons we're pressured into a long engagement. It shouldn't matter. We need time to plan anyway. I want the world to see how different Tyler is from his father, and if they knew that, maybe we wouldn't be living this hell.

If we get out of this, we're not going to live in fear over the will. We're going to be frank with everyone, including the partners, invite them to our wedding, and own our new life.

I've just finished pounding on the door for one more round, and sunk down to the floor, defeated, when I hear, "Hello," spoken through the door.

My eyes go wide and my pulse leaps, hope filling me. "Yes. Yes. Hello!" I twist around and struggle with my hands to get to my feet.

"I need help," I call out and fearful of alerting Oliver, I add, "Please can you get housekeeping?"

"Can you open the door?" the woman asks, her voice strongly accented.

"I can't. Can you get them to open it from that side please?"

"Oh, si, senora. Un momento."

I hear footsteps walking away and I want to scream, "Come back!" What if she tells the wrong person about me pounding on the door? But that's not what happens. Suddenly, the steps grow nearer again and the door opens. A short, robust Hispanic woman appears and the minute she spies my hands her eyes go wide. Rapid Spanish fires from her lips and I lift my bound hands.

“Help, please. Can you cut it off?” I motion toward the kitchen. “Knife.”

She seems to understand, and together we race that direction, and while she struggles to free me, she makes it happen. “Gracias,” I say, and then hold my finger to my lips, making a walking motion with the fingers of my other hand indicating that I must run.

Her expression is fear for me, which isn’t unfounded, but I need out of here and I need out now. I rush for my purse and shove my gun inside, already out the door and hurrying to the stairwell, not about to step into an elevator where there will be cameras. I start the walk down and decide I can’t go out the front door. The doorman will call Oliver. Maybe he’s even working for him, and I risk being stopped.

I’ll go to the coffee shop and convince someone to let me use their phone.

Drawing a breath, terrified about what happens if I’m caught, I exit to the lobby and walk with purpose, head up as I travel right past the elevators where I’m no doubt on camera. Once I’m in the main hotel lobby, I spy the open coffee shop door and hurry inside. I’m the only one here aside from one young girl, maybe eighteen, behind the counter. I rush to her and stop at the counter.

“Can I help you?” she greets pleasantly.

“I’m in trouble,” I say softly. “I have a very bad man following me and he took my phone. Can I please discreetly use your phone?”

Her eyes go so wide, they all but bug out of her head. “Oh, no. I mean—yes.” She fumbles for her cellphone, drags it from her apron pocket, and offers it to me. “Thank you so much,” I say, and quickly punch in Tyler’s number. It rings three times and goes to voicemail. Disappointment fills me but unwilling to allow the girl to hear what I have to say, I move on to plan B. I text him and Dash a quick message, sure one of them will see it. *I’m hiding in the womens’ bathroom of the Grand Hyatt, in a stall. Some of the staff is on their payroll. I don’t have a phone. This is a teen girl’s phone I borrowed so don’t call her back. I won’t be with her anymore. I’m deleting this message. Come get me, please.* I punch send and then delete the message before sliding the phone across the counter. “Thank you.”

“You want to come around back to the kitchen and hide?”

“No, thanks. I’m going to start walking. I need out of here.” It’s a lie, in case she’s cornered and has to talk.

I rotate and move toward the door, aware the cameras could lead my enemy to the bathroom, but if I walk out of the hotel, there’s a lot of open

space to walk to get past the hotel grounds. Better a locked door than open space, where I could be grabbed. As for the mens' room, I've changed my mind on that idea. What if they don't have doors like in the womens' room? I can't risk being followed inside and trapped without a door to lock.

With my heart truly beating like a drum, I walk evenly, calmly toward the bathrooms, and for the first time I wonder how I look. My hair could be standing on end for all I know, with makeup all over the place, but nowadays, if you own how you look, you can get away with just about anything. So, I own it, and I don't dare look around for fear I'll gain attention.

The hallway leading to the bathrooms comes way too slowly, and as I enter the bathroom, I run smack into a hard body. I yelp and pull back, relieved to see a woman with pink hair. We exchange apologies, and I hurry past the sinks and walk the line of heavy doors that reach all the way to the floor and stand way above my head. I count ten doors down and it's the tenth I claim. I enter, shut the door, and lock it, exhaling a heavy breath.

And now I wait and pray my cavalry arrives before someone else does.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

BELLA

I'm sitting on a toilet staring at a wall, my skirt tucked under my bare backside to protect me from the public seating, and it's not a happy place to be.

First, who wants to use a toilet as a resting place? Not to mention, I have no phone, no book, no nothing. With nothing else to occupy me, I hyperfocus on fear for Tyler, with no way to contact him. Thirty minutes into my bathroom stall self-induced captivity, I'm contemplating making a run for it. I'm not a "sit and wait" kind of person, and this is truly killing me. What if my text didn't go through? Or what if Tyler and Dash are in trouble, and I'm sitting on a toilet waiting for them to rescue me when they need *me* to rescue *them*?

I stand up, fretting as I do. I don't know what to do. Go? Stay?

"Bella!"

At the sound of Tyler's voice, every part of me is alive in ways I was not moments before. "Tyler!" I call out, and I yank the door handle down and exit the stall, rotating to find him running toward me.

Fear and worry fade instantly, and I'm darting his direction. The small space between us is eternal until we collide, his powerful arms wrapping around me, his big, warm body the shelter in a storm that I feared would be the end of me and us. I draw in the scent of him, warm and masculine, and I could bathe in the essence of this man.

His mouth finds my mouth, his tongue licking deep, the taste of him a wicked mix of fear and desperation I once thought him incapable of feeling. And then he's cupping my face, searching for answers, even before he demands, "Tell me you're okay. Tell me they didn't hurt you."

"I'm okay." I slide my arms under his jacket and around him, the warmth of his body like coming home. "Now I am. You're here. I tried to call, and you didn't answer. I didn't know if you got the text. And some of the staff is on their payroll and I didn't think I could leave without—"

"I got the text," he says, "and I got you now. And I swear to you, Bella, they will never touch you again."

"Bella!"

At the sound of Dash's voice now, too, we rotate toward Dash as he literally halts in front of me and drags me to him, hugging me hard and fast. "You scared the shit out of us, little sis." He catches my arms, inspecting me. "Are you hurt?"

"No," I say, and it feels good to be with the two men who mean the most to me in life, with *my family*. I poke at his chest playfully. "The man who kidnapped me was a fan of your books. I think that worked in my favor."

He laughs. "Yeah, well, I'd hate to kill a fan, but I think I might have to."

A gasp sounds near the door, and we all turn our attention to the woman who's entered the bathroom, and who's gone from shocked to indignant with supersonic speed. "What is going on in here?" she demands.

Tyler ignores her, and folds my chest to his, his entire focus on me. "Let's get out of here."

"Yes," I say. "Please."

We share a look with Dash, and then the three of us walk past the woman without saying a word. The travel through the lobby is intense, at least for me, as I expect someone to confront us, and some wild explosion of conflict to unfold. But nothing happens. We exit to the front of the hotel, and Dash's car is front and center, waiting on us. That's when Dash motions to the now familiar bellman, who eyes me with a keen stare but says nothing. He simply grabs the key for Dash and walks in our direction. I'm bubbling over with the need for confrontation and when Dash would tip the man, I catch his arm and say, "Don't. The Allen family tipped him plenty."

The bellman's eyes go wide. "That wasn't what it seemed."

"It was exactly how it seemed," I snap back. "And I will never, ever forget your face."

"Now we know who you are," Tyler adds, his voice as icy as a winter storm. "There's a lot I can do with that information." He glances at the man's badge. "*Tony*. But don't worry. I'll keep it between us. It's better that way. At least for me. Let's go home, Bella." With that, he turns me toward the car. And for the first time since this started, I think beyond the moment, to the war that has been started and that will surely burn us all alive.

I can almost feel Hawk Senior looking up from hell with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BELLA

Tyler and I slide into the backseat of Dash's car and in the moments it takes for Dash to join us, Tyler is kissing me again. "You scared the shit out of me, woman," he says, stroking my hair. "I was not okay without you." The confession is downright guttural, spoken from some deep, tormented part of this man's soul he once guarded with stone.

Now it's exposure, cut open and raw, and I pray that's not a problem for us. I pray that all I know about him and how he shuts down, how he shuts me out, will not prove a reality. We are in this together. We are in love. We can get through this. Or I can. Maybe I'm not sure with Tyler, not after last night.

"Wait for the bedroom, you two," Dash grumbles, yanking his door shut. "She's still my damn sister, asshole," he adds, eyeing Tyler in his mirror. "I don't want to see that shit. The ride is short. Hold it together." He pulls us away from the hotel and not a moment too soon as far as I'm concerned, but I stay in the moment, living and loving my freedom.

And as for Dash's reprimand, I laugh at the brotherly love he's throwing at Tyler, and therefore me. "Now you know what it's like every time I'm with you and Allie," I tease, but quickly turn somber with her mention. "Does she know what happened?"

"No," he says, eyeing me in the mirror. "She would have gotten in the middle of this and gotten hurt."

"She'll be pissed you left her in the dark."

"Better to ask for an apology later, than allow her to get hurt," he replies. "But I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do, and you can expect she'll be at your doorstep tomorrow."

"Good," I say, my eyes meeting Tyler's. "She can help me plan the perfect wedding." I curl my fingers on the light stubble on his jaw. "For us, Tyler. Not because of the will or your father."

"Agreed," he says. "It's time to put the will behind us." He strokes my hair behind my ear, his touch tender, and my throat is thick with emotion. I didn't know if I'd see him again. And there is so much I want to know about this man that I've yet to even begin to understand. He is layers of darkness and pain, complicated in ways his father has only amplified, and it kills me to

know a father could want this for his son.

