

A man and a woman are shown in a close, intimate embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and a beard, and is shirtless. The woman, on the right, has long, straight blonde hair and is wearing a black, off-the-shoulder top. They are both looking down and slightly towards each other, creating a romantic and sensual atmosphere. The background is dark and out of focus.

SWEET SINNER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LISA RENEE
JONES

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The Necklace Trilogy
Also by Lisa Renee Jones
About Lisa Renee Jones

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SWEET SINNER

Book Two in the Tyler & Bella Trilogy

BY LISA RENEE JONES

DEAR READER:

Thank you so much for taking this journey with me to tell Tyler and Bella's story. Their story was one that I originally planned as a duet, but these two had massively different plans. As such, you will be getting more Tyler and Bella with a third book titled: *Dirty Little Vow*, which is available for pre-order now! I would apologize, as I don't like making changes like this, but I feel as if my readers would only enjoy more Tyler and Bella, and I also believe in following where the story and characters lead me and Tyler and Bella were not done with me or each other!

If you have not read the Necklace Trilogy yet, that story is about Dash and Allie, and it's smoking hot But for now, we focus on Tyler and Bella, and I always like to help recap the previous book to help bring you into the story. So here we go...

If you remember in *Bastard Boss*, Bella works as an agent and attorney for Hawk Legal. Hawk Legal represents some of the biggest names in country music and entertainment in general. Tyler Hawk is Bella's direct boss, but Tyler reports to his father. Tyler made the mistake of dating one of the staff members, Allison, but it wasn't serious. But this led to her secretly having an affair with his father.

Another Allison, Allie, took Allison's job after Allison took a leave of absence. But the new Allie thought it was fishy and dug around. In the process, Allie meets Bella's half-brother Dash, a famous author, and that is all part of *The Necklace Trilogy*. If I say more, I'll spoil the story for those who have not read that trilogy.

The bottom line is that Tyler's father did bad things and ended up dead.

Tyler's father was pretty rough on Tyler. His death was sure to cause mixed emotions.

Meanwhile, Bella represents her brother, and Tyler and Dash are friends, but the friendship is bumpy. However, they both have a dark past, and a turbulent relationship with their fathers. These things affect their lives, and they tend to save each other from stupidity. Bella works quite closely with Tyler and she's one of the few people who don't find his hard, arrogant persona intimidating. She knows things about him she shouldn't from talking to Dash, as Bella and Dash are extremely close.

Dash lost his father not long before Tyler lost his father.

Bella watched Dash struggle with mixed emotions.

The day of the memorial for Tyler's father, Bella is concerned about Tyler suffering through this event alone. She isn't even sure he will attend the memorial based on the bad things his father did. Bella just can't sit back and do nothing. She shows up at Tyler's apartment and stays to comfort him but there is heat between them. This leads to a fight, and her abrupt departure. But the heat between these two is just getting started.

They're ready to combust and one night at the office, the explosion happens. Bella ends up with him on his knees between her legs, right there in her office, but she's determined to never let it happen again. She goes into avoidance mode but suddenly Dash's Hollywood contract is on the line, which forces her and Tyler to travel together.

In the meantime, Tyler is dealing with his father's will, which holds him and the company hostage. When Tyler was a new attorney, he second-chaired a case that his father indicates was not handled with

proper ethical conduct. Now if Tyler doesn't do as his father's will bids, those case details will be made public. If that happens, every case Tyler and the firm have touched will be questioned, and convictions likely overturned. His father's will declares if he doesn't find a fiancée, court her publicly, and then marry her, that's exactly what will happen. Tyler doesn't want to do this, but if he loses the company, jobs will be cut, people will be hurt, and consequences will be had, such as innocent lawyers being connected to this and destroyed. Forced to comply with the will, Tyler has his attorney, Gavin, begin compiling a list of fake fiancée candidates who won't screw him.

But the only woman on Tyler's mind is Bella, who is as perfectly fuckable as a woman can get but also his employee and friend, not to mention his close friend's sister. She's hands-off. Until she isn't. She is absolutely not a fake fiancée candidate. Such a thing would ruin her reputation and her career. Everyone would think she slept her way to the top.

That doesn't stop the sparks between Bella and Tyler from flying.

One night in LA, they combust.

Tyler and Bella end up in a hotel room, naked and lost in each other, and they don't want it to end. Somehow, they still plot a way to win Dash's contract, move him to a new studio and sign the deal. To celebrate, they stay longer in LA and don't leave the hotel room.

