

A close-up, profile view of a woman's face and neck, looking to the right. She has dark hair and is wearing a large, vertical, diamond-encrusted earring. She is wearing a red, spaghetti-strap dress. The background is a dark, neutral color.

Scorned
QUEEN
part one

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**LISA RENEE
JONES**

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The Tyler & Bella Trilogy

Also by Lisa Renee Jones

About Lisa Renee Jones

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SCORNED QUEEN

Wall Street Empire book two

LISA RENEE JONES

Dear Readers,

Welcome back to the Damion and Alana story. I thought it would be fun to do the first part of *Scorned Queen* as a freebie...this is a glimpse into the events that foreshadow the future, and the way Alana will become the “Scorned Queen.” Everything that happens in this little novella matters later, and in a big way. Alana is still finding herself, not yet embracing her inner queen. But she will, oh how she will...

My regular readers know I always like to do a quick recap of the story and how we got to this point, so here we go...

What if you met the love of your life when you were in diapers? Would that make all your dreams come true? When, at only two years old, Alana Blue proclaimed Damion her future husband, she was in love. That love never went away, but young love is delicate and volatile, and Alana somehow had the maturity to see friendship as what mattered. Maybe she was right, maybe she was not, but Damion became her best friend. And despite all the chemistry between them, they stayed just that—friends.

Until the day Damion was to leave for college and decided to kiss her as his goodbye. Only he still had a girlfriend. Alana only kissed him back because she thought they’d broken up. They parted ways as best friends turned enemies, but they were destined to see each other again at Yale.

Somehow though, it was years before they ran into each other, one night at a party. The result was combustible. They ended up in a bedroom, ready to have sex, but then some girl burst into the room looking for Damion, and Alana thought he’d cheated with her on a girlfriend again. Later she’d find out that was not true, but much later.

Flash forward to near graduation time, and Alana is invited to an elite event for the future leaders of New York City. Damion is also invited. She is a mess when she sees him, and when the evening is over, she flees. Damion finds her, and the heat between them is instant. He tells her she was wrong to think he was cheating on the woman who’d shown up when they were at the party. She’d been trying to get with him, and he had eyes for no one but Alana.

Alana goes home with Damion.

In the process, Damion overhears things between Alana and her family via phone calls, and he finds out Alana’s father is in gambling debt to the wrong people. The next morning, Damion is gone without saying goodbye, but he’s

left Alana a note. He's leaving for Europe to run a division of the family business. He's also paid off her father's debt.

Alana then feels like a whore, as if Damion paid for her services. Angry and embarrassed, she rushes to his office and confronts him before he leaves. They part ways on bad terms. Now Damion is gone, and Alana knows it's time to move on with her life, and forget her childhood fantasy of the two of them ending up together.

At this point, Alana has been accepted into Yale and she has her sights on law school. She feels her family needs to diversify their real estate business, and a law degree can help that happen. But then her father slithers his way into more gambling trouble, and she's forced to leave school and help sell the family out of debt. Nothing has gone as she'd planned, not in love nor business.

But then Alana shows a property to a big-time Hollywood person, and suddenly she is being offered her own TV show. This might seem like a dream to many, but she really doesn't want to take it. She isn't a spotlight kind of girl, but her family pressures her to accept the offer. After all, her father is still gambling. Money matters, for all the wrong reasons. Alana caves and takes the offer. Now she's a star, quite literally, as her show is an instant hit.

Then, one night, the studio sends a car for her and a driver transports her to meet a studio head.

Shockingly, it's Damion.

He's the man behind her show.

She's upset but he reminds her she owes him a favor, which only makes her all the angrier, but he's also right. He loaned her family money. He needs a fake fiancée to seal a business deal.

Alana agrees to help Damion, but she still loves him, and it's a struggle to have him touching her and the intimacy between them is as real as it gets. Confessions are made, and she learns he always wanted her, but her friendship rule held him back from pursuing her. He also explains his need to stop his father's brutal business practices and his plan to take over the company.

Alana is all in to help him, even knowing he will break her heart.

There are many revelations that follow, including the way his father is trying to take over her family business because he feels Alana is bad for Damion. He's always been between her and Damion, and it's clear Damion

wanted to keep her out of his father's sights, but that just didn't happen. So much so, that it comes to light his father is sleeping with her mother as "payment" for money her father borrowed from Damion's father.

Near the end of the book, Damion gives Alana a ring to make their "fake" engagement look real. This ring is not just any ring, either. It's made of a stone Alana has always loved. Damion confesses that five years ago, he was ready to come back to the States and propose to her. He went so far as to pick out a ring. But he talked himself out of it for a good reason, at least in his mind. He's done things he's not proud of. He's not good for her, and yet he confusingly turns around in the next breath and asks her to move in with him.

Alana's confused and out of sorts, but they head to dinner to meet the CEO this engagement is all about. They are close to sealing a deal with her that helps Damion take over the company when his father shows up, assuring Damion his plan has failed.

And now we begin Scorned Queen....

Lisa

CHAPTER ONE

Damion

My father and I stare at each other, and the silent battle we wage on each other is no less fierce than two boxers in the final round of a championship match. Because that's what this is, but the battle is not for a belt, but rather controlling interest of Mary Morrison's company.

My father thinks showing up at the table where Alana and I are wining and dining Mary to win her trust, will destroy my plan to save her company rather than gut it and sell it off, like he would dictate it to the board. It will not. The board is on my side, ready to go from sharks who gut businesses to a company that develops success and takes a piece of the profit for helping it happen in a long-term fashion that ultimately means more profit.

He's a raider, pure and simple, a "man" who makes money by destroying people's dreams and hard work. The worst of it is that I almost let him turn me into his mini me, but no more. I'm not like him. I will not operate on his terms. Never again. "You're not invited, father," I say. "Leave."

"Did you really think members of the board wouldn't tell me you planned to out me?" he asks, all cool and calm, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Did you really think what they said to your face is what they meant? I thought I taught you better."

The problem for him, I think, is they didn't just say it, they signed off on it. I glance at Mary. "Nothing has changed."

"And yet, it has," she says, shoving her chair back from the table and standing, her long gray hair draping her shoulders. "We're done here." Mary rotates and starts walking.

Alana is already on her feet, tracking Mary with rapid steps, as they both head in the direction of the door. "She can't save Mary for you," my father states, drawing my sharp gaze to his as he adds, "but you can save, Alana."

A chill as icy as an arctic breeze slides down my spine at the obvious threat, and I go stiff, doing so because I know things my father has done. Bad things, horrible things, you don't come back from, and he doesn't care.

The fact that my father is sitting here, at this table is meant to panic her

and check me. I'm beyond being checked. I'm beyond being caged. Mary is another story. She took his bait, and she ran with it, ready to drown in the muddy waters of his bullshit.

My father thinks he's won, but he hasn't.

Now it's my turn to be amused. I smirk and meet his stare. "Who's going to save you, father?" I ask.

"I thought I already made that clear. The board. You don't own them." He leans in closer. "I do. And you'd be smart not to forget that." He pushes to his feet and walks toward the door.

I don't move. That's what he wants. A reaction.

We both know he's walking toward the door where Alana could end up his target, but despite everything inside me that makes me want to place myself between him and her, it would be a mistake. If I allow him to see her as a delicate creature that I'll protect with a proverbial shield and sword, my father will see blood.

Alana's blood.

And this, right here, this night and the target it's put on Alana's back, is why I stayed away from her, but that ship has sailed. She's mine. And she's strong enough to stand beside me against my father and my enemies. But she needs to believe that herself. That means she needs to know I believe in her.

I force myself to count to twenty and then I flag the waiter and hand him my credit card. I'm cool on the outside, but inside I'm pure fury ready to be unleashed. And if my father steps wrong where Alana is concerned, I'll show him that the cold, ruthless part of me he created isn't dead. It's just waiting on him.

CHAPTER TWO

Alana

My heart flutters as I race after Mary, desperate to reassure her that Damion is on her side and that he's legitimately eager to aid her quest to save Morrison Enterprises. Adrenaline is not my friend, as my knees wobble a bit, and I worry as much about what is happening between Damion and his father as I do about what's before me with Mary. I don't know what is in the past between them fully, but I remember the way he manipulated and controlled Damion in his youth. I know even if it's been glossed over by Damion, that he became something he isn't proud of, followed in his father's footsteps, and became a version of a man he never wanted to know as himself.

I exit the front door of the restaurant to find Mary standing to my right, her back to me, while she runs fretful fingers through her long, gray hair.

"Mary!" I call out, and rush toward her.

She whirls around, her face etched with shadows, her eyes bloodshot, in a way that tells me the brilliant, tough-as-nails CEO is on the verge of tears. And why wouldn't she be? Damion's father means to rip all her hard work apart and destroy her baby. I've closed the space between us only to have her hold up her hands in a move that reads both protective and defensive. "I have nothing to say to you."

"I swear to you, Damion intends to do right by you. He has the board. This is a manipulation tactic by his father and nothing more. He only wins if we let him win."

"I know Erick, and he's not here to intimidate. He's here to gloat. And the reality here—which I'd like to think you're too naïve to see—is that Damion is his father's son. By luring me into his big plans to save my company, he made me look away. I have no back-up plan."

I reject her point of view as emotional and incorrect. "None of what you just said is true and, on some level, I know you know that. I swear to you—"

"You already said that, Alana. Stop and open your eyes. Damion has a track record of being as cold as his father. Don't marry that man."