The ride is indeed short, and in a matter of minutes Dash is pulling into the driveway, leaving the car idling, a sign he isn't staying. Tyler helps me out of the vehicle, and when I sway a bit, he catches me to him. "What was that?" he demands, his voice etched with concern. "Are you okay? Did they drug you?"

"No. No drugs, and I'm okay. I just had an overload of adrenaline and no food." Eager to calm Tyler's worries, I brush off the incident and turn my attention to my brother as he steps out of the car. "You're leaving." It's not a question.

"You need time together," he says. "I get that, but I'll come by in the morning with Allie and we can talk about what happened and what needs to happen." He pulls me into a bear hug and murmurs, "I love you, sis."

"I love you, too."

Dash releases me, offers Tyler a nod and then climbs back inside his car.

Tyler wraps his arm back around me and rotates us toward the house as we start walking. "I sent Molly's nanny home," he informs me.

"Good," I say, glancing up at him and he leans down and kisses me.

Molly hears us at the door and starts barking. I'm officially bubbling over with excitement to see her. It's just amazing how that little girl has made my life so much better. Tyler opens the door, and I'm inside in an instant, squatting down and loving on her. Molly is happy to bless me with puppy kisses and a big smile and we end up in the kitchen, offering her treats. Tyler kneels with me and he's giving Molly all kinds of love too. I watch him, my intense man made of stone, for everyone but me and Molly, and I wish the world knew this side of him but even if they do not, I do. And he is everything I saw beneath his surface all those years we walked around our attraction.

Those late nights at the office he let his guard down and showed me little pieces of the man no one else knew existed. He made me want more of us, and I still do. His gaze lifts and locks with mine, and the punch of heat between us is combustible. I'm spellbound by the moment and the man and when he cups my face, we stand together, step into each other, our bodies aligned.

"You have no idea how many ways I was losing my mind the past few hours."

"I hate they used me against you."

“They used you against themselves.”

My concern is instant, at what seems to be confirmation that this is far from over. “What happened?” I ask. “What *is* going on?”

“Not now,” he says, his voice sandpaper rough. “Not yet.” And then his mouth presses to my mouth, and he licks past my lips. The taste of him is possession and dominance.

He doesn’t want to talk right now.

And I don’t know that I do, either.

Because we both know this isn’t over, and we have to face what tonight’s events mean. Just not yet, not right this minute.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BELLA

Tyler shrugs out of his jacket and tosses it to a barstool, his hands returning to my body in a matter of a blink, his thick erection pressed to my belly. He cups my face, kissing me, drinking me in, and the taste of him is a drug. His kiss is rough and rousing and I am instantly seduced, a willing captive to his passion, to all that is this man.

I catch his shirt and pull it from his pants, shoving my hands under the starched cotton, my palms pressing to taut muscle and warm skin. A low growl escapes his lips, as if my touch undoes him, which has always really turned me on with Tyler, a man composed at every turn.

Except with me.

And I want more, so much more of him, wild and hungry and full of demand.

I reach up, unbuttoning his shirt, or trying. My hands tremble with more adrenaline, the emotions of the day, the lack of food, the intense desire coursing through my body, working a number on me.

Tyler helps me, finishing a button off and then pulling his shirt over his head. My hands are all over him before it ever hits the ground, my mouth on his chest. He catches the hem of my skirt, dragging it up my legs, and I have one moment of realization before his hands cup my naked backside. His fingers search for the silk I'd normally wear, and I suck in a breath, anticipating his reaction. God, I didn't warn him, I didn't tell him about Oliver. And I do not think he will react well. This man knows what I wear under my work attire, and sure enough, he jerks backward, his hands cupping my face. "Where are your panties?" he demands.

"He didn't touch me, Tyler. I promise—"

"Where are your panties?"

"He bound my hands and even fingers so I couldn't get out of the room," I say quickly, and deciding I've done this out of order, I add, "He had me take them off so I could go to the bathroom, but he turned his back. I only got out of the room because a maid heard me screaming. I swear, Tyler, he didn't touch me. He didn't look at me like that. He was offended I thought that he wanted to and I'd tell you, I swear. I wouldn't be okay right now if he'd

touched me.”

His palm settles warmly on my waist and his forehead touches mine. “I hate this happened to you. I hate I let this happen to you.”

My hand covers his hand. “You didn’t let it happen. Your father did this to us both, and I hate this happened to *you*.” I press on his chest, his heart thundering under my palm, telling me how affected he is right now. “They used me against you,” I say, tilting my chin up to meet his stare. “They made me a weapon.”

“They made me a weapon, and if they don’t know it, they will.”

A chill slides down my spine at the dangerous statement I fear more than I did Oliver. I can’t let him become his father. I won’t. “Tyler, I don’t want—”

“I do,” he says, “I want so fucking bad, I am coming out of my own skin.” He turns me around, and my hands catch on the island. He unzips my dress, between the two of us we pull it over my head, and soon I’m naked; everything is gone. And already his hands are back on my body, warm and possessive, and when he reaches around me and pinches my nipples, sensations slide through me and settle low in my belly. My sex clenches.

I want him inside me. I want him pressed close to me.

He rotates me, his piercing eyes raking over my naked body, one palm scooping my backside, molding me to him, possessiveness etched on his face. Tyler owns me, and it’s terrifying sometimes how much I love him, because I always think he’s one moment from talking himself into being bad for me. I think he hates himself. I think his father made him that way.

He kisses my neck, his hands and mouth exploring my body, and when my fingers dive into his hair, there is a spike of urgency between us. “I need to be inside you, Bella,” he says against my mouth, his breath hot, my body hotter.

“Yes, please,” I whisper, my voice all rasp and desire, and we’re so caught up in the storm of emotions raining down on us, that nothing exists but my need to feel him buried deep inside me.

We both reach for his pants and between the both of us, his zipper is down now, and his erection juts forward, thickly veined, my hand wrapping around it. He groans but doesn’t allow me to do any of the many things I’d like to do to him right now.

There is a frenzied need between us, and my breast is in his hand, my head tilted back, his lips on my neck, on my nipple, sucking deeply. And then his arm is around my waist, anchoring me and lifting me. He presses inside me, driving deep. I’m against the island with his big perfect body snug with mine,

and he leans in, inhaling me as he murmurs against my neck. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Bella.”

The words are roughened up with desire, spoken like a confession from someplace deep in his soul, and I have never been as turned on as I am in this moment. There is a fierceness about him as he drives into me, a hunger in the way his eyes ravish my breasts. In the way his lips touch mine and his tongue tastes me.

The more frenzied we become, the more intimate we feel. The way we wrap ourselves around each other, touch each other, kiss each other, move together—it’s as if we are trying to crawl under each other’s skin. When it ends, it’s in a wild, wicked, sudden way. One minute he’s driving into me and I’m pressing against him, my nails digging into his arm, and the next I’m trembling with my orgasm. And the stark passion etched on his handsome face as he comes with me is the most sexy and yes, beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

When our bodies still, our breathing fills the air, our emotions filling the room with the bravado of their creation. Love. Sex. Fear. Friendship. More fear. My fear, because I can feel a spike in Tyler’s mood, a shift between us. But his touch is tender, and he strokes my hair. “I’ll get you a towel.”

“Thank you,” I whisper as he pulls out of me, and when he turns away to fix his pants, his shoulders are bunched, the tension there is telling.

I grab paper towels and clean up before he can even make good on his promise. Because I know what is coming. Last night is coming. His desire to pull away to protect me is no longer a possibility. It’s a reality.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BELLA

I slide off the counter, toss the paper towels, and grab my dress.

By the time I'm stepping into it, Tyler's pulled on his shirt, and the action on his part reads like brutal confirmation that this really crappy day is about to get worse. My mind travels back to the backseat of Dash's car, when I'd said I wanted Allie to come over and help me plan our wedding. Tyler didn't say anything. He certainly didn't offer an agreement. That silence was telling, and I hadn't even noticed.

Suddenly, I need space before I explode on Tyler, and with that goal in mind, I rotate with every intention of leaving the room. Tyler catches my hand and turns me to face him, and I hate how heat zips up my arm. I hate how completely affected I am by him. I set myself up for heartache, but he's not letting me walk away.

The next thing I know, I'm back against the island with his big body caging mine, his hands on the counter on either side of me. "Who was the man who kidnapped you?"

"Why, Tyler? So you have another reason to walk away from me?"

"Who is he?" he asks again.

"He said his name was Oliver. He works for the family. He was proper, or he played the game of proper. He wanted to talk. He asked about the file. He pushed me to tell him where it was. Eventually, he believed me when I told him we don't have it. That's when he tied me up and left."

"He took you to a hotel room, Bella."

"He was afraid of you finding us before we talked. But yeah, that was scary. He kept threatening you. I had to go with him, or he said—well, alluded to—something bad happening to you."

Torment slices through his eyes. "I would never want you to put yourself on the line for me, Bella. He could have *raped you*."

"I believed him when he said something would happen to you, Tyler. There was something about him, a lethal quality. I think...I think he's a killer."

"A killer," he repeats flatly.

"Yes. A very proper, polite man who is a killer. A man too confident and

secure in his looks and skills to ever rape a woman. Somehow, in my mind, that makes him more dangerous than otherwise.”

His jaw sets and he pushes off the island, offering me his back again, and running a hand through his hair. My insides twist in knots as he seems to study the ceiling before rotating to face me again. “This is what I was talking about last night.”

“And here we go,” I say, throwing my hands in the air. “I know all about last night and what that means. So go, Tyler. Just pack and go. I can’t do this hot and cold thing anymore.” This time I start walking.

He’s in front of me in a heartbeat, his hands shackling my waist, possessive and warm. The touch of a man who believes he owns a woman. The problem is, he’s right. He owns me and it’s going to be torture to dislodge myself from the roller coaster ride that is this man.

“What do you think is happening right now, Bella?” he demands. He’s always all about the demand.