Back in Nashville, things are about to get awkward. Bella *really* doesn't want to look like she slept her way to the top. Tyler cannot think about another woman as a fake fiancée. He plots a way to make her his without hurting her career. He draws up the agreement, presenting her with her own company, a cash payout, and more, all to

protect her and allow him to have the only woman he wants while still meeting his father's demands. Tyler goes to Bella's house to present his plan. They sit across from each other at her kitchen table and when he slides the contract to her, it's the beginning of the end.

Bella reacts in shock and accuses him of turning her into a whore. She kicks him out and as he leaves, her brother and his wife are at the door with a puppy to gift her.

Bella and Tyler are over.

Or so it seems.

I'm going to start you out with the final chapter of Bastard Boss to fully reengage you in the story...

I hope you enjoy Sweet Sinner!

Lisa

THE FINAL CHAPTER OF BASTARD BOSS

A reminder that Gavin is the attorney that works for Tyler and the celebratory gift is to celebrate Bella and Tyler closing the film deal for her brother Dash...

BELLA

I walk into my front door and lean on the hard surface and exhale with relief.

Somehow, I survived this day, but it was hard. Seeing Tyler first thing outside Gavin's office was awkward and emotional. And Gavin was weird, too. He kept staring at me, almost as if he knew something he should not know, but that's crazy. Tyler is a private person. I don't believe he would talk about me to anyone. My cellphone rings and I snake it out of my jacket to find Dash calling.

"Allie and I are on our way over. We got you a little celebratory gift. We just wanted to make sure you were home."

I grimace at the idea of company despite how much I love them both, but then again, maybe company is exactly what I need. "I'm here. I just got here."

"See you in thirty to forty-five minutes."

"Perfect. I have time to change and get comfy."

We disconnect and my doorbell rings. I frown because I'm not sure who would be here. Perhaps this time I really do have a package delivery, or a neighbor visiting with a package meant for me.

I grab the things I've set on the floor, place them on the entry table, then open the door. I blanch and my heart lurches at the sight of Tyler standing there. His suit jacket is gone, and his white shirt sleeves are rolled up to display powerful forearms. He smells so good I want to

lick him all over and I hate him for stirring such thoughts in me.
“What are you doing here?”

He lifts a folder in his hand. “I need to go over some contractual information with you.”

My eyes go wide. Damn it, I must have missed something in the contract and Dash is on his way over here. “What is it?” I ask urgently.

“Can I come in?”

I hesitate but I nod and back up, allowing his entry. I shut the door and lean on it again. He turns to face me. “Let’s go sit.”

No, I think, but what I say is, “Right. Let’s go sit. The kitchen table will be good.”

He motions me forward. “Lead the way.”

I move ahead of him, my knees weak with the heaviness of his eyes on my progress. The walk across the living room feels far and wide, but finally, we reach my table, the smaller one off the actual kitchen rather than the large dining room table. I stand on one side and wait for him to sit. His lips quirk as if he knows I’m waiting to choose my seat, based on where he places himself. He goes opposite of me, and we both settle in. The table is smaller than it seems normally, and we are closer than I intend.

“I thought this was better done away from the office.” He slides the folder in front of me.

I can only assume he means due to distractions.

I open it and stare down at a document that reads: *This agreement is between two parties, Tyler Hawk and Bella Bailey.*

I blink and my gaze jerks to Tyler’s. “What is this?”

“We’re not going to stay away from each other, Bella. I’m going to

be followed by a PI, looking for me to screw up. If I touch you, and you are not my fiancée, I lose everything. The company loses everything.”

I’m shell-shocked. “So wait, *I’m* the problem here?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. I trust you. I know you won’t screw me, Bella. I need to trust the person I call my fiancée. And that gives us time to fuck each other out of our systems”

He might as well have stabbed me right in the heart. “Right. Because it’s all about sex.” He opens his mouth to speak and I hold up a hand, anger churning in my belly. “Everyone will think I slept my way to the top. No.” I shut the folder and slide it to him. “I don’t need to fuck you out of my system, Tyler. You just finished this for me.”

“I’m not going to let this screw you, Bella. I want you to open a film division for Hawk Legal. We’ll set it up as another company. Additionally, I’ll ensure your salary is double, as you will head that division. Furthermore, I know money isn’t an issue for you, but this is a mammoth-sized commitment. When I inherit, there is a substantial payout for you in the contract. I do not want to take advantage of you, Bella, but I need you by my side. And I *want* you by my side.”