"He's not his father," I say without hesitation. "Did he head down that

path? Yes. Does he regret it? Yes. I grew up with him. I know him at his core.”

“Then why weren’t you together until now?”

“Aside from our age?” I ask, but don’t wait for an answer. “I forced the friendship thing down Damion’s throat. I was so afraid of losing my best friend that I wasn’t willing to risk it by dating. He’s a good man, and I promise you he’s as upset right now as you are. He’ll win. His father will not.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

At the sound of Damion’s father’s voice behind me, I go cold, and my eyes meet Mary’s, hers filled with warning and a promise: I’m out of my league. He’s brutal. I’ll get cut and bleed out if I dare stand against him. All of which I reject as surely as I did her assessment of Damion. I don’t even think about backing down. “I am,” I say, rotating to face him, my chin held high. “And so are you, or you wouldn’t be here tonight.”

He stuns me then by closing the space between us. We’re suddenly toe to toe, his garlic-scented breath fanning my face when he says, “You were always beneath him. That hasn’t changed. You were convenient. A fake fiancée to win over the board. They are not impressed any more than I ever was. You’re over your head and beneath his stature. Go away, little girl, before you get hurt.” With that, he offers me his back and starts walking.

I suck in a breath, and there are pins in my chest, hundreds of pins, pricking my heart, and I am bleeding on the inside in ways only Damion can make me bleed. *Only it’s not Damion*, I tell myself. This is his father who hates him, who is trying to hurt him through me, and I cannot let him win.

Mary’s hand comes down on my arm and I draw in a calming breath before turning, my eyes meeting hers. “He’s not like that man. Do you understand? He is *not like him*.”

She studies me with an intense inspection and says softly, “If you still say that after what his father just said to you, I believe you mean those words.”

“But you don’t believe they’re true, do you?”

“Alana.”

Damion’s voice hums through me, a song in the middle of the scream that is my emotions right now, suave that soothes the wounds his father has created. I turn to face him, and in an instant, he’s in front of me, his hand cupping my face, dark eyes searching my eyes. “What did he say to you?”

I swallow hard. “It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter.”

Mary steps into view, beside us both. “He told her she’s dirt on your shoe, and you’ll never marry her. Do right by us both, Damion, or I swear to you I’ll finish this life with you under *my* shoe.”

Damion’s broad chest rises, stretching the fine silk of his shirt before he replies to what she’s said, but he speaks to me instead. “You are everything to me, Alana, even if you don’t know it yet, but I swear to you, if it’s the last thing I do, you will.” And then he ignores the public place and Mary watching, leaning in, his mouth on my mouth, as he kisses me, a deep, seductive slide of his tongue. He tastes like whiskey and forever, but then hasn’t he always? At least the forever part?

When his mouth parts mine, I’m breathless, my mind drugged by his kiss, but he’s still fully on point, his gaze lifting to Mary’s. “I’ll do right by you. Because doing right by you is doing right by her.”

“I hope you do,” she says.

It’s right then that her car arrives. She gives me a tiny nod and then walks to the driver’s side and climbs inside. A moment later, she is gone, and Damion catches the fingers of one of my hands in his. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

That word choice twists me in knots and pulls tight. He asked me to move in with him, but he also told me the ring on my finger is as fake as his father declared the idea of us marrying. Damion says it’s because he’s not good enough for me. Then why is he good enough for me to live with?

He tugs me to him, his hand settling low and possessive on my back. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. It’s wrong.”

I wet my dry lips and nod, but I can’t find words.

He kisses my fingers and says, “I’ll make you understand.”

I nod again, though I don’t know what he’s referencing.

Make me understand why he can’t marry me?

Make me understand why that doesn’t matter?

I don’t know if either is possible, but not only do I love him, right now, he needs me. And I need him.

CHAPTER THREE

Damion flags the doorman as he drapes his arm over my shoulders, and pulls me close, his big powerful body warm and strong against mine as we wait for his car. Tonight he's driving a silver Porsche Boxster worth two hundred thousand easily. I can't say the vehicle didn't impress me when he'd unveiled it tonight, because it did, it does, but that level of luxury where Damion is concerned, doesn't surprise me. He's always had money, lots of it, and he's never hesitated to lean into the style and prestige that comes with it. And by his own admission, no matter how vague, he also leaned into the methods his father utilizes to create that wealth. I've heard the stories about his father, the brutal, unethical corporate raider but growing up, he was just Damion's arrogant, grumpy father. I don't like to think about Damion being another version of him, but I do believe him when he says he wants to be a better man. But even with his confession and proclamation, in my mind, it's hard not to think about how I've felt used by Damion at times in our lives, especially after his father came at me like he did.

I've loved him since we were kids, but I've long ago taken off the rose-colored glasses where life, and he, exists.

I've learned that love is a complicated thing. It can both make us whole and shred us, and I fear with Damion, that's the least of my worries. I believe—I *know*—he has the power to carve out my heart and leave me incapable of anything resembling a normal human being. He could easily break me, and I'm not sure I have the same power over him, and that's a problem. A relationship has to be halves, two parts of one whole, and yet equal in who we are and what we are apart and together.

My show might erase my perceived deficiency in career and finances but Damion is why it even materialized. But on the other hand, he gave me an opportunity without guaranteed success. I'm the one who turned it into skyrocketing ratings.

Damion pulls me around in front of him. "I can hear you thinking."

"I'm not surprised. You know me better than anyone on this Earth."

"Then remember the same applies to you with me."

"That's why you picked me for your fake fiancée, right?"

His expression turns stormy. "You know we aren't fake."

“Just the ring?”

“Alana—”

It’s right then that the car is pulled up beside us. “We’ll talk at your apartment,” I say, and someone shoots a photo of me, and I have a piece of paper shoved at me.

“Can I get an autograph, Alana?”

I swallow hard and plant a smile on my lips before greeting the thirty-something woman and scribbling my name on what is actually a napkin, not a piece of paper. A full minute later, I’m warmed by her love of my show, and when she departs, Damion guides me to the car and opens the door. I quickly fold myself into the vehicle, the warm leather enveloping me; much like my love for Damion does every moment I’m with him, but that doesn’t make our ride one without turbulence and pain. The truth is, his father’s comments were poorly timed, just after the whole ring fiasco. It’s real and fake at the same time, which perfectly personifies us.

The entire exchange had cut deep while his father’s insults ground in the open wound.

When I would expect the door to shut, Damion kneels beside me, his expression earnest, his eyes troubled as they search my face. There are flutters in my belly with the intensity of his attention. “I’m okay,” I whisper as if he’s asked a question.

He catches my hand in his and murmurs something I cannot understand, and I’m not sure I’m even meant to understand before he whispers, “Alana,” and presses his lips to my knuckles. “I don’t believe you, but I’m going to fix it. And us.”

And then he’s gone, pushing to his feet, and shutting me inside the warm vehicle.

I’m still reeling from whatever that just was, when he climbs inside the driver’s side, claiming the captain’s seat, so to speak, the earthy scent of him consuming me. They say scent is part of what draws us to another human being. It’s a primal thing, beyond our understanding. I can believe that to be true between Damion and me. I’m drawn to him as a man in ways I am not to other men equally good-looking and successful. I have always been drawn to him. I’m not even certain when attraction and friendship became love. Probably very young, and while I didn’t understand my feelings back then, I appreciate them more with a little life under my belt. I’ve learned that a real connection is hard to find.

Damion and I have one.

It's simply failed to lead to a happily ever after between us.

I'm not sure it ever will, and maybe on some deep, instinctual level, I knew it never would, and that's why I insisted so intently on maintaining our friendship. But we've gone beyond that now, and there's no turning back.

CHAPTER FOUR

I blink and we are on the road, the dark night enveloping us, the passing streetlights flickering through the shadows, tracing the handsome lines of Damion's face. I stare at him, transfixed by his male beauty, and I don't know how one person can cast a spell on another that seems to last an eternity, but isn't that in some ways the definition of happily ever after?

The music permeates my thoughts, an instrumental that needs no words to seduce the listener. "Come Get Her" by Andrew Savoia, has been all over the charts as of late, and I tell myself Damion has done just that. He's come for me. He sought me out. He made my show happen. My finger caresses the engagement ring, and I'm transported back to a day years before.

I'd been seventeen, and obviously Damion not much older, and he'd been forced to attend a wedding at one of his parents' Hampton estates. He'd dreaded the event and begged me to go with him, claiming I'd make it bearable. We'd done that a lot for each other through our teens, always acting as each other's support source.

I shut my eyes and sink deeper into the memory, one not so unlike tonight in many ways.

Damion and I stand next to an ice sculpture, under some outdoor covering overlooking the ocean, the salty taste in my mouth well doused as I eat icing off his plate. "How do you eat all that sugar?" he asks.

"How do you not?" I point my fork at him. "That's the real question."

An announcement sounds, and we're all told to claim a seat, for some special dessert. Yes, we had cake before dessert. It's a little weird, but I often don't understand the logic of rich people.

Damion grabs both our plates and sets them on a tray before he catches my hand, leading me toward a table. My palm tingles with the connection. Okay, my entire body tingles with the connection. I know he doesn't think twice about holding my hand—we're best friends—but the girl in me struggles with all the feels it gives me.

Fortunately, the table he's chosen is empty, and we tilt our heads close as I ask, "Who's the bride again?"