“I don’t think, I *know*. You’re about to say you need to protect me, so we need distance, and we need to break-up until this is over, but it will never be over. Why did you have to play me like you did? Why did you make me fall in love with you just to—”

His mouth crashes down over mine in a deep, toe-curling kiss that leaves me breathless as he declares, “I’m not going anywhere, Bella. I’m going to live in fear of every moment I’m not with you, and that’s going to drive you crazy until I check it. And that’s not going to be easy or fast.”

I blink. “I don’t understand. You just said this is what you were talking about last night.”

“I had a bad feeling last night, Bella. I was right. I could feel an attack coming at us. I could *feel it*.”

“Which made you think we needed space.”

“For about thirty miserable seconds. I’m just trying to be a good man for you, Bella. I don’t want to be selfish with you and at your expense, but the truth is, I can’t help myself. I’m selfishly unable to walk away from you. I need you too damn much to walk away even if I should. You are my addiction that I happily subscribe to. But it kills me that I’ve made mistakes that put you in harm’s way.”

My heart is heavy and warm, relief sliding through me. He’s addicted to me. He can’t walk away. He’s just trying to protect me and too often, I think it’s him he feels is more dangerous than anyone. “You had a bad feeling. You

had no way of knowing what was coming.”

“I could have stopped it from getting this far. I’ve acted out of character when handling this threat from my father.”

I think of him digging through files, desperate to win against his father, above all else. “There’s nothing normal about a father putting you through this, Tyler.”

“No, but I should have charged at the problem, and taken the bull by the horns. Instead, I was running from the bull. Proof that my father can still fuck with my head. I have so much to say to you and tell you, and I want to hear about every second of what happened to you, but nothing you say is going to get rid of me.”

“I’ve told you all there really is to tell about what happened to me,” I say, eager to veer away from my afternoon, which is his hell. “But, Tyler, last night—”

“Was nothing more than what I said it was. Damn it, Bella, I want to get on a plane and go get married in Vegas. That’s how all-in I am, and that’s not the first time I’ve said this. I think we should. We’ll do the fancy wedding up right, but we’ll know we’re forever.”

“I told you I don’t need that.”

“I do,” he insists. “I need to know you said yes.”

I soften, tenderness filling me. “I said yes the minute I met you, even though I didn’t know it yet.” My head spins again and I sway.

“Baby, you had me the minute you walked into that interview. Bella, I’ve got you,” he repeats. “I got us. I need you to know that.”

“I know that, all of that, but you don’t seem to know that I’ve got you, too.”

“The only person who ever has,” he says, stroking my hair behind my ear, tenderness in his touch. “I think we need to talk about a lot of things, but we need to feed you before you pass out on me. And I want to wash that man off you.”

“He didn’t—”

“I don’t care. I want every part of this evening washed away, except for the part where I got you back. What do you want to eat?”

I don’t fight him on the dirtiness of the day. He’s right. I want it behind us. As for food, I have strong opinions, always. “Pizza?” I ask.

“Pizza,” he agrees. “I’ll order, and we can shower while we wait.”

A few minutes later, I stand under the flow of warm water with Tyler, his

arms wrapped around me, my face resting against his chest, his heart a steady thrum beneath my ear. We don't talk. We just stand here together, the two of us, in the aftermath of the storm, that has now passed, at least for the moment.

I don't know if the war has passed, and I'm not ready to ask.

But for the first time in our relationship, I feel certain we will face what battle is left together. It doesn't matter how long our engagement is or how short. I'm going to marry Tyler Hawk, and we're both going to hold on tight to each other and not let go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BELLA

Tyler and I have barely gotten out of the shower and dressed in our hanging around the house clothes, which means sweatpants for him and leggings for me, when his cellphone rings. He retrieves it from his pocket and eyes the caller ID, grimacing as he hits decline. “Gavin,” he explains. “I thought he was involved in everything that happened today, but he ended up helping. I’m just not sure I’m clear-minded enough right now to really decide if he’s a good guy or a bad guy.” The doorbell rings. “That’s the pizza.” He kisses my temple. “I’ll tell you all about it while we eat.”

“Sounds good,” I say, and I’m almost too tired at this point to even feel capable of digesting all that he might have to share, but I suspect food might re-energize me mentally and physically.

About thirty minutes later, we’re on the living room floor in front of the couch, the coffee table our dinner buffet of pizza, which we’ve shared with a very happy Molly. So far, he’s told me all about the timing of my disappearance and the partners meeting, and his efforts to find me after said events.

“The thing that bothers me the most about the way this all went down,” I say, “is the way I was hijacked right when you were called into that meeting. It feels as if the Allen family conspired to take you down, or at least threaten you.”

“Yes. I agree.” He sets our pizza box aside. “There’s a connection, which means I have a leak from inside.”

“Or it’s Withers and your father,” I suggest. “I mean what if Withers was instructed to deliver the terms of the will to the partners, even if he didn’t know what it was?”

“I considered that,” he says. “But we’d have to assume he conspired with the Allen family on the timing of those letters and your kidnapping. It’s a tough sell.”

“Not if one of the partners was corrupted by the Allen family and paid to call the partners meeting this morning. Or maybe there was no letter from your father and Withers at all. The Allen family simply got to some of your people.”

“That feels right, though I wouldn’t put it past my father to send letters to the partners. I should have assumed as much, and I have to assume as much now, even if it’s not what happened.”

“Which translates to what?” I ask, shoving my plate aside and sipping from the glass of wine Tyler poured me.

“I need to think about that, and I’m too damn tired to do it objectively. And I think I’ll pay Withers another visit.”

I rotate to face him with a realization. “I forgot an important detail about my time with Oliver. I’m just tired and I think on overload.”

He goes stone still. “What does that mean, Bella?”

“Nothing bad,” I say, leaning over to kiss him. “But now that I’ve eaten and my adrenaline has settled down, my brain is focused on the details and one of them might be important. You already know he pushed me hard to convince you to give him that file. I told him you don’t have it...we don’t have it.”

“And yet he left you alone. That surprises me.”

“He pushed me hard but seemed to believe me, but the important part is where that led. When he found out that Withers would be the one to release the file to the public should you challenge the will, he was not pleased. He called him on speakerphone.”

“Oh, shit. And what happened?”

“Withers assured him he had no idea that what was in the press release he’s supposed to make public if you challenged the will.”

“Which is a lie. Withers knows exactly what is going on. He was either lying for show or lying to save his ass with the Allen family.”

“Whatever the case, Oliver reminded him how important loyalty to the Allen family must remain. Well, actually it was more like—they would be unhappy if you released that file, and you know what happens when they’re unhappy.”

“How did Withers respond?”

“Scared. He’s not going to cross them, Tyler. You don’t have to worry about that file being released. I believe that with every part of me. Once Oliver talks to the Allen family, this should be over. And you haven’t even told me about your meeting with them. How hard did they push?”

“It wasn’t the family but one man, Knox Allen.” He shifts the topic. “What did Oliver look like?”

“A tall, distinguished Black man.”

“He showed up and asked to talk to Knox in private. I don’t know what he said to him, but when Knox came back into the room, nothing had changed. He wanted my assurance the family was protected. He offered me a proposition, which was nothing but bullshit.” His energy shifts, darkens. He pushes off the ground to sit on the couch.

“What proposition?” I ask, uneasy enough to sit on the cushion next to him.

“He wanted me to record a confession about the trial that he could hold should I burn him. This in exchange for your safety.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

TYLER

“No. No, no,” Bella declares, rotating to face me, her eyes alight with a mix of absolute panic and anger. “Tell me you said no. You don’t give that family anything to hold against you, Tyler.”

“Look, baby—”

“Oh my God,” she gushes. “You told them yes.” She pops to her feet.

I follow her and catch her hand, turning her to me yet again before she can escape, my hands settling on her shoulders. “No,” I say. “I did not tell that little prick yes, though for the record, if I thought it would truly protect you, I’d do about anything, no matter how stupid it might be.”

“You said no? Then how did the meeting end?”

“I told him that until I had you back and safely with me, there would be no negotiation. He took a potential ally and made me his worst nightmare. It was all a test, to evaluate how easily I could be bullied. Ultimately, he gave me a key to your hotel room, but you texted me before I even left his home. Because you, my beautiful, future bride, are resourceful as fuck.”

“I might not have been though, Tyler. This could have ended much worse. This isn’t over at all. How do we make it over?”

My jaw sets and I don’t know what she wants to hear, but there’s only one answer—the honest one—I can give her. “They took you, Bella. I can’t just let that go.”

She searches my face, her expression earnest. “What does that mean, Tyler?”

“I don’t know yet, baby. It’s all pretty fucking raw right now. I literally feared you were dead hours ago. If you make me answer that question right now, the answer will be nothing but bloody. I need you to just give me tonight, to just be with you. Can you do that? Can you give me that?”

“I was scared, too. They threatened you to get me to do what they wanted me to do. So I get it. I do. I want this over, but for good.”

“And it will be. Of that, you have my word.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

TYLER

I wake to the sun breaking through an uneven curtain panel, with Bella nuzzled to my side, and a sloppy puppy kiss on my face. I can't help but smile, which in itself is a testament to not only how my life has changed but how I have changed. After the bullshit that went down yesterday, I should be an asshole and a scowl mixed together to make a monster, but I don't feel weaker because of this softer side of me Bella has created.

I meant what I said to Knox Allen last night.

He's made an enemy of me, one with a reason to hurt him. I'm not about games like my father.

Bella shifts and blinks up at me. I kiss her and smooth her hair from her face. "Rest, baby. I'm just going to take Molly out."

Her eyes fill with tenderness. "Do you know how much that makes me love you?"

I chuckle. "I'm glad it does." I try to move away, and she catches my arm and says, "You're a really good doggy dad."

Molly whines. "I better go prove that to be true."

She smiles and releases me.

I stand to pull on my pajama bottoms, and Bella says, "And you have a great ass."