I swear I can feel my heart shattering into pieces and then exploding into anger. My voice quakes and I say, “The crazy part is I would have done this for you, as a friend. For you and the company because you know—I just would have. And I didn’t need a contract to go away. I learned the hard way that love is rare and my parents were lucky to have it. I don’t want to get married. I don’t want to fall in love and be burned by nastiness like this.” I lose control and throw the folder at him, before standing up. “I’m done. We’re done. And, no, I’m not going to quit my job. I’m going to stay and congratulate your new

fiancée on her future happiness. Everybody will think I mean her life with you, but I'll mean her big payday."

"Bella—"

He is on his feet rounding the table. "No." I point at him and back away. "Don't even think about touching me."

He curses and scrubs his jaw, and somehow, he manages to look tormented, like I really matter to him. How many women has he made think they mattered to him when they were just sex? "Forget the contract," he says. "Just do this with me. Date me. Marry me. This isn't how I wanted this to work out. I thought we'd both have the freedom —"

"To fuck each other out of our systems? *Leave, Tyler.*"

My doorbell rings and I say, "That will be Dash and Allie."

"Of course, it is," he says. "Now I have to leave, but this isn't over. We are not over."

"We are so over, Tyler. You insulted me and tried to pay me off. I feel like a whore. You made me feel like a whore."

"Bella," he breathes out. "God, woman. I don't think—" The doorbell rings again, and he huffs out a breath. "I'm going." He rotates on his heel and strides toward the door.

I follow him, and why on Earth do I want to scream for him to stop? Why do I hurt so badly at the idea of him leaving? I reach the edge of the foyer as he opens the door to face Dash and Allie.

"What the hell are you doing here, Tyler?" Dash demands.

"Ask your sister," is all Tyler says, and then he disappears out into the hallway.

Dash and Allie step into the foyer, and Allie is holding a Golden

Retriever puppy. I've wanted a Golden Retriever since I was a kid, but my mom was busy, and often traveled all over the place with my father. I just couldn't have a dog. In my mind, when I think of getting a dog, it's a Golden.

“Surprise!” Allie says, while Dash counters with, “What the fuck is going on, Bella?”

I burst into tears.

CHAPTER ONE

BELLA

Tyler is gone.

Dash and Allie are not.

They stand in my doorway with a puppy in Dash's arms, staring at me as tears stream down my cheeks. After making me feel dirty and foolish with his stupid contract, Tyler has left me to explain away everything Dash and Allie just witnessed. And at this point, I've all but announced I'm sleeping with my boss, who is also Dash's close friend and the owner of the agency that represents his books and career.

"What the hell was that?" Dash demands, glancing over his shoulder in the direction in which Tyler has just departed and then back at me, expectation in his stern look. No, it's a look that says *I'm not on my way to beat his ass, but I'm about to if you don't talk me out of it.* And we all know how Dash likes to fight.

Thankfully, the Golden Retriever puppy distracts Dash with big ol' slobbering licks. I'm also a fast thinker, thanks to a job that places me on the hot seat more times than not. For instance, with my demanding boss, who I should never have allowed to touch me, a decision that creates a question about my judgment.

I rush forward and greet the puppy before daring a glance at my brother. "I can't believe you got me a puppy." The puppy replies with an Olympian effort at kissing away my tears and the sweetness only makes me want to cry all over again. Actually, I do cry all over again, but I direct it right back at the puppy. "Oh my God, you're killing me with your sweetness." I glance up at Dash. "And yours. Thank you. I love you." I eye Allie. "And you. I love you too, Allie." And I do. She's

good for my brother and has become a close friend—another sibling, in fact.

“She’s a girl,” Dash says. “Just like you wanted.

“Yes, I did,” I approve, and scoop the pup from Dash’s arms and carry her to the living room where the carpet is soft and comforting. As a plus, when I go down on my knees, the furniture hides both of us from loving but prying eyes.

I lower myself to my back and pull the puppy across my body, and while that ache in my heart still cuts deep, the cuddles are welcome comfort.

I nuzzle the puppy’s face and I’m kissed half to death until my tears morph into giggles. I all but choke when Dash appears above me, glaring down at me. “Bella. What the hell was that with you and Tyler?”

I sit up and allow the puppy a moment to explore. “I’m going to call her Molly.”

“Tyler, Bella,” Dash presses. “Why was he here?”

“He wanted me to sign something that had to be an original signature. When I told him you were on your way, he ran away. You have that impact on people, big brother.”

He kneels down in front of me. “You were crying. He was angry.”

I hold up Molly. “I cried because you surprised me with her, and he’s always angry.”