"The daughter of one of the board members. She's ten years older than me. I really don't know her."

It's right then that a group of Damion's business club friends sit down, which surprises me because why are they here? Damion reads my mind, leaning in close to whisper, "Alexander's father works with my father. He's dating Christi, the girl with him, and they each brought friends."

I nod, but there's this energy at the table that is electric in all the wrong ways. There are eyes on me and whispers that feel as if they chant my name. Damion exchanges a few words with Alexander, and soon we have some sort of chocolate bonbons on a plate placed in front of us. Damion eyes me. "I know you love this."

I grin. "What makes you think that?"

"Which one first?"

It's a game we play, tasting new things at the same time. "The round one." We reach for them together and take a bite. Damion immediately makes a face.

"That is not good," he says.

I laugh and finish the entire thing. "I disagree." But even as I do, there's this weird tingling sensation on my nape that has me glancing up to find Alexander staring at me.

I swallow hard, with the intensity of his attention.

"You're that real estate agent family, right?"

I fight the urge to pop back and remind him one person is not a family, but I never get the chance. His head snaps to Damion and he says, "Man, what is she doing here?"

My cheeks heat, and I feel as if quicksand is all around me, and my chair might as well be sinking into the deep, dark, muddy water. Damion's fingers curl in his palms a moment, and I can almost feel him battling his anger, which is only going to make this worse. I grab his leg and squeeze, whispering, "Please don't."

But there is no "don't" to be had. Damion scoots his plate aside and says, "Leave my table, Alexander, and do not even think about sitting with me again.

Alexander pales. "What?"

"You heard me," Damion bites out. "Leave now."

"I meant no harm, Damion."

"And yet, you caused it," he says.

The two of them stare at each other for several beats and then to my utter shock, Alexander motions to his girlfriend and the lot of them stand and

leave. It's then that I realize how much power Damion possesses. I mean I knew, I did, but I've never seen it on display, not like this. I'm mortified at what has just happened, and I try to stand up.

Damion catches my hand, and when my eyes meet his, the punch between us is created by years of friendship, and something more, something that is as confusing as it is painful. "I need to go to the bathroom."

"Don't go."

"I just—" I swallow, "I need a minute."

He fills his lungs with a heavy breath, his broad, perfect chest expanding beneath his crisp, white shirt. I'm wearing a pink dress he'd called sweet. He's in a suit I'd called brutal. Somehow, that now fits but is also unfair. He's just protecting me, I know he is. I know that's his intent.

"Damion," I whisper, a plea for him to release me.

A heavy breath lifts his chest, and he runs the fingers of his free hand through his thick, dark hair before he releases me. I'm cold in an instant, which only sends me rushing toward the house all the faster. There are bathrooms there, and while they are probably for the elites, not people like me, I pray for a moment of privacy. I tilt my chin low, and hurry though what must be a crowd of three hundred. Once I'm inside the house, which is a monstrous white mansion that would fit five of my houses, I hurry up the stairs to an area where a map indicated a powder room.

Thankfully, at the top of the landing the door is open, and I step inside.

"Alana!"

At the sound of Damion's voice, I step back into the hallway.

"Don't do this," he says, joining me, all but touching me again. "Don't hide away and act as if you don't belong. You'll get into an ivy league school because of your brains. He'll get in because of his parents' money. That makes you better than him."

"I don't want to be better than him, Damion," I proclaim. "I just want to be the best me, and to not be looked down on. And I know you were trying to protect me, but I'm embarrassed about all of it. I don't want to be here like this."

"Like what?"

"Like decoration."

"It's not like that," he says tightly, but we both know it is, proven by the way his hand drags through his hair once again before both his hands land on his waist. "Fuck this party. Let's go down to the beach and pick up those

seashells you love.” He motions to the bathroom. “Go pee. You always have to pee. Then we’re getting out of here.”

I blink back to the present, streetlights, flickering past my window. *And we had*, I think. We’d gotten out of there. We’d gone to the beach and laughed over bon bons and two desserts, and the world had been right again. But deep down, we’d both known we were from two different worlds, and one day our roads would lead us two different directions. Maybe that’s why we never kissed until the day he left for college. It was easier to say goodbye that way.

I glance over at him, his strong profile in the thick darkness of the vehicle as he navigates toward his apartment. He wants me to move in with him, but how do I do that when there is still a divide? He’ll live with me but not marry me. It reads like me getting hurt again. And I’m just not sure I’m built sturdy enough to do that again, not with Damion.

CHAPTER FIVE

I blink again and we are already pulling up to Damion's apartment. *Our apartment*, if Damion has his way. But is his way my way? Not the way things are now. Not yet. I'm confused by what is happening between us. And I'm afraid of losing me in this process of finding out, and me having a solid handle on my own identity and goals has always been what saved me from brutal heartache where Damion's concerned. Not that my identity has become what I'd strived for it to be, but I'm pretty darn grateful for where I've landed. I've come to a point where I'm not giving Damion the credit for my show as I was when I first found out he'd opened that door for me. I mean, in business, connections matter. I learned that way back in college when I was already mixing and mingling with the rich and famous, as they judged me worthy or not worthy of a future proverbial crown. Damion opened the door for me, yes, but I've done the camera work. I've made the show mine and I'm proud of what I've created. I've also held my family together most of my adult life. That took sacrifice and courage.

I glance over at Damion to find him staring at me. "What are you thinking?" he asks.

His eyes are filled with concern, and my heart squeezes at the uncertainty I read in him. I am probably, almost definitely the only person on this Earth he allows himself to be vulnerable with, because uncertainty is vulnerability, or so they taught me at Yale. And so his father taught him his entire life. But the issue here isn't how easy it is for him to be vulnerable with me.

It's how that becomes uncertainty.

And he *is* uncertain about me. That's why the ring isn't real, and he wants me to move in with him, not marry him. Maybe on some level he really does know our two worlds were never meant to be one. And yet, somehow, they have never been more interlinked and far apart than they are right this minute.

Damion will never intentionally hurt me. He just can't help himself.

The door opens beside me, and when I would escape and avoid his question I'm not quite ready to answer, Damion catches my arm and pulls me around to him. His fingers press against my arm, and even through my jacket, the heat of his touch sizzles up my arm and across my chest. "What are you thinking?" he presses.

I'm drowning in the intensity of his dark eyes, swimming in a pool of lust and love that will soon be the end of me. I feel it in every part of me, but I also feel him. I feel him in every possible way, inside and out. "That you're going to shred my heart before this is over, and I'm still going upstairs with you."

"I would never—"

"And yet, you always do."

"Alana," he breathes out, his voice as rough as sandpaper and yet it's still silk on my nerve endings. Everything about him is sandpaper and silk. I believe that's part of what makes him so ridiculously dangerous.

"Take me upstairs," I whisper.

A tormented look flashes in his eyes. "This conversation isn't over."

I nod because agreement is the only way he'll release me, of this I'm certain. He studies me another beat, seeming to weigh my headspace, surely not about to pass his inspection. And yet, almost accepting of this fact, he reluctantly releases me. We both know we won't talk when we get upstairs. We'll fuck like rabbits and fall asleep. And that's probably for the best. Morning light always brings clarity an emotional night does not. I think we can both use a good dose of sex and morning light clarity.

CHAPTER SIX

I exit the car, and I swear Damion is there before it's physically possible, an impatience in the way he palms a large bill to the bellman. I might not have been sleeping with Damion for a very long time, but I know him like I know my own smell. He needs an outlet. He needs to be inside me. And after what his father said to me, as far as I'm concerned, that's such a better way to cope with this night, than conversation.

I don't want to think about what transpired with his father. I sure as heck don't want to talk about it. I just want to get lost in Damion, and some part of me is aware I won't have him for long. A big part of me believes I won't and believes he feels the same of me. How can he not? Can we not? We're always two steps from losing each other, but we have always found our way back together.

But then we'd never crossed that line and slept together, either.

Damion catches me to him, his arm sliding around my lower back, palm settling on my opposite hip, his hard, warm, big body aligned to mine. There's an intimacy to the way he holds me; sensual, possessive. I've never known him to be someone who is about public displays of affection, but tonight he kissed me in front of Mary, and now he's all but telling the entire building we're about to have sex. And me—little, always conservative me—doesn't even care. I'm drugged by his touch, my mind muddled up by the awareness working its way through every part of my body.

We approach the building, and the sliding doors open, allowing us to enter. I'm immediately aware of a thirty-something man in a suit with a buzz cut and a hard-set jaw standing near the desk. His entire presence screams ex-military-turned-security, which means he watches everyone and sees everything and I'm instantly wondering what he must think of us. Wondering what he must think of *me*. It's not something I wonder for long as Damion halts us in front of him, and the surprise I feel at this move is echoed in this stranger's eyes.

My cheeks heat and I am instantly self-conscious as he motions between me and the stranger. "Noah, meet Alana. Alana, Noah."

Noah's attention lands on me, the surprise in his eyes deepening, as both of us are clearly wondering what the heck is happening right now.

“Welcome, Alana,” Noah greets and there is a flicker in his eyes of something I cannot name but I wish I could, because I feel like he’s more in the know right now than I am.

“Thank you,” I say uneasily.

“Noah’s the head of security for the building,” Damion explains and then addresses Noah directly, “Alana is moving in with me and she’s become quite the star. She has a TV show and—”

I blanch at this announcement Damion and I have not yet confirmed, then blanch again as Noah says, “I’m aware. My sister is unemployed and watches it all the damn time.”