Now she's just trying to take my morning wood to a whole new level. I glance over my shoulder. "Show me when I get back."

She's sitting up now, the sheet to her chest. "I will. You better hurry. It's eight already. I know Allie. She'll hear what happened and be over any minute."

She's right. That is exactly how Allie rolls. "Way to ruin all my plans to come back to bed." I motion to Molly. "Come on, girl."

A few minutes later, it's like déjà vu from yesterday morning. I've just finished putting the chocolate coffee on to brew when Bella appears in her robe and slippers. "Feels like yesterday, doesn't it?" she asks, her mood a bit more somber than when we woke up.

"Except I'm not letting you out of my sight today."

"I can live with that," she says, wrapping her arms around me. "I feel a

little weird today, like this out-of-body kind of strange feeling. Like yesterday didn't really happen."

Because she could have died, I think, her use of the word "killer" to describe Oliver, knifing through me.

"Which is why we're going to the office and acting like we're unaffected," she adds. "Like we have a plan we don't have yet. Also, Dash and Allie will be here in forty-five minutes, so we need to go shower. I suggest we save time and do it together."

I won't turn down a chance to be wet and naked with Bella, but the rest of what she's just said is another story. "Staying home today does not make us look weak, Bella. It might actually make us appear like we're up to something."

"I think we should go to work, Tyler. I think we look stronger that way. You, especially. You can't come off like a woman makes you weak."

"The last thing that man believes right now is that I'm weak because of you, Bella. I made my point clear. He touched you. He made an enemy."

"You keep saying that, Tyler." She eases back to study me. "What does that mean?"

"I laid in bed last night and thought about just that. I assumed my father pointed me toward the Allen family to threaten me, but maybe I wasn't reading the puzzle correctly."

"Meaning what?"

"Maybe it wasn't a threat but a warning in his demented way of communicating. The Allen family is as good as a mob family. We represented them. My father did something dirty to get one of them out of murder, and they tried to hold him captive. He, in turn, held them captive. Now, he's gone—"

"And they want to do the same to you."

"Yes. He knew they'd come for me."

"So why not just leave you the file?"

"Either he did, and I just can't find it, or he never had it, and he bluffed."

"Then we have a problem," Bella says. "Because if he did, we have to assume Withers had it, and Oliver told Withers to leave his office open so he could go get it last night. They likely have the file now, and we have nothing."

"If Withers even had the file. My father and his games, remember?"

"Okay, but assume they do. Why does this even matter? They could ruin

us, but they ruin themselves in the process.”

“If memory serves, the trial was based around Allen Senior, who is now dead. That file doesn’t hurt them, it hurts us.”

“But does it? Both men are dead.”

“All of our cases will be looked at,” I argue.

“You haven’t done criminal law in a decade, Tyler. And it would just seem more a part of you being stuck with your father’s crap. Let them threaten you. Let them do what they are going to do.”

I catch her waist and pull her to me. “You forget, Bella. They went after you. If I don’t respond to the threat, they’ll come at you again. I have to shut them down. I have to be my father in this and hold something over their head. And there was more to that file than a dead man’s sins, or they wouldn’t want it this badly. We have to find it.”

“I told you, Withers left it out for Oliver.”

“There’s another copy. We have to find it. I will find it. Because it’s how I protect you.”

CHAPTER FORTY

BELLA

Our quick, shared shower ends with Tyler's fingers tangled into my hair, me pressed against the wall, and his thick erection buried within me, in what I can only call pure animalistic demand. That dark side of him, that part of him I've come to know all too well, is here and now, and tells me he's not okay. When it's over, he's still hard lines and bunched muscle. The pressure he's feeling to protect me clearly has him on overload and his plan—finding the all too elusive file—isn't a good answer. It's a continuation of more of the same strategy we've struggled with for weeks now, with no results. He knows this, of course, as he's a smart person, which makes me fear there's more to his plan, and it won't be anything I'll approve of. I'm terrified he's going to do something we will both regret and I'm not sure Dash will help me talk sense into him. My father certainly would not. They're all men protecting a woman they love.

Allie is another story.

Tyler is dressed long before me, in one of his blue pinstriped suits, off to make phone calls in the other room. Before I dry my long blonde hair, which takes a good long minute, I text Allie: *I know you know what happened. I'm fine. Tyler is not. He's after blood. He won't say that, but I know him. I know that's what's going on.*

She replies immediately: *I can't believe they didn't tell me what was going on and thank God you're safe. Dash was in the same state of mind, but I talked him off that ledge last night. Hopefully enough for him to do the same for Tyler. But we do have to take action against these people, Bella. What if they come at you again?*

It's a question that lingers on my mind during the rest of my morning routine.

Why is a case that's over ten years old creating such a problem for everyone involved? Why does it scare the Allen family enough to kidnap me? The unknowns are what feel scary. I Google the family despite knowing a lot about them from going through the files with Tyler. They own a major company with paws in everything from retail, to yes, legal services. There's more to that file than meets the eyes, and would Hawk Senior, a man who

held them captive for a decade, just leave the details with Withers—an attorney with connections to the Allen family?

No.

That makes no sense to me.

I'm betting Hawk Senior would rather Tyler win this battle than the Allen family, because even if he wouldn't admit it in life, Tyler winning, is him winning.

I've just stepped into a red dress and black heels—no hiding for me today, it's bold all the way—when Tyler appears in the doorway, looking as broody and hot as ever. “What if your father didn't want this conflict with the Allen family to end because that meant they won, so he made sure you kept it going? So if you end it, you beat him.”

“And they win.”

“Does it matter, if it does us no harm?”

“They already did us harm, Bella. They took you.”

The doorbell rings, and Molly goes nuts. Tyler disappears out of the doorway without another word, and I know why. He doesn't want to answer my questions, of which I have many. He's going down the rabbit hole of revenge, and I do believe that's exactly what Hawk Senior would want, but I know deep down that is not what Tyler wants to become. But he's being pushed. And he's on the edge of the point of no return. And I'm not sure how that changes him or us if I don't stop it from happening.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BELLA

Edgy doesn't even begin to describe how I feel as I head into the kitchen to greet Dash and Allie, who've come with waffles from one of my favorite breakfast spots. Dash is dressed in his normal writing gear, ready to huddle down in a coffee shop and write, in worn jeans, biker boots, and a tee. The familiarity that he represents is comforting and good for my soul right now.

"Not as good as when you make them yourself," Dash greets, setting the bags on the table, warmth in his eyes as he adds, "but the next best thing."

He's referencing my habit of coming by on the weekends and making him waffles, something that used to be just me and him, and now needs to become the four of us. We need to get back to those weekend mornings, to family.

Allie is instantly around the table and pulling me into a honeysuckle-scented hug.

"Just hearing what happened scares me," she whispers near my ear before pulling back to inspect me. She looks lovely today in an emerald-green blouse and black skirt, her dark hair silky around her shoulders, her eyes brimming with genuine worry. "How do you feel this morning?"

My gaze lands on Tyler behind the counter, where he's holding a cup of coffee. "Worried this is exactly what Hawk Senior wanted."

"Which is what?" Dash asks, as Tyler hands Allie a cup over the counter.

"Yes, which is what?" Allie asks.

"Tyler, damn it," I say, facing the counter, my back to my brother. "Your father wanted you to go after the Allen family to continue the feud and he made sure you did."

"It doesn't matter why this happened, it matters that they took you."

"But does it?" I ask. "I'm fine. They didn't hurt me. We cannot live our life with them as enemies."

"It's done now," Dash says, stepping to my side. "They took you, Bella. He can't let that go."

"You are supposed to be ex-FBI, Dash," I scold. "And that means setting a good example by doing the right thing."

"Because I'm an ex-FBI agent, I can tell you, that family has a mark on your family, and Tyler is your family now. That means he's our family. We

have to control them, so they don't control us." I open my mouth to speak, and he holds up a hand. "I get it, Bella. You don't want him to become his father, and he's not his damn father. He's protecting you and his business."

"How does going to war protect our business?"

"We have famous, powerful clients, Bella," Tyler says softly, drawing my attention to his steely blue eyes. "What happens when they have me pay for your safety in a percentage of their contracts?"

"Oh my God," Allie murmurs. "Would they do that?"

My eyes haven't left Tyler. "Would they do that?"

"That little Allen bitch said to me, and I quote, 'I'm sure you can find a way to pay me for my discomfort.'"

Disbelief rolls through me. "And you said?"

"'With more discomfort.' That's when Oliver interrupted. When Allen went to meet with him, you texted me. When he walked back into the room, I told him when I had you back safely, we'd talk and not a moment sooner. Then I left."

"Okay, I'm sold," I say. "We have to shut them down. Forget the waffles. What's our plan?"

"First of all, I stop fucking with my father, his will, and the partners. I let my father get in my head, or I would have done that from the beginning."

"How?" I ask. "What does that mean?"

"We call a partner meeting, and I want you there, Bella. I tell them we're getting married. My hold on the company is locked down, but the threat that is the Allen family is a threat to us all. Someone knows something. They need to be put on notice that they bring it to me, or they will be terminated, all stock revoked, should we find out they knew information to protect the company and its partners, and withheld it."

"That almost seems too simple," Allie says. "Logical, but simple."

"Which is exactly why my father didn't think I'd do it. He wanted me to understand why this mattered, why controlling the Allen family mattered, and I had to get to know them to do that. He won. I learned the lesson. I already texted my secretary to setup the meeting." He glances at his Rolex. "We have an hour. Let's eat waffles."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BELLA

We eat waffles, but I barely taste them.

My mind is playing a million war games and not many of them end with us victorious. I'm worried. Is one of those statements, you could call an understatement, tenfold? Nothing feels under control and while yes, I consider myself a control freak anyway, having none messes with me, which I feel to my core. The only comfort I find is that Tyler, who makes my version of "control freak" look like I'm not one at all, is at ease over breakfast. Almost as if he knows what I do not, and I need to be enlightened. Dash isn't much different, which leads me to believe they've talked outside of this breakfast.

At one point, Allie looks between them and says, "What do you two know that we do not?"

"I think Tyler has a good plan," Dash says and offers nothing more.

I turn to Tyler. "What don't I know?"

"Dierk ran into Withers during his morning coffee shop stop this morning. They talked. Per Withers my father wanted me to find my enemy, the Allen family, and control them. He used Withers to get that done. And yes, Withers also works for the Allen family, but because he is captive to them. If they own you, they own you. On the other hand, he was friends with my father. Withers helped him control the Allen family, and now he wants us to believe he's helping me do the same."

"Why kidnap me?"

"Because the Allen family believes I have whatever my father had on the family, and because I have you, I can be controlled."

"But you don't have it," I argue.

"Neither did my father. Or so he thinks. It sounds like bullshit to me. According to Withers, my father made the Allen family think he had whatever it was they're scared of. Withers doesn't know the details, but from this point, I have to make him believe I do until I do. I need to control them. I need a way."

"We're working on that," Dash says. "And the partner meeting might be the answer. Someone knows something. Tyler's going to give them a reason

to talk.”

“We can only bluff so long,” I say. “Then what?”

“We’ll handle it,” Dash says. “Dierk and I will use our CIA and FBI resources to make them believe we’ve stuffed charges as favors to Tyler.”

“It feels very dark and very iffy to me,” Allie says, plucking the thoughts out of my head.

The doorbell rings. “That will be the pet nanny,” Tyler says, pushing to his feet and taking me with him, his hands settling on my arms. “We got this, baby. I swear to you, we got this, and I’ll say it again, I got you. I will never let them come near you again.” He’s a private person, but he drags me close and murmurs, his voice low and raspy, “I love you too damn much to ever let that happen.”

I believe him. I do. But I’ve also learned how cruel the world can be.

My mother is dead, and my father would have done anything to save her.

It’s a conversation for later, and maybe after I see how today goes with the partners, but one thing I know for sure. We have to end this with finality. And we need to get married sooner rather than later. I want to know we both knew the other said ‘yes’ if this ends badly.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

TYLER

I walk into my office to find Gavin waiting on me at my conference table. He pushes to his feet, his hand on a stack of files. “We’re ready. Is Bella joining us? How is she?”

“I’m fine,” Bella says from the door. “I was going to swing by my office and drop off my stuff, but I just don’t feel like chatting before the meeting.” She walks to the coffee table in the sitting area and sets her bag down. “Let’s just do this.” Her blue-eyed, intelligent stare pins Gavin. “Are you really on our side?”

“A hundred percent,” he assures us. “I was pressuring him to get married to protect him and his interests.”

“And yours.”

“I don’t deny that as fact. Yes, and mine. And yours. And everyone at this firm who needs him in the driver’s seat. And getting married is how he locks in his role as controlling partner, but I always thought you were the best choice for his bride.”

“Because I didn’t want his money?”

“You don’t. You want him. That’s about as good as it gets. But you’re also smart, levelheaded, and someone who brings value to the firm. I don’t believe anyone will think you slept your way to the top, Bella. You don’t need this job. You walked in here with something to prove to yourself, and you proved it to the world in the process. You’re his equal as his mother never was to his father.”

Bella digests his words, and if I were frank and open with both of them right now, I’d say I do as well. Gavin is right. Bella belongs by my side. She has always belonged by my side, but we let way too much get between us, though ultimately, I think time made us stronger when we finally came together.

“I want to call you an asshole,” Bella finally replies. “But I can’t argue your point of view. Okay, scratch that. I’ll say it anyway. You’re still an asshole. We’re all attorneys here. Being Tyler’s direct council means having decorum, compassion, and a broader picture than your wallet in ways you

didn't show. And yes, be arrogant. Confidence wins, but again, decorum, Gavin."

My lips curve. "I'm fairly certain you were just put in your place, Gavin,"

"And I'm one hundred percent certain that's why she will win the room in the partner meeting. She'll do the same to anyone who crosses her." He scoops up the files. "So you know, Bella, I'm giving them all copies of the will and a confidentiality and ethics agreement to sign before they review it. I'll go in first, get the paperwork done, and then let Tyler know we're ready for you both." He looks between us. "Unless you need me for further consult?"

"Give us the green light when you're ready for us," I say.

Gavin gives me a nod and then glances at Bella, smartly offering her respect. She too nods her approval, and he exits the room.

By the time the door shuts, I'm on the other side of the desk, with Bella, my hands on her waist. She's so damn tiny to pack such a punch. "I agree with Gavin. It had to be you. It always had to be you."

"You know you have to show them you're king today, right?"

"And I will. Marry me. Let's leave tonight and go to Vegas. Screw the will. I can't wait to marry you and I want you to know when I say I do, it's because I want to, not because of that will. And I want to know when you say I do—"

"It's because I love you. But no to Vegas. Yes, to getting married sooner rather than later. Vegas feels like we're gambling. There's enough of that in our life right now."

"Then where? When? How about Paris? Or Italy?"

"Can we get a license to marry there?"

"It'll take months. The truth is that's a better place to plan our formal wedding. Why not find a spot in the mountains, invite a few people and get married in a month? Then we can do the formal ceremony anywhere you like."

"I love the idea of Italy," she says. "It feels romantic, but it's not like we have a place there that is our place. Our special place."

"Why not go find one? We can get on a plane this weekend."

"We're going to Dallas to see my father's race."

"And I want to spend time with your father," I assure her, and I do. I need to know the man that means so much to Bella. I'll be nervous as fuck, but that relationship matters. "We can fly out afterward."

“You can’t leave right now, Tyler, not after this meeting. Not with all that’s going on. Let’s do Vegas. We can charter a plane from Dallas.”

“You said—”

She pushes to her toes and kisses me. “I know what I said. I just want to marry you. I want to know that, if something happens, something goes wrong, we know we said ‘I do.’”

I fold her close. “Nothing is going to happen. How about Dallas, baby? We’ll all be there anyway. We can find a location, even on short notice. Then we’ll plan a spectacular fucking official wedding. Your dream wedding.”

“Actually, my parents were married in Italy. Maybe we *could* get married there?”

“How would your father feel about that?”

“Do you know how much I love that you asked that?” she asks, her eyes warm. “Let’s ask him together this weekend. I’ll start by calling him about the weekend wedding later today.”

My cellphone buzzes with a text message and I grab it from my desk and eye Bella. “Showtime. They’re ready for us.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

TYLER

I walk into the partner meeting with Bella by my side and I read the energy as non-confrontational. I lead Bella to the front of the room with me, step in front of the table and greet our audience. “I assume you’ve all read the will.”

That’s when Amy Moore, a redhead with a feisty attitude speaks up. “Can I just say this is bullshit? Your father was an asshole. I’m glad you and Bella are in love, and you’re a better man—fair and hardworking—than your father ever was, but nothing should be forced on anyone like this.”

Another partner, Andrew Brooks, speaks up. “I could get this thrown out of court, which I know isn’t necessary, but I’m concerned about the threat attached. What happened on that case?”

Several partners chime in with agreement before Andrew adds, “Where are we on figuring out the fallout?”

“There won’t be any fallout,” I assure them. “But before I elaborate, I want to be frank. We can’t find the case file and I have almost no memory of the case. I was second chair. It all seemed up and up to me, but now, I’d say otherwise. I need to come to all of you with honesty no matter how painful. The reality here is that we wouldn’t want to release a case file that hurt us just to hurt them. The threat would seem to be a bluff, if not for one thing.”

“Which is what?” Andrews asks, seeming to be speaking for all.

“The Allen family is worried about what I know and what I could do to them. They assume I inherited knowledge about them I do not have. My father was a dick. He liked to play games, but I have the impression that family tried to blackmail us or our clients, and my father checked them with whatever this file holds. Maybe in his fucked-up way, the way he wrote the will was supposed to make me figure that out.”

“Why not just tell you?” Andrews asks.

“Because he hated me.”

A partner, a brunette fifty-something who’s damn good at her job, named Beverley Hallow, chimes in then. “That’s true. He was so jealous of you. He probably wants you to succeed but has to punish you through the process. We all saw that.”

There is a hum of agreement again, before she adds, “But this time, it affects us all.” She waves her hand around the room. “Does anyone know anything about the Allen family feud with us?”

There is silence and a lot of shaking of heads.

“All right then,” I say. “I’m trying to figure that out. I have no file. Needless to say, I need a way to check them. I need everyone on that. And if you wonder why Bella is here, I need you all to understand, she’s by my side now. The wedding is not a sham.”

“His father didn’t believe in love,” Bella adds. “He hoped being married would be torture to Tyler. It was supposed to be his final kick in the teeth, like ‘you can have my money and company, but you have to suffer to do it.’”

“He had no idea how I felt about Bella,” Tyler adds.

“We can all see that,” Beverly replies. “And we all respect Bella.” On that note, her attention turns to Bella. “I never told you I had the honor of meeting your mother. She’d be proud of who you’ve become.”

Bella gives her a nod. “Thank you for that. I try to make her proud every day. And I do love Tyler. We didn’t mean for it to happen, but the fact that our feelings grew over the years makes us stronger.”

“We’ve all talked privately,” Andrew interjects. “We believe we’re headed the right direction, and none of us want that disrupted. What happens if the Allen family comes at us and we don’t have whatever was in that file, which clearly was not something damning to us, but them?”

“Let me be clear. Knox Allen crossed a line with me that cannot be uncrossed, and I won’t elaborate. What I will say is that while I may be a more honorable man than my father, I’m the enemy he didn’t want to have. And I’m his enemy. Mark my word, the Allen family will be controlled.”

“What if that isn’t enough?” Andrew challenges.

“If you trust me that little, I’m sure there are partners at this table that will happily buy your stock. I’ll put in the first offer.”