I’m taken aback by Noah’s admission, aware now that look in his eyes was about my show, not me moving in with Damion, and his reference to his sister in the mix manages to drag a laugh out of me. “I take it you don’t like my show?”

“I’d like your show a whole lot more if she were employed and out of my house.”

I laugh again, finding him remarkably likable considering the hardness he oozes. “I understand. We’ll be in reruns soon. Maybe that will help.”

“She’ll just watch the Hallmark Channel,” he mutters and then adds, “but welcome to the building, Alana. It’s not your fault my sister is lazy.” He eyes Damion and then me. “It’s nice to see him settling down.”

This remark flutters about in my belly like butterflies, and then nose dives into anger at the pure manipulation of the moment. “I’ve known him a very long time.”

His brow lifts. “Really? And I’ve never seen you before, why?”

I twist out of Damion’s grip and point a finger at him that is an accusation in all kinds of ways even if my tone is not. “I think he struggled with the idea that I’d seen him in diapers,” I say, because giving Damion a hard time is something I’ve practiced most of my life.

Damion laughs now. “As I have you, Alana.”

I’m not happy with him right now, but it’s impossible not to feel the connection between us and the heat of his body without a bit of an internal sigh. “We’re going to call it a night, Noah,” Damion says, capturing my hand with his and then tugging me closer, his arm sliding back around me, even as he adds, “If you need me, you know how to reach me.”

“Indeed,” Noah agrees and gives me a nod. “Goodnight and nice to meet you, Alana.”

“Nice to meet you, Noah.”

Damion rotates us away from Noah and toward the elevator, and that’s when my anger really begins to truly ignite. In an effort to calm myself and remain logical, I mentally replay what just happened. My conclusion is that while I want this man to want me, and yes, *I want* him, everything about what just happened speaks of the layers of complication between us.

We halt at the elevator, and I can feel my body vibrating with my hyped-up emotions. Damion punches the button, and the doors open instantly. I twist out of his arms and step into the car, and I hate the way his touch has left me smoldering in the aftermath. I just want him to touch me again, but isn’t that the problem? He has seduced me far too easily all my life.

I can feel him at my back, his energy, his body heat, and my mind is already muddled with his nearness. I rotate to face him, trying to regain my control, of which, I have little with Damion. He punches the key to his floor, and it *is his* floor, not mine, contrary, of course, to what he just told Noah. I haven’t made the decision to move in with him and he doesn’t get to make it for me. The doors shut and now Damion and I are facing each other, the energy between us cracking and snapping.

“Why are you over there?” he demands, and proceeds to move my direction.

I hold up a hand, then a finger. “Wait. I’m pissed at you, and we both know there are cameras in these elevators. I don’t want either of us to be fodder for the press.”

His chin lowers, eyes burning into mine. “Alana,” he says softly.

“Don’t say my name like you’re scolding me, Damion. I’m not your employee. Or maybe I am.” I lift my hand with the ring.

“Employee,” he repeats, his tone sharp with anger. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“That’s what I want to say to you right now, but since this video could be played on TMZ, minus volume, and our body language analyzed, I’m not.”

“You think they can’t read us right now? Come over here and make nice for the camera.”

“I’ll stand next to you but do not touch me or I will not be responsible for my actions.”

His lips hint at amusement, I dare him to make more obvious, but he gives me a nod. We move at the same time, stepping close and rotating to face the front of the elevator. I wait for him to touch me, to push me, like he did with

Noah, and if he does, if he disrespects my wishes, it will be the end of this night. But he doesn't. Really, he doesn't get the chance. The doors open almost instantly, and I step into the hallway, pausing to wait on him.

He joins, six foot two inches of sexy, arrogant man, and for a moment we just stand there and stare at each other, a push and pull between us that is blazing physical attraction pumped up by a punch of white lightning anger. He draws in a breath, and motions with his head toward his apartment. I give a barely-there nod and in unison, we walk toward his door, the air charged around us. There's an explosion coming of epic proportions, and the only chance I have of winning this battle is by keeping my clothes on. Because if we end up naked, he is absolutely on top.

And we both know it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Damion unlocks his door but doesn't open it, and before I know his intention, he pulls me in front of him, forcing me to catch my weight on my hands, and the door. I'm officially caged between it and the man who'd I'd call my biggest temptation, and at present, the source of my ire. Not exactly the way to maintain my control, especially when his powerful thighs and hips frame my backside, one of his palms pressed to my waist, the other over my head, on the wooden surface.

"I'm crazy about you," he murmurs, his lips near my ear, his breath tantalizingly warm, lips brushing my neck.

My knees are weak, and my body is one big nerve ending that is alive and charged.

"You treated me like an employee," I hiss.

He turns me to face him, his eyes glistening with his own anger now. "I treated you like the woman I want in my life."

My lashes lower and my lips tremble, and I fight all the things I want to say to him, that only make me look as foolish as I have often felt with Damion. But I can't hold it all back...I just can't. When I look at him again, I say, "For how long this time?"

"There's never been a time in my life that I didn't want you with me."

"And yet, there's been so much of it you made sure we spent apart."

"It's not like that, Alana." He caresses hair from my face. "You—"

Voices sound behind us and he curses, his arm wrapping my waist to steady me before he opens the door. "Let's go inside," he says softly, and I don't fight him. I twist around and away from him, away from the intimacy of his touch that makes me as wet as it does dumb.

By the time I've rotated to face him, he's shut the door and he's standing closer than I'd like, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "Alana—"

"What was that down there?" I demand, my finger pointing at the ground.

"I was removing any thought you had that I didn't really want you to move in with me."

"I didn't have that thought," I say, when I want to confront him about the way he plays with my emotions. Giving me the ring and telling me it was bought for me, but that he'd changed his mind about coming home to get me.

Now it's mine, but it means nothing. It's a callous thing to do for personal gain. It's almost cruel. But if I say that, I seem like a pathetic girl in love with the rich boy next door who is still too good for her. "This wasn't about me thinking you didn't want me, Damion. That—what you did—was manipulation, which feels a whole lot like a family trait."

He draws in another heavy breath and for several seconds he just stands there before he huffs out that air and scrubs his hand through the thick strands of his dark hair. It's an act of frustration, something he rarely shows, at least not with others, but he can't hold back with me and I'm not sure what that says about us. All I know is that I feel like nothing more than the sum of an acting gig as his fake fiancée.

His cellphone rings and he says, "I need a drink."

He ignores the call and walks toward the bar. I hug myself, a sharp stab of guilt in my belly. I shouldn't have said that to him. "Damion," I say, taking a step toward him.

He holds up a hand without ever even looking at me. "Not now, Alana."

My chin dips to my chest with the rejection I deserve. I'm hurt and I lashed out and I've seen how that works for my parents. It destroys relationships. And Damion and I aren't kids anymore who can scream at each other one minute and just go play outside the next. Life is far more complicated as adults. *We're far more complicated.*

I walk toward the floor-to-ceiling window again, bringing in the glint and glitter of the stars and city light blurred by a heavy cloud cover. A storm is coming, and it's not just the weather. It's me and Damion. It's him and his father. It's me and my family.

I'm just wildly confused about what is happening between me and Damion, while he appears wildly uncertain. I stare down at the gorgeous ring he gave me. We'd been right here in this spot, and I squeeze my eyes shut, replaying the memory, trying to find the truth of me and him, in the memory...

He reaches in his pocket and produces a velvet box, and before I can react, he says, "You can't be a fiancée without a ring."

There's a pinch of disappointment in my chest. This is not real. Of course, it's not real. "Okay," I murmur.

He opens the lid and a stunning, heart-shaped diamond glistens and glows inside. My gaze jerks to Damion. "I used to love hearts as a kid." I laugh but it sounds choked, even to my ears. "It's kind of appropriate but it seems

extravagant for a fake fiancée, Damion.”

“Because it wasn’t meant for a fake fiancée, Alana. Five years ago, I got drunk and decided I could come back and get you. I chose the hearts because you always had them everywhere. You even drew them on me at one point.”

I can barely breathe. I can barely speak. “I—I don’t understand. We hadn’t talked and—”

He catches my chin and leans in and kisses me, his lips lingering against mine for long moments even after the kiss ends. “This is me telling you, Alana, I meant what I said earlier. I might not have said it until tonight, but you have always been it for me. Always.”

My heart swells, and I feel what I can almost call a sense of completion. Like he is a part of me I was missing, and now he’s here but I’m afraid to believe it’s true. I don’t really even understand what this is or why he’s saying it. I can feel more coming, and I find myself holding my breath, not sure what to expect.

“But you also need to know that the morning after I bought this ring, Alana, I came to my senses. I knew I was not good for you. I know it now, too, but when you’re standing in front of me, I can’t seem to give a damn. I am not good for you. You need to remember that. And if I get drunk and propose again, be smart and say no.” He cups my face. “And stop being stubborn and move in with me.”

My heart is happy and my brain a bit drunk on this conversation. “Why does it always feel as if you are standing in front of me but out of reach?”

“Because I’m always trying to protect you from me.”

“Alana.”

My eyes open to find Damion standing in front of me offering me a glass of whiskey. “I thought we could both use the strong stuff.”