Andrew smiles and then laughs. “I’ll keep my stock.”

“Anyone else?” I challenge.

The room is silent.

“Meeting adjourned,” I say, and my cellphone buzzes with a message I pull up to read: *Tyler Hawk, it’s Knox Allen. We never finished our meeting.*

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

TYLER

We never finished our meeting.

My lips curve, and my amusement is real. If Knox Allen wants to play this game, we'll play. My way. I don't reply. Not yet. At this point the room has cleared except for Gavin and Bella, and I turn to Gavin, arching a brow. "You killed it. You won't be challenged by the partners and anyone that might have been in question, stayed silent and got shut down. Now we just need to find that damn file for our peace of mind."

"Agreed," I say, thinking about the partners who'd led that confrontation with me yesterday. "Call the partners in that challenged me yesterday— Raiden, Jack, and Terrance, and offer them an out. Make sure they know I know who they are. Their silence today in the meeting did not make them invisible. I don't trust them. Make sure you aren't one of them, Gavin. Make sure I trust you."

"I was never one of them, Tyler." One of the janitors, a man named José, who's been around since I was a kid, appears in the doorway and hesitates. I motion him forward. He's a quiet guy, was always kind to me when I was young and hanging out at the office, and he's probably more loyal than the partners that challenged me yesterday. My chin lifts at Gavin. "Go show me how loyal you really are."

His lips press together, and he heads for the door. He's not pleased with my challenge, but he needs to know he has to earn my trust at this point.

I rotate to Bella, my hands settling on her arms. "You were perfection."

"As were you, but you still don't know how you're going to deal with the Allen family."

"Strategically," I reply. "Trust me, baby. And go talk to your father and brother about us getting married this weekend. And the official ceremony in Italy."

"I want to talk about Italy with my dad in person. I need to look in his eyes and find out if it brings him joy or pain to have us hold a ceremony in the same place he and my mom did."

I stroke her hair. "Agreed, but this weekend, Bella. You and me, forever. If you want that, we'll start looking for a location."

“You really want to do this now?”

“More than I’ve ever wanted to do anything in my life, but only if you do.”

“After last night, I’m reminded that every day is a blessing. I want the chance to say I do. I’ll go make the calls. You were good, Tyler. You made us all feel like we have strong leadership.” She kisses me and leaves the room.

My gaze lingers on her, and my heart is full in a way I didn’t know a Hawk male could ever feel. I reach for my phone and read the text message that reads: *Tyler Hawk, it’s Knox Allen. We never finished our meeting.*

I reply to his text with: *No, we have not and I have much to say. Eight o’clock tonight. The Wesley Cigar Bar. Just you.*

I slide my phone back into my pocket and glance around the empty room to find José working in the corner, messing with a trashcan, and I have a flashback of him giving me a sucker when I was a kid. I walk over to him. “José,” I greet.

He straightens. “Mr. Hawk.”

“Tyler,” I say. “Anyone who put up with me as a kid can call me Tyler.”

He smiles, the skin around his eyes lined deeply, his skin aged and thin. “You were a cute boy.”

“Why haven’t you retired?”

“I like to work.”

I wonder then about how oblivious I have been to all but our partners and my father. And my only goal, which was to prove myself to him. “Did we give you a retirement plan?”

“Yes, of course. You offer me excellent benefits and pay. Your mother made sure of it.”

My mother. Of course, and I think this not because she is a better person than my father but because she’s self-centered enough to want everyone to love her. And yet, it is always fake with her, in ways it will never be with Bella. “Then why are you still working?” I ask.

“My wife, Melissa, died a few years ago. I don’t think you ever met her, but I hate being home alone without her.”

I draw in a breath, aware that Bella’s father suffers much in the same way. All too aware that I thought I would as well last night. “Bella’s father—”

“Yes. She told me. One night working late, she was crying. She hung up with her father, and it was the anniversary of her mother’s death. You know,

she went to your office that night.”

I’m stunned by this revelation. “She did? And what did I do?”

His lips curved. “You talked with her for hours, I do believe. I knew that night, you are not your father.” He waves a hand around the room. “Now everyone knows.” He studies me a moment and adds, “Bella is a beautiful girl and very smart.” He taps his temple. “Hold onto her. She will make you a better man.”

“She already has.”

He winks. “Yes. She has. Now I better get back to work. I wouldn’t want to make the new boss mad.”

He reaches down and starts tying up a trash bag the way I’m going to tie up the loose ends with the Allen family. And I have until eight o’clock to figure out how. I start walking toward the door but before I exit, I pause and say, “Thank you, José.”

“Wait, Tyler.”

I rotate to face him. “Forgive me if I overstep—and truly I almost let you leave without saying this—but I know you’re looking for a secret your father kept locked away.”

My spine straightens, and I step into the room, shutting the door. “What do you know?”

“Specifically, nothing, but I saw a lot. Your greatest failures were sadly his greatest joys. It shouldn’t be that way. They were his prized possessions but no one else would think that. No one else would look *there*. I don’t know where ‘there’ might be, but if you do, I think you’ll find what you’re looking for. I hope that helps.”

His observation is as good as a blade in my gut and heart, but it’s one that rings with bloody truth. I give him a nod and exit the conference room, preparing myself to face my failures, and all they meant to my father.

And now, to me.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

BELLA

The first thing I do when I sit down at my desk is call Dash. “Are you at Cupcakes and Books writing?”

“Not today. Today is not a day I get words. I’m meeting with Dierk and a couple old friends. If we can’t find the file, we’re going to find dirt on the Allen family to create a new one.”

“FBI friends,” I assume.

“Yes. The minute you brought up Cupcakes and Books, I feared you’d come walk to see me. None of us can live that way, and for the record, shoot the bastard next time.”

“Yeah, I probably handled that all wrong.”

“In the end, you did fine, Bella, but damn, it was a long few hours. I’m glad we’re going to see the race this weekend. We all need some away time. And Tyler needs to get to know your dad.”

“About that. We want to do a secret wedding this weekend, in Dallas. How do you feel about it?”

“He makes you happy and he loves you, but why this weekend?”

Emotions well in my chest. “Mom—and you never know—and last night—and—”

“This weekend,” he says. “I get it. Do you know where?”

“No. No, I need to find a place.”

“Call Allie. She’ll help. What about your dad?”

“I haven’t told him, but I think he’ll get it. Especially if I tell him about this weekend.”

“I’m not sure you should do that,” he warns. “What if he connects the danger to Tyler?”

“Good point. Okay, I’ll just tell him how I feel, minus the trigger. We want to do the full ceremony, the one the will requires, but we want to do that in Italy, where Mom and Dad married. How do you think he’ll feel about it?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard to say, but my gut says he’ll understand you want a way to have her close to you.”

“The way you just understood?” I ask, my heart squeezing.

“Yeah. The way I just understood. I love the hell out of Allie. It makes it

much easier for me to understand the way the heart leads the mind. Call Allie. She'll help you plan this weekend. And do it fast. Is today Wednesday already?"

"It is." My brows dip. "I think. Yesterday is still messing with me."

"Love you, sis. Let me go get to work on keeping you safe. I'm coming by to see Tyler later today. I'll come by your office, too."

I disconnect with a smile on my lips, and dial my father. "Dad," I say when he answers.

"Yes, my daughter?"

"What if I said I want to have a big wedding I plan out, but that tomorrow isn't guaranteed and I want to do a small ceremony this weekend in Dallas?"

He's silent several beats before he says, "I'd say, you're right. Tomorrow is never guaranteed, baby. Do you have a dress? Because I know a few people who could have a shit ton of choices waiting on you when you get here."

I laugh and spend the next twenty minutes planning my wedding with my father and it turns out I don't need Allie's help at all. He's hiring a wedding planner, someone who knew my mother very well.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

TYLER

Once I'm back in my office, I shut my door and step behind my desk, but I don't sit. I repeat the entire conversation with José, and his claim my father reveled in my failures, which bites like a bitch when it should not. This is old news I've long ago coped with, and even heard validated in today's partner's meeting, but somehow it affects me coming from José. Maybe because he's been around so long. Maybe because he has no skin in the game and his opinion is completely objective.

I chide myself for allowing my father's hate to bother me at all, but it seems no matter how hard he tried to punish the human out of me, he failed, and I can only be thankful. I might not have Bella by my side otherwise.

If I'm looking for a shrine of hate owned by my father, there is only one person I'd call an expert. I dial my mother, who shockingly does not answer. Of course, not. I leave her a message. "Call me. It's urgent." I disconnect and my desk phone buzzes.

With a punch of a button, I say, "Yes?"

"The CBS studio head is on the line."

From there, I'm locked down in back-to-back meetings and I know Bella is as well, confirmed when she calls me about a negotiation she's in near noon. We debate the contract numbers which has me thinking about José again and his claim that she cried on the anniversary of her mother's death and then spent the evening in debate with me.

"Also," she adds, "my brother and father are all-in for this weekend. And I ordered us both lunch we probably can't even eat together."

"Bella," I say, when she would hang up.

"Yes?"

"I hate I don't know the answer to this question. What is the anniversary of your mother's death?"

She's silent a beat. "Why are you asking?"

"Because I should know things like this that impact my future wife."

"November which makes it hard during the holidays."

"We should go see your father that day, for the entire holiday, too."

"Yes. Yes, I think we should." Her voice cracks. "We'll plan it this

weekend. I have to go. You do, too.”

After a quick goodbye, we hang up and I decide I owe José more than I imagined possible. I just don’t know how to repay a man who wants what he cannot have back—his wife.

I don’t even have time to digest this thought before I’ve got a partner in my office with Allen gossip followed by another. At two, I’m shoving down my food, when my mother calls. “Tyler, honey, any luck weeding through your father’s bullshit?”

“Did my father keep a shrine to my failures?”

“I don’t know about a shrine. He talked about them though.” I can almost see her rolling her eyes. “We fought over you all the time.”

“You did?”

“God, yes. I protected you every chance I got, but I didn’t tell you because, well, I was afraid of weakening you in ways you needed to be strong to endure him.”

“That’s the closest to a motherly comment I’ve ever heard you say.”

“Yes, well, you just don’t remember the rest. You became cold and calculating at a young age and I had to celebrate even if it meant I lost my little boy. It was rough though. If you failed at something, I had to hear about it for years, even more so as those failures became few and far between and he grew competitive in ways that were unnatural. Example: that year in little league when you missed that ball—”

“Can we skip the grade school stories and move to more present day?”

“It’s more of the same. I mean I heard about your first lost rights trial for years.”

“What rights trial?”

“For some actress. All I remember is you lost the case and her. She left the firm.”

Ana Monroe, I think. I know the case well. There were things I should have done differently, mistakes I made that I never made again.

“What is this about?” she asks. “Really about?”

“I’m getting married this weekend in Dallas. And yes, I know you can’t be there. But we’re doing it right in about nine months, probably in Italy. Try to be there, Mom.”

“Why this weekend? That’s fast. Is this about the will?”

“No. More about how damn much she means to me.”

“That’s a shocking but good thing to hear. Don’t become him. I hope

Bella keeps that from happening.”

“How did you know it was Bella?”

“You told me. Didn’t you? Either way, no I can’t make Dallas, as much as I wish I could, sincerely. But I will be in Italy. Send me photos. I do love you, Tyler.” She disconnects.

I have a fleeting memory of José and my mother chatting when I was a young boy and I wonder how much of what she knows, and what he told me today, have to do with their mutual efforts.

I consider a moment. How devious of my father would it be for him to place the Allen documents in the case file that is my first loss?

I sit down at my desk and pull up the file archives and curse, when the file I want is not present. Of course not. My father hated online archives. He felt like the data too easily landed in the wrong hands. That means I have to go to our storage facility in Henderson, but I have a good feeling about this. Maybe, just maybe, I will end up sitting across from Knox Allen with more than a bluff in my pocket.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

TYLER

I've just reached elevator banks, nearing the lobby, about to go see Bella, before I leave for the storage facility when Dash steps off the elevator. "Any news?" I ask.

"Nothing. Still digging. You?"

"Maybe. I might know where my father hid what we need but I need a couple of favors."

"Hit me."

"I'm meeting with Allen tonight at eight at the cigar club. If you can get Bella home safely, I'll have Dierk shadow, and back me up."

"And if you don't find what you're looking for?"

"I'm going to bluff like hell and we'll figure it out this weekend. I'm about to tell Bella I'm in meetings that might run late. Yes, it's a lie, but—"

"I get it. You're trying not to scare her."

"I'll tell her the truth when I get home."

"Understood. I hear you're getting married this weekend?"

"We are. And I need to do a little shopping for Bella, too, if I get done soon enough. I want it to be special."

"Allie's already got a few options for the ceremony. You want to talk about details tonight?"

"I want Bella to be happy. That's all that matters. I need to go and I actually can't see Bella first. She knows me. She'll know something is going on and I don't have a lot of time."

"Go," he says. "I'll handle Bella."

I give him a nod and walk to the stairwell and exit the hallway. I need to clear my head and think about my strategy with Knox Allen, be it with or without the need to bluff.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

TYLER

Our storage location is off site, and tightly locked down on the upper level of a high-rise where the security desk is literally shutdown. It takes me nearly an hour to get someone out there, and then I'm presented with a storage area two floors deep. Logically there would be a date, and/or name system I simply can't seem to figure out. It takes me some time to figure out a weird coding system that was no doubt my father's doing. Even then I have rows and rows of files to go through. In the middle of it all, I receive a phone call from a number I do not know.

When clients call from all kinds of phone numbers I don't have the luxury of declining a call. I answer with, "Tyler Hawk."

"Tyler. This is Bella's father."

My spine stiffens. "Sir. Good to hear from you."

"You're marrying my daughter, I hear."

I don't even hesitate. "I love her. And if you're worried about her money, until this moment, it never crossed my mind. I'll sign a prenup that gives me nothing. I have my own money."

"Why in the world did I make you think about money?"

"It's your job to protect her."

"While I appreciate that, she's pretty good with her own money. I'm more worried about her heart."

"I think it's me who needs protecting. I didn't think any woman could bring me to my knees, but Bella most definitely has."

"How?"

"I know you think that's a tough question, but I'll be honest. Of course, she's beautiful, and charming and smart, but I think the fact that we had years to build a friendship before we ever became romantic is what makes us solid. She slid right under my defenses, and I didn't even know it." I pull out a chair at a long table and smile. "She used to come to my office when we were working late, and we'd talk through her contracts. I'd blink and hours would pass. That doesn't happen to me."

"That's how I was with her mother." There's a rasp to his voice.

"I heard that. I hope we can have the same special thing you two did."

“Why the rush this weekend?”

“We’re going to plan a formal wedding. We’re working on it. I want her to have her fairy tale wedding, but I think the idea of her mother is what is pushing us forward. You never know when there won’t be another day to say I do.”

“There’s nothing more to it?”

“She’s not pregnant if that’s what you’re asking. And I don’t know if we’ll have kids. We’ve both got some work to do to be ready for that. Right now, a Golden Retriever is a pretty good start.”

“Molly,” he chuckles. “I get pictures of my grandpup all the time. Speaking of you never know about another day. One day I could get in my car and that’s it. You gonna take care of her if that happens?”

“It’s not going to happen, but I’ll take care of her. Always.”

“All right then. I’ll see you this weekend. I hear Allie is planning the wedding despite the fact that I hired a planner. She’s running the show which I assume means she loves Bella as well.”

“She does. Oh, and sir, Bella said something about Italy for the bigger wedding. Just wanted to put that bug in your ear, so you have some time to come to terms with how you feel about that idea. I’d rather her talk with you in detail though. And whatever you decide is fine with me. Whatever she wants and you want—”

“Thank you, son. See you soon.” He disconnects.

My phone buzzes with a text message from Bella: *My father might call you.*

I laugh and dial her. “He called,” she answers.

“Just now. I literally just hung up. I like him. He’s everything my father should have been and was not. And I talked to my mother. She won’t be in Dallas, but she will be at the bigger celebration.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. One out of two is a pretty big deal with my mother. Listen, baby, I have a late meeting. I want Dash to stay with you.”

“You really don’t think I’m safe.”

“I’m paranoid right now.”

“You’re meeting with them, aren’t you?”

I sigh, not about to lie to her at this point. “I am, but Dierk is backing me up and at a public location.”

She’s silent several beats. “Just come home safe, okay?”

“I will. I love you, Bella. I really fucking love you.”

“I love you, too. See you soon.”

We disconnect and I text Dierk the details of the meeting. He confirms his support almost instantly. I stand back up, walk to the file cabinet, and finally figure out where I’m supposed to be looking. Almost immediately I find the file I’m looking for. I sit back down and lay it in front of me. *Please, let this be what I need to protect Bella.*

I flip the file open and at first it seems to be a basic case file, until it’s not. Everything I need to control the Allen family is right here, in all its dirty glory. I push to my feet. I’m going to make a copy and then head to the bank vault, where I’ll keep a copy, but I’m going to give Dash a copy for backup, too.

With a smile on my face, I dial Tiffany’s in Dallas, Texas and order Bella a very special necklace, before I get to work, preparing for drinks and conversation at the whiskey and cigar club.

CHAPTER FIFTY

TYLER

The Wesley Cigar Bar is a dimly lit, old-world-feel kind of spot located downtown near my offices, which means, my stomping ground. It's a place I frequent with clients and while I'm not a cigar guy, plenty of them are.

I arrive to the meeting early, tip the staff well and in advance, and settle into a private corner, where I order a ridiculously expensive bottle of whiskey. The Balvenie 40 Year Old Scotch is my choice, which runs seven thousand, but in this joint will cost me more like ten.

A truce between enemies is worth the price, as is, a declaration of war.

We'll see where we land.

Knox arrives ten minutes early, unbuttoning his custom jacket before he sits down. He eyes the bottle between us and arches a brow. "Interesting choice. I haven't tried this release." He reaches for the bottle and fills a glass, before sipping from his glass. "A vanilla sweetness. Dry. I like it. You?"

"It'll do." I slide the file in front of me toward him. "Before you open that if you wouldn't have touched my woman, I wouldn't have dug for that. That bastard hated me so much he hid it in the case file that was my trial loss."

He drags the file toward him, opens it, and starts reading. Two minutes later, he shuts it, downs the whiskey and pours another glass. "I might need the whole damn bottle. I assume you kept a copy."

"Of course, I did. And part of me wants to ruin you with it, for one reason."

"Bella," he supplies. "I didn't have her taken. Oliver worked for my father. He got ahead of me. I didn't know until it was done and then I had no choice but to roll with it."

"Why should I believe that?"

He removes his cellphone from his pocket tabs through a few items and then sets it in front of me. There's a string of messages with Oliver, that include him asking Oliver what the fuck he was thinking, and warning him not to hurt Bella.

I return the phone and say, "Why the fuck don't you have better control of your people?"

He laughs bitterly. "My father's mess has not been easy to clean up with a

brother who isn't much better. I've managed to exile him to Europe. Now I can get the real work done."

"So I'm to believe you're the good guy?"

"I'll do what I need to do to protect my family, but murder isn't my thing. Neither is rape. I have boundaries. And don't tell me you don't play dirty to get the job done, within boundaries."

"I don't know you or your version of dirty and boundaries well enough to trust you. You did a lot of talking last night that sounded like bribery."

"You have the file," he says. "I had to make my point. I can come at you, if I want to. We both know I have the power and resources to do it. There's nothing in this file that hurts me, but it hurts my brand and name and that's not acceptable."

"You're sounding like an enemy again."