It’s insane the way my heart leaps with his nearness, the way butterflies dance in my belly when I’ve known him my entire life. I accept the glass, the brush of our fingers jolting me, and I think I see the same reaction in his eyes. Or maybe, I just want to see the same in his eyes. I down the amber liquid, choking with the bite of the liquor. It’s warm in my belly and my apology is fast on my tongue. “I’m sorry. I should have never said that to you.”

He tips his own drink back, emptying the contents of the glass before he sets it on the wide steel ledge separating the window. He takes mine and does the same. The buzz in my head is officially here and I laugh without humor. “That was not a good idea. I’m already feeling whatever it was I just drank.

Damion, I—”

He catches me to him, and the feel of him next to me is everything. His touch warms me all over. His smell permeates my senses and stirs emotions and wild flutters in my belly. He maneuvers me backward and leans me against the steel beam that flows from floor to ceiling, one hand warm on my hip, the other on the beam above my head, torment in the depth of his stare.

“I did what I did because I felt the push between us. I knew you were going to say yes, and I want you to say yes.”

“Then talk to me,” I say. “Don’t—”

He catches my hand with the ring and holds it between us. “I know this is about this ring. Isn’t it?”

I blanch with the directness of his words, a deer in headlights. What do I even say to him right now? I don’t know what to say. You hurt me. You won’t marry me. Why would anyone want a man to marry them if they didn’t want to marry them? I don’t. Not even Damion. Especially not Damion.

So I’m back to what I always do with him—living in the moment and with the heat of the booze and the heat of his body burning through me, it’s not a hard thing to do. Exactly why I say, “Can you just kiss me already?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Alana,” he murmurs softly, and my name on his lips is more dangerous than whiskey to my good sense. I’m drunk on his very existence.

“Damion,” I whisper in reply, and while my name on his lips had been all about heat and fire, his name on mine is every question I have but don’t dare speak.

As if he reads that in me, his hand closes around the ring and my hand. “This isn’t nothing.”

“It’s fake,” I reply, when in my mind I’ve told myself to just let it go, but apparently, I just don’t have that in me.

“It’s not fake. God, woman. I bought it *for you*.”

Only to basically tell me it was a stupid mistake, I think, but this isn’t a conversation I want to have right now. My emotional bandwidth has expired times a thousand. I try to push around him. He cages my legs with his powerful thighs. “Alana.” This time my name is stubborn plea. He’s not ready to drop this, and I am.

“Let me go.”

“I did that several times now,” he replies “It never works out for me.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Letting you get away was a mistake I won’t make again.”

The words are sweet, like sugar and happiness, but they don’t compute with everything else he’s said and done. “You confuse me.”

“Says the woman who told me we could only be friends when we both wanted more.”

“Okay,” I admit. “That’s fair, but we were kids. We’re *not kids anymore*.”

“We’re not just friends either.” He releases my hand and grips my waist, and I swear his hand on my body is already burning through my brain cells. His forehead presses to mine, and he murmurs, “I did things, Alana.” His voice radiates with a mix of guilt and torment. And while no, this is not the first time he’s said something like this to me, there’s a gut-wrenching quality to his confession that tears down the wall the whole ring thing has slammed between us.

My hand presses to his cheek, and I meet his stare, my hope that he sees the truth in my eyes. “Whatever you did, it’s in the past. I don’t care.”

“I do,” he insists. “I care. I don’t want you to know *those* things, and my worst fear is that I might not be able to hide them from you.”

“I don’t need you to hide anything from me, Damion. That feeling—like you need to do that—it’s not us. That’s not who I want to believe we are together. And that’s not how we make this work.”

“It might be the *only* way we make this work.”

“You want to live with someone you have to keep secrets from? Really? That’s your idea of happy? The person you live your life with should be able to deal with the good, the bad, and the ugly. It’s not like my family doesn’t have its ugly.”

“It’s not the same, Alana.”

“It’s the same to me.”

“No.” His expression tightens. “It wouldn’t be if you knew the details, which you will not.”

“That doesn’t work for me, Damion.”

“Try harder to make it work,” he demands.

Anger churns in my belly and I try once again to escape his embrace. I barely move. He’s too big and too strong for me to push myself out of this confrontation.

“I thought I could protect you by staying away, but that didn’t work,” he confesses. “My father still has his claws in your family. I need you close, but I don’t know how close I dare.”

“Living with you is pretty close.”

“Probably too close, but I *need* to be able to protect you.”

That’s twice he’s made that statement and this time, I bristle and press my hand to his chest. “Is that what this is? A way to protect me?”

He covers my hand with his. “*You know better*. Do you really think I’d give you that ring and tell you the story behind it if I didn’t want to marry you, Alana? If I didn’t want to see the look in your eyes when I told you what I’d wanted then, and what I have always wanted with you.”

“And what did you see, Damion? What do you see now?”

“A woman who doesn’t believe I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Will you?”

“I need to know nothing can blow back on you.”

My gut twists in painful knots. “That’s not the answer I want, and most importantly, it’s not the answer I need to be able to say yes to living with you. It sounds like an excuse.”

“It’s not a damn excuse. I’m standing here, right here, right now, telling you it’s bigger than that, Alana. It’s *so damn much more*.”

In that moment, it’s easier for me to believe he’s afraid of what I might learn than afraid of a real future with me. Maybe because it’s true. Maybe because it’s what I want to believe. “The part where I’m not the little girl next door anymore just doesn’t seem to compute with you and maybe it never will.”

“No,” he says, “you’re not the little girl next door. You’re the woman I want in my bed every day when I wake up.”

He shrugs out of his jacket, and everything inside me screams, “Yes, please, let’s stop talking. Let’s get naked.” My sex clenches, and there is this need inside me for this man that has existed for what feels like my entire life. It’s pure craving, and that craving doesn’t care about heartache, rings, business agreements, or even living arrangements.

I reach for his silver tie and tug it free, the silk pooling on the ground as surely as I’m melting in my own high heels.

His hands settle possessively on my hips, scorching me right through the thin black silk of my blouse. There’s possessiveness in the way he holds me, the air charges around us, and my knees tremble with the intensity of what I share with this man. “God, woman,” he murmurs. “What do you do to me and how do you do it over and over and *over* again? *Tell me*.” But he doesn’t give me the chance to argue the reality, which is much different than his version of who does what.

In my world, it’s him who messes with my head and emotions.

Him who always leaves.

Or maybe it’s not like that at all.

I don’t know if I’m objective right now.

He shifts our lower bodies, melding us intimately close, hips to hips, and I am breathless with the press of his thick erection against my belly. My teeth worry my bottom lip. What am I doing with Damion again? Why am I offering my heart up for destruction again? “I should run away,” I whisper.

“Yes,” he says. “You should. But don’t.” He catches the hem of the black silk and his warm fingers press to the delicate skin beneath it.

He’s all man now, confident and sure of what he wants, a man who gets what he wants, and I’ve always admired those traits in him. In contrast, I’ve always known what I wanted, but nothing I swore I’d make happened, happened. I’m not an attorney. I’m not his wife. Not that you make marriage

happen, but then I never thought that's how it would go. I just thought we'd end up together, like that's what the universe had in store for us.

Damion leans in closer and presses his cheek to my cheek, his lips to my ear. "Stop thinking whatever you're thinking." He eases back, his dark eyes meeting mine. "We've been through hell, but we found our way back to each other."

His fingers caress a path over my skin until he's pulling my blouse over my head and tossing it aside, his gaze raking over my nearly naked breasts. "Have I told you how many times I've fantasized about you, Alana?" he murmurs, his finger teasing my nipple where it puckers beneath the barely-there lace.

A heavy breath trembles from my lips with the clench of my sex. I'm struggling to remember why this is a bad idea, why *we* are a bad idea, and already Damion is unhooking my bra, dragging it away. "Did you fantasize about me, too, Alana?"

His fingers tease my nipples and my throat is almost too dry for words—almost—and yet somehow, I manage the truth. "I was too busy hating you to dream about you."

His palms are back on my waist. "Liar. You don't hate me."

"It was easier than loving you, Damion. It hurt less."

Seconds tick by as he weighs my words, and I can see his own hatred in his eyes. Hatred for my words, hatred for the truth in them, hatred of himself and this moment of truth. Then suddenly, he turns me to face the pillar, forcing me to catch my weight on the steel, and for reasons I can't explain, I feel as cold as its surface, only my cold is inside, where it's lived a very long time.

He unzips my skirt and drags it down my hips and gives my backside a smack. I yelp, and my heart is racing when he turns me back around, and now I'm in nothing but thigh highs, heels, and panties with Damion's hand on the steel bar above my head.

"I deserve your hate," he says. "I earned it. But that seems like a really good reason for me to give you about a dozen orgasms and you to let me do it."

CHAPTER NINE

Let him give me a dozen orgasms.

The deliciousness of his exaggerated concept, and even more so the act of making it so, might not solve anything, but I don't care. We're here, right here, right now, and the miles that still remain between us can't divide us, at least not while we're focused on pleasure and orgasms. I don't want to think about secrets and class wars, and where we fit together or don't fit at all, based on those things. There's enough whiskey in me to be all about momentary gratification, no matter the fleeting bliss it might create.

"You've always been good at talking big," I murmur, aware of the challenge in those words. "You owe me a dozen orgasms, and I'll allow you one week to deliver."

He leans in close, his lips just above mine, his breath oh, so perfectly warm against my skin. "How about one a day, and you agree to stay one year—three hundred and sixty-five days—and then I'll talk you into staying another." His lips brush mine, and I feel the connection in every part of me.