"I'm not. I won't go after you. You don't go after me." He refills his glass and lifts it toward me. "And we toast to a truce."

I lift my glass and right before we toast, I say, "If you ever touch Bella again, murder would be too painless for you. And that goes for anyone in your circle."

"Understood," he says, and touches his glass to mine, both of us tipping back our glasses.

He downs the whiskey and then stands up, with me joining him on my feet. He offers me his hand. "Maybe one day we can actually help each other."

I accept his hand and we shake. "I doubt it," I say. "But never rule out a potential resource."

He reaches in his pocket, pulls out a wad of cash and drops it on the table. "That should cover half. That makes us even." With that, he turns and walks away.

I don't know if he was behind Bella's kidnapping or not. I do know I'll be watching him. And as far as I'm concerned. He's my enemy, one well contained, but I wouldn't turn my back on him. For now, I'm going home to Bella, and I'm going to tell her this is over.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

TYLER

I arrive home to have Molly and Bella greet me with excitement, that has my heart lighter than it was moments before. I share a look with Dash and a nod that tells him it's over, before he quickly gathers Allie and the two of them depart.

I pour me and Bella glasses of wine. "Well?" Bella asks, as we sit down on the couch.

"We're good," I assure her. "Knox Allen swears Oliver acted in a rogue fashion."

"What?" she asks in disbelief. "Tyler, Oliver was afraid of him."

"And he knows if he touches you ever again, it's war. I have the file. I have everything I need to ruin them before I ever even get started on revenge. Enough of them, baby. What are you doing for a wedding dress?"

"There are plenty of options being delivered to the hotel room Friday night."

"Do we have a location?"

"Allie found a rooftop with city views that looks beautiful. If that works for you? It'll only be a few of us."

"It's perfect." I shift the topic to one now weighing heavily on my mind. "Bella, we haven't talked about your money, because I've never given it much thought. I want to protect you. We should do a prenup."

"Is this where we compare bank accounts? You have as much money as I do."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"I don't want a prenup. I was thinking—should we build a house that's ours? I'd have a lot of fun decorating and then we could get Molly a sister."

"You want another Molly?"

"Maybe a Joe or Jim?"

I laugh. "You want to name Molly's brother Joe or Jim?"

"Yes," she says. "I like that idea."

"Bella," I say sobering.

"No. Prenup. I need to go pack for Dallas." She smiles, kisses me, and hops to her feet, rushing away with Molly on her heels.

Now there will be a Jim or Joe.
I kind of like the idea.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

BELLA

Tyler charts a private plane to Dallas, for us and Dash and Allie, with champagne and strawberries, waiting on board. The trip isn't long and it's a really amazing thing to be with both family and friends, and have them be one and the same. The night before we'd decided no honeymoon now, but we'll go big after the public celebration, a tour through Italy even if we don't end up getting married there.

My dad is waiting when we arrive at the airport and we have dinner with him. The best part of the night is the time he and Tyler spend talking and just how much they laugh, two men I've too often thought laughed too little.

That night, I spend time in a private room picking out a dress. I pick a pink full-length dress with a plunging bodice and embellished silk. It's stunning, but not as stunning as the dress I'm already eyeing for the bigger wedding.

The next day, my father is the star, and Tyler and I have so much fun together watching him race, and despite it being an expedition race, win. That night, Allie makes me and Tyler sleep apart, because of course, tomorrow is our wedding day. Tyler is not happy about this, and we end up on the phone part of the night.

Morning arrives with Tyler calling. "I can't believe I'm marrying you today."

"Regrets?"

"Sleeping without you."

My lips curve. "I like that answer, but I didn't like it either. It's a luck thing. I think we need to take luck where we can get it."

"All my luck was used up when you said yes. Can I come bring you a gift?"

"You know you can't."

"Fine. I'll give it to Allie to give you."

Later, Allie arrives, no gift in hand. We eat a light meal, go workout, and when I'm done showering, we head to the venue, where I'm given champagne and fruit before the hair and makeup artist go to work.

It's an hour before the ceremony when Allie hands me a blue bag, a Tiffany bag. "I'll give you some privacy." She smiles and slips out of the

room.

I sit down on the chaise lounge in my prep room, a silk robe around me, and read the card. *“Because you’re the star that lights up every dark part of me.”*

My lips curve and my hand trembles as I open the lid to find a stunning diamond necklace in the shape of a star. There are two more boxes as well. My band which is gorgeous and matches my ring and a band for him, which is engraved with today’s date, and our names. My heart is full when a knock sounds on the door. My father pokes his head into the room.

“Are you decent?”

“I am,” I say. “Come in.”

I stand and he appears, looking dapper in his tuxedo. “My dad is a hottie.”

He laughs. “I’m getting old, baby girl, but thank you.”

“You need to settle down. Mom would want you, too, but that’s for another day when I’m in proper lecture mode.” I lift the box and show him my necklace. “Can you help me put it on?”

“Of course. From Tyler I assume?”

“Yes.” I show him the card because I want him to know how much Tyler means to me. He reads it and his eyes turn glassy. “I think you should hold the formal ceremony at the spot your mom and I got married. Villa Orlando Bellagio. Then it will be as if she is there.”

“Are you sure, Dad? That would be a dream, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Nonsense. It’s how it should be.” He helps me with the necklace and we both stare at it in the mirror. “You are a star,” he says. “I hope he remembers that.” He kisses my temple. “I’ll let you finish getting ready.”

It’s fifteen minutes later, that I stand in the mirror staring at myself in my dress, and tear up a bit, thinking of my mother, wishing she were here. Allie notices and points at me, “No tears. Not yet.”

She looks lovely in a flowy, pink gown, her dark hair falling around her shoulders like silk. “You’re right. But I’m going to cry.”

“Just not yet,” she warns again with a small smile.

There’s a knock on the door. “We’re ready.”

“Did Tyler get his ring?” I ask anxiously.

“You have to give it to me,” Allie says. “I know you have it. Tyler told me. You’re nervous but remember, I give you his ring. You give it to him. Dash will have yours.”

“Right,” I say. “Right. I know you’ll handle it.”

My father pokes his head in the door and his eye light. “You’re gorgeous, honey. Let’s go get you married.”

And that’s exactly what happens. With pink and white flowers all around us and in my hands, I exit to the rooftop, where Tyler waits, looking more handsome than any man should in a tuxedo. The minute I see him, I’m filled with joy, and certain this is the moment, and the man my mother would have wanted me to know.

The minute I’m in front of him, he catches my hands and pulls me to him, his cheek to mine and he says, “You are so damn beautiful it's impossible to believe you're really mine.” And then he looks at the preacher and says, “I do.”

The preacher laughs, and he says, “Too soon, son. We’ll get there.”

And we do. We both say, “I do” and exchange rings and then it’s official. I am Bella Hawk, and from now on, be it a war, or the truce he claimed with the Allen family last night, we will do it together.

It’s later that night after much love making that I show him a photo of a puppy, a super cute golden ready for a new mom and dad. “I think this can be Ralph.”

He laughs. “What about Joe and Jim?”

“He looks like a Ralph.”

“This is where I say, ‘yes’ right?” he teases.

“Oh, you did that when you said, ‘I do.’”

He laughs again and says, “When do we pick up Ralph?”

The end

Readers, I hope you loved Tyler & Bella’s story as much as I loved writing it! These two definitely took me for a ride... and how about Knox Allen? If you want to see his story, let me know!

As always, I would be so honored if you enjoyed *Dirty Little Vow* if you would consider leaving a review!

xoxo,

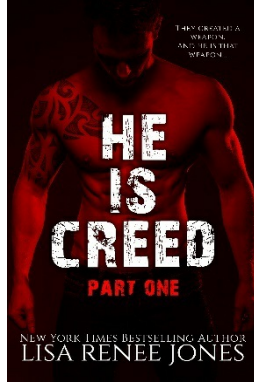
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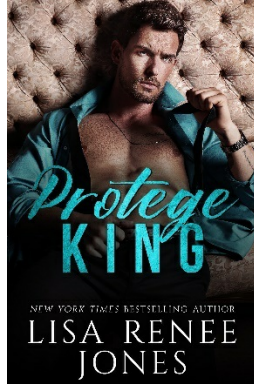
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We are two broken people who are somehow whole when we are together, but those secrets—his, and yes, I have mine as well—threaten to shatter all that is right and make it wrong.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE NECKLACE TRILOGY HERE:

<https://www.lisareneejones.com/necklace-trilogy.html>

READ AN EXCERPT

“I’ll lick you anywhere you want to be licked if you just say please.”

I’m really, truly a rather shy person and no one has ever spoken to me so boldly as Dash has this night, but I’m different with Dash I’m starting to

realize. More comfortable in my own skin. I just can't find it in me to hide from this or him. "What about where I want to kiss *you*?"

"Where do you want to kiss me?" he asks, squeezing my backside.

"Everywhere," I assure him.

His lips curve and he says, "Is that right?"

"Oh yes, but you resist me, Dash Black."

"I assure you, Allison, I'm not resisting." Somehow him calling me Allison in this moment is more intimate than Allie, and I don't know why. "I want nothing more than your hands and mouth on my body," he says. "But you'll have to allow me to kiss you everywhere first."

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New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Lisa Renee Jones writes dark, edgy fiction including the highly acclaimed *Inside Out* series and the crime thriller *The Poet*. Suzanne Todd (producer of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Bad Moms*) on the *Inside Out* series: *Lisa has created a beautiful, complicated, and sensual world that is filled with intrigue and suspense.*

Prior to publishing, Lisa owned a multi-state staffing agency that was recognized many times by *The Austin Business Journal* and also praised by the *Dallas Women's Magazine*. In 1998 Lisa was listed as the #7 growing women-owned business in *Entrepreneur Magazine*. She lives in Colorado with her husband, a cat that talks too much, and a Golden Retriever who is afraid of trash bags.