"You get a weekend and a dozen orgasms," I counter. "If you can't keep that promise, why would I stay a year?"

His lips curve with a low chuckle and he says, "All right. I'll start with a weekend."

"Is this where you finally shut up and kiss me?" I challenge.

"Yes, baby," he murmurs, "this is definitely when I shut up and kiss you." And even before he makes good on that promise, I'm reveling in the endearment. *Baby*. It's nothing really, I know, spoken by many a man, in many a casual situation, but somehow it manages to shut out our childhood and take us to a place where we are man and woman with needs and wants that include each other.

I've barely materialized that thought when his tongue finds mine, licking deliciously into my mouth, and every part of me responds, every part of me tingles. The kiss is the same bittersweet perfection that personifies Damion in every possible way. Just as he desires to lock me down, be it for one weekend, one week, or one year. There is never forever with Damion. The idea has me leaning into the freedom that represents. We aren't forever, but we are right now. That's where my head has to stay with Damion. I know

this. I've always known this.

My fingers dive into the thick, dark strands of his hair, and when his mouth parts mine, his teeth scrape my lips. "I'm going to lick every part of you before this night is over."

"Promises, promises," I murmur. "So much talk." But even as I say the words, there's a shift in the air between us from playful to serious.

He leans in and kisses my neck, and I swear his lips are velvet that travel to my shoulder, and it's only now that I am suddenly aware of the fact that I'm naked and he is not. He says I know him, and I do. I know exactly why he wanted it this way. It's all about his control, of which he feels he has none right now, because I won't just say yes to a weekend, a week, a year, that might not be another year. But I don't care if he has control of my body. I have control of my mind, and my heart has to take a backseat in decision making.

Damion's phone rings again and with a grimace, he snatches it from his pocket, the caller ID in view, *King Asshole*, it reads. He declines the call, and I catch his hand. "Do you need—"

He leans in and kisses me until my toes curl before he declares, "You. I need *you*, Alana, and if you want to talk about hate, I hate how much you don't know that." He pulls up his music app and pushes play. He set his cell on the steel railing next to me, and music fills the room, an easy invitation to block out the rest of the world.

Damion curls me into him, his hands caressing up and down my back, and it's hard not to feel tiny and vulnerable folded against him, but somehow this arouses me. He's always been that dominant male persona that I liked a bit too much, and I'm not sure what that says about me. His hands press to my breasts, his mouth to my mouth, and then he's lifting me and leaning me against that steel beam all over again.

He kisses me and then lowers his head, his mouth suckling my nipple, and the room fades but the song does not. It's "Astronaut in an Ocean" by Masked Wolf, and the words have me trying to escape the whirlwind of emotion they stir in me, digging my fingers in his hair and willing his mouth to mine. Instead, he palms my breasts, and the words haunt me.

*When these people talk too much, put that shit in slow motion, yeah.
I feel like an astronaut in the ocean.*

I've always felt like an astronaut in an ocean when I'm inside Damion's world, out of place and yet where I belong when it's just me and him. But it

isn't just me and him. There are so many other people involved. Finally, his mouth is on mine, and he tastes like whiskey, power, and torment, as if he's certain he'll lose me, and I'm not sure what to do with that information nor does he give me time to go that deep.

He cups my face and says, "You're thinking too damn much. Obviously, I'm not doing my job."

"Am I a job now?"

"Don't turn that around on me. It's every man's job to take care of his woman, and you are my woman, Alana."

I could tell him I'm not his woman, but the words don't come to me. He eases me down his body, and my feet touch the ground, and we just stare at each other. "No objection to being called my woman?"

"It crossed my mind, but it would be a lie for me to deny the truth. And I'm pretty sure I was just preaching about honesty, even if we didn't use that word. I've been your woman for the entirety of my adult life."

His eyes burn like blue fire before he kisses the hell out of me and then scoops me up and starts walking.

CHAPTER TEN

Damion's bed is every bit what you'd expect a king's bed to be, larger than life, with towering posts I don't remember really giving thought to until tonight. Because tonight, as he sets me on my feet, he leans me against that thick wooden surface and says, "This is where you belong." One of his hands is on my hip, a possessive burn to that touch, while the other is on the wood above my head. "That ring—"

Everything in my head screams in rejection of what he might say next. I've officially turned this night into me playing the role of the desperate girl who wants to marry the guy who doesn't want to get married. It's embarrassing and not who I want to be. "No," I say, my hand pressing to his chest, the act pausing his words, and I can feel his heart thundering beneath my palm. "Don't talk about the ring." I pull it from my hand and press it into his. "Now, can we just forget the ring and fuck already?"

His spine stiffens, and he stands ramrod still. He is stone, unmoving, his expression impenetrable, a tic in his jaw, and yet the sexual tension between us still crackles like electricity. Seconds pass, and the silence mixed with my boldness becomes my enemy, and just when I'm about to act or say something, anything, he catches my hand and slides the ring back into place.

And when his eyes meet mine, he says, "We can fuck all night long as long as this ring is on your finger."

There's no time for me to react or even assess what I feel right now. His hand slides under my hair, his palm to my neck, pulling my naked body flush to his. "You really have no idea how much I want you, or how much I have always wanted you, do you?" It's a question filled with torment and self-hate, that I don't quite understand. His mouth closes over on mine, his tongue stroking into my mouth, wicked and full of demand, the whiskey and power I'd tasted minutes before has transformed to torment, hunger, and need mixed with a possessiveness that says he believes he's about to lose me. The truth is I'm his to lose.

I'm not really sure what that means for him or me, but my arms fold around him, and I offer myself to him, a shelter in the wildness of a storm I believe has raged in him far longer than I ever imaged. And right now, he needs someplace to put it all. He needs me. And I need him. But there must

be something he tastes on my lips, in my reaction, in the way I'm responding to him, that undoes him, because he tears his mouth from mine.

He presses me against the bedpost again, a mix of dark passion and shadows in the depth of his eyes that I can only call haunting, but he says nothing. I say nothing. But then the time for words has long passed, and the burn of possession and the need for control radiates from him. The charge between us is a live wire, and when his gaze rakes over my naked breasts, my nipples pucker and my sex clenches. I ache to feel him press inside me, to fill me, and yet still he just stares at me, one second more. I reach for his shirt. He catches my wrist, his grip snug but not painful.

"One day you'll run away just like you said you should in the living room."

He's afraid, I realize now. Afraid for me to see the truth of who he is, and that's almost impossible for me to wrap my head around. This is me he fears, not some stranger, but I say the words I know he needs to hear, "What if I don't? And will you ever know, if you keep pushing me away?"

"You think you can handle it."

"I know I can."

His eyes narrow, darken to almost black, and then he presses my hands to the post behind me and says, "Let's see what you can really handle. Show me you trust me. Do what I say and nothing else."

We're back to his need for power, and my need to give it to him, which I'll analyze in the morning. "Okay then," I say.

He steps back from me, no longer touching me, the very act of him standing there, fully dressed, and me here naked, hugging a pole, and not him, as submissive and arousing as anything I've ever known.

My chin lifts. "Now what?" I whisper.

"Keep your hands right there. Understand?"

I wet my parched lips and nod, warm all over, my nipples rock-hard pebbles. "Yes," I whisper.

"Good," he replies, and I am rewarded for my compliance as he reaches for the buttons on his shirt. Finally, he will be naked with me, and true to that expectation and hope, a moment later his shirt is open enough that he's tugging it over his head. He tosses it aside, the flex of muscle and man a delicious answer to my compliance. But just when I hope and hunger for him to fully undress, he closes the space between us.

Instinct has me reaching for him, and he catches my hands and presses

them back against the bedpost. “I told you, baby, *don’t move.*”

Somehow there is a contrast of tenderness and command in his voice that is as arousing and confusing as everything else about Damion. “Or else what?” I ask, daring a bold question that pulls us deeper in this power play.

His hands settle on my waist, fire against my skin, and he leans in close, his warm breath a fan on my neck as he says, “I’ll be forced to punish you.”

For some odd reason, my belly trembles with this promise, and it’s all I can do not to touch him. I don’t know this part of Damion, but I’m not afraid as I suspect he thinks I will be. I’m not even a little afraid. “How?” I ask instead.

I can feel him smile against my skin a moment before he eases back and says, “I’ll spank you, Alana. And I’ll enjoy it, as will you. So feel free to break the rule. Move your hands. Give me a reason to turn you over my lap.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The little girl in me that grew up next door to Damion wants to laugh at his promise to turn me over his lap, but he's not laughing at all, and I have no idea why I'm suddenly ten times hotter than I was moments before. I've never done such a thing in my life. Never had a man touch me as he suggests he will or talk to me in such a way. I feel young and naïve and really quite vanilla when we are nearly the same age. But then, I remind myself that I was never really all in with anyone in my life, *but Damion*.

Either way, I don't know what I feel right now, or what his intent is behind such an erotic statement, but it doesn't feel as simple as it seems.

"Have you ever been spanked, Alana?" he asks, and it's a question meant to push me, maybe scare me away even, if he were honest. In one breath, he says he wants me to stay. In another, he pushes me away, but I think of the torment I've tasted in his kiss and seen in his eyes, and I know he really wants me to stay.

But he needs to know I can see him for who he is, be it the boy next door, or the future king of Wall Street, and everything in between. This is all about his "you can't handle it" declaration.

"You'd be my first," I confess. "First kiss, first spanking. It fits, right?" My chin lifts in defiance. "But you'll have to make me move my hands to make that happen."

Satisfaction lights his dark eyes and he answers me not with words but with actions, his hand closing around the silk between my legs as he tears it from my body. I yelp with the shock of the action, and it's almost enough for me to move my hands, his intent I'm sure, but I do not. His fingers press between my legs, stroking the wet heat of my sex, his lips curving. "So wet, baby. I think you like this talk about me spanking you." His fingers slide inside me, and I pant, my hips lifting with his exploration, when I really want to grab him and push myself closer.

He's merciless in his exploration, stretching me, stroking me, and the only thing that allows me to maintain my control is the promise that he will soon be inside me. But I'm so close to the edge, so ready to come, that I moan with the ache of my body, but I hold onto the bed, afraid he'll stop, certain he'll deny me any moment.

He leans in and kisses me, and it all but undoes me. My arms need to be wrapped around his neck, and when his hand covers my breast and teases my nipple, I'm melting right here in this bedroom. My lashes lower, and I wish for something I can clench but there is only wood. My breasts are high, thrust into the air, and I want him to touch my nipples, lick them too, but he denies me what I want.

Instead, he leans in close, his cheek to mine, his fingers pulling out of me, to cup my sex, and he says, "Not yet."

My entire body screams in rejection, and my fingers curl in my palms, as it's all I can do not to capture his that rests on my waist. "You're trying to make me touch you," I whisper.

"Touch me, and I'll let you come," he promises.

"And then you'll spank me?" I challenge.

"You'll like it."

"I can make myself come."

He laughs low and soft and kisses me. "But we both know it's better when I do it for you." He catches me to him, and I touch him, there's just no way around it, before he turns me to face the post, and I'm forced to catch my hands on the hard surface, which should be him, but it's the post again.

The idea that he's about to spank me sends my pulse soaring. Adrenaline takes control and I try to turn around. Damion pins me between the post and his powerful thighs and hips, filling his hands with my breasts, exploring my waist, then my hips, and yes, then, my backside.

"Damion," I say urgently.

He squeezes my backside and murmurs, "I'd never spank you without permission, Alana. Trust me, baby." His teeth scrape my shoulder, and he says, "*Trust me.*" There's something about the way he repeats those words, and I know they run deeper than sex. They're about our history, about the love and hate, and push and pull, that is carved into our every moment together.

But his request is easier said than done, when the lifetime behind us still defines us far more than any lifetime before us, and the minute he steps away from me, I try to turn. He flattens his hand on my back. "*Trust me.*"

It's not a command, as one might expect in the circumstance, but rather a request, and that's what undoes me.

And the truth is I do trust him, with everything but my fragile heart. I know he won't spank me without my permission. I know he won't hurt me.

And when he says he'll give me a dozen orgasms, he means to make that vow come true. I have nothing to lose, and I whisper, "I do."

He waits there a moment, his hand still on my lower back, as if he is giving me time to change my mind. I can almost feel him battling within himself over me and this moment, and I don't know why but his emotions and his arousal collide and crash over me. A moment later, his hand slides over my hip and backside and then falls away from my body, but my skin tingles where he touched me.

I'm vulnerable all over again.

He's good at doing that to me.

There's a shift in the air, and I know he's moved away, the sound of clothing rustling about, and I know now that he is naked, too.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I know he's behind me before he ever touches me. That's the thing about me with Damion. I feel him on some level that defies any reality I know with any other human being. I can't even explain what that means, but if he's close, *I know*. It's like a tingling sensation, an awareness that reaches beyond the conscious being.

And right now, he's so close I can feel the heat of his body, a moment later, the press of his cock to my hip. I swallow hard and hold my breath, waiting for what comes next. His hands settle on my waist, and his touch torments my nerve endings in the best of ways.

He leans in and draws in a breath as if he's inhaling my scent, "Turn around." There is this raw, achy need in the depths of his voice that radiates through me and has me twisting around to face him.

The minute I do, he's right in front of me, his sculpted, naked body intimately framing mine. His fingers tangle into my hair, his grip rough, erotic. "I'm not going to spank you," he says, "but, God, woman, I want to do every naughty thing you'll let me do to you."

I'm caught up in the moment, in the absolute intimacy between us right here and now, finally touching. "Do it," I whisper.

"You have no idea how much I could take from you if you let me, so don't let me. Not yet." He pauses, his lashes lowering, as he murmurs, "*Damn it.*" And when he looks at me again, he says, "It's going to kill me when I lose you," before his mouth closes down over mine and he kisses me—no, he *consumes* me. This is not *just* a kiss at all. It's tenderness, demand, passion, torment, and *love*, and the mood of push and pull is gone.

I don't even try to tell him he doesn't have to lose me, it doesn't have to be that way. He's not in the right headspace right now, and maybe, I'm not either. Besides, I'm touching him now, as I've wanted to touch him for what feels like a lifetime. Touching him everywhere, anywhere I can, and I am not shy about it. I wrap one hand around his thick erection. He groans with the impact, and the power I've wielded over him is a high I can't explain. His hand grips mine over his erection as pumps into my grip, but grows quickly impatient.

He palms my backside and lifts me, my breasts molded to his chest, my

legs wrapping his waist, and he walks to a large chair in the corner and sits down with me on top of him. I straddle him, his erection is between us, pressed to my belly, and the hunger we have for one another is dark and edgy. I can feel it cloaking us like a heavy blanket, pulling us together.

My hands land on his shoulders, and he catches a strand of my hair and twines it around his fingers, tugging lightly. “Come here.”

That’s the definition of power. To command me with a single strand of my own hair around his finger. It’s so very hot. I’m hot. I’m melting right here, on top of him. I ease forward, closer to the man who destroys me with a word and touch, sensations swirling in my belly, my nipples tight. “You’ve always been bossy.”

“And you’ve always loved to play with my toys.”

I laugh, and I love that I can be naked and aroused and still laugh with Damion. “Nothing has changed, I guess—”

I barely get the words out and he’s drinking me in again, kissing me with long, sensual strokes of his tongue before he murmurs, “I’ve needed to be inside you again for a lifetime it seems.”

I wet my lips and say, “Yes. Please.”

“Hmmm. I like that word—*please*. I’m going to make you say it again and often.”

He catches my waist and anchors me, while I reach for his cock and guide his erection where we both need him to be, pushing him against me, past the slick heat of my sex. He is big and hard, and he presses into me, deep, then deeper, the look on his face pure male satisfaction. I pant and take all of him, sliding down the hard length of him, taking every inch of him, and it feels oh, so good.

He feels so good.

My hands are back on his impressive shoulders, and our gazes collide, and I can only describe what we share as raw hunger and emotion. And for a moment or ten, I have no idea, we just stare at each other, but all of our past is there with us, all that has been and might be in the future. It’s complicated, and right as it is wrong. Because this little time out we’re sharing has nothing to do with sex, and yet everything to do with why we want each other to the point of addiction.

He reaches up and teases my nipples, sensations rocking through my body, clenching my sex, and my fingers dive roughly into his hair.

I don’t know how those small acts unleash the wild in us, but they do. Our

hunger for one another erupts and suddenly we are kissing, swaying, touching each other. My body is hypersensitive to everything he does, and I have no reserve. I ride him, rock against him, while he kisses me, fucks me, and just plain drives me wild. I am so very close to orgasm, the best kind of orgasm, with him inside me. I want it. I press into reaching for it, but I also don't want this to end.

Somehow his mouth ends up on my nipple, sucking as I sway against him, and that's all she wrote. I gasp and hold onto him while my body stiffens and then shatters. It is the most intense orgasm of my life. Damion groans, wraps his arms around me, and pulls me against his cock with a hard thrust. And then he's right there with me, his face buried in my neck as his body quakes beneath mine.

We end with him collapsed on the chair and me collapsed on top of him, for I don't know how long, both of us breathing heavily. We just lay there, long moments passing, and I really don't want to leave this spot. Because when we do, when reality returns, we are one giant lifetime of goodbyes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Let’s go clean up, baby,” Damion says softly, stroking my hair, and before I can respond, he’s standing and taking me with him.

Suddenly, I’m thinking about him and his *it’ll kill me when I lose you* statement, or whatever it was he said, but it told a story. He’s already decided we are temporary. A few seconds later, he deposits me on the floor of his massive, sparkling master bathroom and hands me a towel. I accept his offering, and when he reaches for another, I make my escape. “I need to go to the bathroom,” I declare, and dart around him and enter the stall, shutting the door and leaning against it.

I don’t actually pee when I probably should—the whole after sex thing—but I clean up and sit on the edge of the toilet seat. What am I doing with Damion? Why can’t I ever just walk away? *Because, I think, he gives me all the feels, and no one else ever has.* And because I’ve tasted his pain and felt it, too, and I don’t really understand where it comes from but it makes me feel like he needs me.

A loud knock on the door has me jolting. “Alana?”

“Yes?” My voice trembles ridiculously in a telling way with that one single word.

“You okay in there?”

I stare down at the sparkling ring on my finger, a ring he really did pick for me, which means something. It might even mean a whole heck of a lot. I’d tried to take it off, but Damion had rejected the idea, and insisted I wear it. Because he wanted me to? Because he’s afraid I’ll walk away before he’s ready. “I just need a minute, okay?”

“Can you take it with me?” he asks softly and there is a vulnerability in his voice I’ve rarely heard in our lifetime of knowing each other. My belly clenches as I remember that he only shows that softer side of himself to me, or at least, I think he does.

I run my hand through my hair and stand up, but I’m ridiculously nervous to open the door, and I really don’t understand why. “Can you just give me a minute, please?”

“Please don’t shut me out,” he replies, and the plea that defies his cool control and confidence, is what does me in. It means something, just like the

ring, and him wanting me to wear it does, too.

I open the door.

He's standing there in long slung sweatpants, his ridiculously perfect body stretched tall, his arm resting on the doorframe above my head, his gaze probing, as he searches my face, but not for long. He drags me close, folding me into his long, lean muscle, as he declares, "I love you, woman. You *have to know that*. You have to feel it."

I don't doubt this to be true. I've never doubted we love each other. There are few people who endure a lifetime of drifting apart and coming back together as we have, but—there are so many buts. I just don't really know where that love falls in a sea of possibilities. My fingers curl on his chest. "I love you, too. I always have. I always will. Also, I really need a shirt or something. Please? Because I can't be naked when you're not, not right now."

"I'd rather just take you back to bed."

"We were never in the bed."

"Let's fix that. We'll order take out and eat in bed. *Our bed*, Alana." He cups my face. "Come on, baby. Try out what it's like to live with me, at least for tonight and tomorrow morning."

"You do know that it's hard to get rid of someone who lives with you, right?"

"I don't want to get rid of you. Ever." He caresses my hair behind my ear in a tender act that sends shivers through me. "Never."

"And yet, you told me losing me would kill you."

"I'm done leaving. It's you who will leave. You want to leave now." His tone is one part accusation and one part something that feels like defeat when he is never defeated.

"I don't want to leave, Damion. I want you to stop pushing me away."

He catches my hand and gives me one of his heated inspections. "You're gorgeous, smart, compassionate, and a better person than I will ever be. I'd be a fool to push you away, Alana. I don't want another man to touch you or sleep with you ever again. Or make breakfast with you the morning after fucking you. Or anything else, for that matter. Let's order food and go to bed."

I'm a ball of confusion with Damion, I am, but there is something in him tonight. I try to hear what he's saying, what he's *really* saying, but it might take morning light and clothing to allow that to happen. I nod, and he cups

my face and kisses me. “I know a taco place I think you’ll love. You do love tacos.”

It’s a reminder of the familiar between us. “Tacos always sound good.”

“Then go pee, since we both know you didn’t. I’ll order and”—he points at the walk-in closet in the back of the bathroom—“grab whatever you want to wear.” He kisses me hard and fast and exits the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him.

He’s giving me the moment I’d asked for because Damion gets me. I really do need it, but it wouldn’t have been good if I had it before he said all he just said. I walk into his closet, the spicy scent of him everywhere, wreaking havoc on my brain cells and body. I step to the center of the giant room, eyeing Damion’s well-organized clothing, all the expensive suits lined on one wall, his causal wear on another, and yet there is a ton of space left over. Space in which I could easily imagine all my things mingled with his, and the idea sits in my belly, feeling like it’s supposed to happen. I’m going to move in with him, the consequences be damned. I already know this, so why am I even fighting it?

I grab a shirt, pull it on, and then dig through a drawer to find a pair of his socks, suddenly eager to stop overthinking and get back to Damion. I go pee, clean up a bit, and even spray a little dollop of his cologne on, inhaling the delicious male scent. When I return to the bedroom, he’s entering the room with a bottle of wine and two glasses in hand.

“Wine?” he asks.

I nod and he pours me a glass, both of us sitting down on the bed as he grabs the remote but pauses to nuzzle my neck. “Why do you smell like me?”

I laugh at that. “I’m pretty sure you’re all over me.”

“Yes, but that’s not it.” He eases back to look at me. “Did you put on my cologne?”

My cheeks heat and I confess, “I like it on you. I thought you might like it on me.”

He strokes hair from my face and tilts my gaze to his. “I do.” His voice is low and gravelly before he kisses me. “I’m so fucking glad you’re here.”

My chest tightens with emotion. “Me, too.”

He kisses me and then releases me to flip on the TV, finding a specific channel he’s hunting for, which turns out to be the Hallmark Channel. I laugh and shake my head. “I know you do not watch this.”

“I actually do every once in a while, when I’m missing the old days. It

reminds me of going to your house. You and your mom always had it on.”

My heart squeezes with the idea that holds our past as close to his heart as I do. “We did,” I agree, “but I won’t subject you to watching it.”

The doorbell rings, and he hands me the remote. “Leave it on Hallmark. I’ll get the food.”

“You think it’s already here?”

“Oh yeah. The taco place is right next door.” He pushes to his feet, and crosses toward the bedroom door, the flex of his back muscles holding my attention as he exits the room. Someone is getting an impressive show when he opens the door, because Damion is a specimen.

It’s a long time later, when we really have finished a super cute Hallmark movie, and our bellies are full of amazing tacos. Damion turns off the TV and rolls us to our sides, facing each other, our legs curled together, his hands on my hips. “You know that song that was on when we were downstairs. It’s by Masked Wolf—”

“Astronaut in the Ocean.”

“Yeah, that one. It reminds me of you.”

“Me?” I ask, surprised, though it’s not an unfamiliar feeling, even when it played tonight. “Why?”

“You’ve always been the astronaut, destined to soar higher and higher, while the rest of us try to pull you into an ocean of sharks.”

I’m stunned by this comparison, and I am certain it confirms what I’ve read in him. He’s afraid of pulling me under and drowning me.

“When I say I have to protect you,” he adds, “it’s not out of obligation. It’s out of my personal need to take care of you. I just keep getting it wrong.”

“I’m here now,” I say, emotion welling in my belly. “If you don’t let go, you didn’t get it wrong this time.”

He nods and pulls back the covers. We climb under, and he reaches over and turns out the light. Damion pulls me down on the bed, folding me close, holding me almost a little too tight as he says, “I don’t want to get it wrong with you, Alana.”

But he thinks he will.

That’s the unspoken message but I also realize that he’s told me I’m an astronaut and he’s a shark in the ocean. I think—I think he’s our worst enemy, and maybe his own, too, and it’s time for him to see himself through my eyes. It’s time for me to hold onto him as hard as he’s holding onto me right now. Even if that means I stand toe to toe with his father in a proverbial

war. I think of my mother crying about that man forcing her to have sex with him. I've let that go. Why have I let that go?

This is war, and Damion's father is my enemy, and his as well.

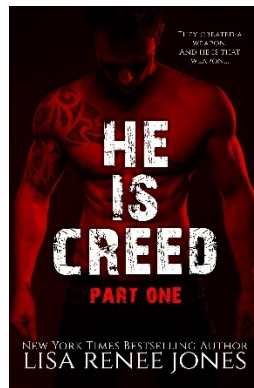
And the best place to fight it is by Damion's side.

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READ AN EXCERPT

“You’re going to have to share your room with me, sweetheart,” he says, and he doesn’t allow me time to object or even savor that endearment, not that objection is on my mind. I’m thinking of nothing but his mouth and hands on my body and this time, mine on his.

He opens the door and enters the room, maneuvering me along with him. The door slams shut behind us, and he’s already kissing me again. This time

when his fingers find my hair, he gives the long strands an erotic tug and drags my gaze to his. “Control in all things, Bella. It’s who I am. It’s what I need, not a want.”

“And as you remember,” I say, my fingers curling on his chest, “I don’t like what I can’t control, which I guess actually means I like control, too.”

“And you have it with me,” he promises. “Always. All you have to say is no, and we find what feels like a yes to you. You asked if I trust you. I’m asking you now, if you trust me.”

I consider the complexity of the question. Do I trust him to listen when I say no? Yes. Do I trust him not to break my heart? I’m pretty sure that’s signed, sealed, and delivered, so, no. Do I trust him to make tonight all about pleasure? The kind of pleasure I’ll remember long after he is married off to his future fiancée. Yes. That’s a brutal yes because of where this is headed, which is nowhere but right here, right now, but one I can’t walk away from, either. “Yes,” I say. “I trust you.”

“I don’t think you do, Bella,” he murmurs, and the way he uses my name—it’s as if he wants me to know I’m not just sex to him. Or maybe I just want to believe that—even need to believe that—to be here with him, to be this intimate with him. Because I’m still me. I’m still not the “sex is sex” kind of girl, even if he aspires to change that in me. “But I want you to trust me so damn badly it’s insane,” he adds roughly, an edge of frustration in him, as if this statement somehow contradicts the control he so values.

It shakes me just how much I’m pleased that I’ve tormented him in some way, as if it’s selfish of me. I know this, but Lord also knows I’m tormented over this marriage agreement he’s obviously accepted. And if I think too hard about it, I will run. I will leave.

I don’t want to leave.

I press to my toes, desperate for his mouth and body, for that oblivion he’s shown me once that I crave once again.

His grip tightens gently round my hair, the act both arousing and brutal, as he denies me his mouth. “I’m going to make you trust me, Bella,” he declares, and then, thank you Lord, his mouth slants over my mouth, his tongue caressing my tongue. And it’s a toe-curling, deep, drugging kiss that leaves me breathless when his lips part mine. “Undress, baby,” he orders. “I want to watch.”

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ABOUT LISA RENEE JONES

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.