His lips press together. “That’s not wrong, but he’s a man of control. He doesn’t storm out of a room. And he shouldn’t be at your house.”

“Yes, well, he doesn’t care what he should or should not do. It’s all about money to Tyler. You know that.”

I'm sure this is the winning statement, but Dash proves me wrong, continuing to push. "What did you do to piss him off, Bella?" he repeats

"Told him everything about the contract was wrong, which it was. Thanks to me, he wasn't able to close the deal tonight." *All of which is the truth*, I think, as long as we don't get into details. I scoop the pup up again and change the subject. "Thank you," I say again.

"Thank *you*," he says. "Molly is my way of showing my appreciation for all you did to close that deal for me."

"And because you're afraid I'll end up old and alone."

"On the contrary," he says. "I'd rather you have a dog than the wrong man. For instance, Tyler."

And here we go again. "Tyler's my boss," I say, dismissing his comment. "I'm worried about the puppy needing and deserving love and companionship. My job is ridiculously demanding."

Allie sits on the chair framing this side of the couch. "You'll give her plenty of love."

"Did you get one for yourselves?" I ask, looking between them.

Allie cast Dash a demure look. "I'm working on him."

"Maybe you can make real babies instead," I suggest.

"Now I know you're trying to distract me from Tyler's bullshit," Dash accuses.

The puppy whines and starts sniffing the ground. Allie hops up and scoops her out of my arms. "I'll take her to potty." She heads for the door, and while yes, the puppy needs to go out, I'm pretty sure she's giving me and my brother some sibling time.

Allie understands that need a little too well right now, considering

I'd rather skip it until I've pulled myself together. Damn it, I want to cry again. And damn Tyler for making my insides feel like mush.

I push to my feet, intent on running away from my brother and not afraid to admit it. But he's standing as soon as I'm standing, planted right in front of me. "Talk to me, little sis," he urges gently.

He's obviously not buying my diversions, and while I could make up a bigger story, and basically lie to Dash, that's not the relationship I want to have with him, or anyone in my life, for that matter. I get that from my mother. She preached honesty and she lived by the truth, no matter how difficult the truth can sometimes be.

She wouldn't approve of a barrier between me and Dash.

I don't approve, either. Not so long ago, Dash hid a lot from me. He hid his underground fighting from me because he was embarrassed. He didn't like what it said about himself. I'm not sure what this thing with Tyler says about me, but I don't think I like it either. This is why I confess to Dash, "I'm not ready. I need to process and think."

His chin lowers, his eyes fixed on me. "Bella," he says, compelling me to speak with that one word.

"I need to think," I repeat more insistently. "And I need to deal with this myself."

"I tried dealing with things on my own," he replies, speaking of his fight club habit, no doubt. "It didn't go so well for me," he adds. "Don't make the same mistake."

"I'm not going to shut you out and hide some major problem from you, Dash. I've worked with Tyler for five years now. I just haven't been under these intense circumstances with him since I was in LA. He's intense. And without the office as a buffer, more so than ever. It

was” —I lower my lashes and then lift them—“overwhelming. But even so, I’m exhausted, or he wouldn’t have been able to get to me tonight. He’s also my boss,” I add. “And I don’t need my big brother to insert himself into my career. I won’t have a career if that’s how this plays out.”

He studies me for a long moment. “This is a work thing?”

I think of the contract Tyler just offered me and I don’t even hesitate to reply with “Yes,” because Tyler made it clear that’s all anything with me is or will ever become.

“What did he do to piss you off?”

“I swear you asked this, and I have answered. Tyler acted like Tyler, and that’s what pissed me off. Him being him. And for the record, I’ve seen him make grown men cry.”

He scrubs his jaw and settles his hands on his hips. “Okay. That’s all you had to say. And I’m sure the situation with his father hasn’t made him more tolerable.”

“No, it has not. Add to that, the time zone change from LA to Nashville and the stress of holding your contract in the palm of my hands, and I think I really did need a puppy.”

He narrows his eyes on me, a warning that he’s not done pushing even before he observes, “Not many people get away with fighting with their boss and keeping their job.”

“Not many people bring their boss the money I do mine.”

He considers me a moment and then says, “Why don’t you go out on your own?”

“I’m frustrated with Tyler, Dash, not my job or the firm. Hawk Legal has resources I could never have on my own. They are the best of the

best, and I want that for my clients, including you, Dash. I'm good at what I do, but collectively, the firm has someone who has experienced every situation that comes up and brings that knowledge to whoever needs it." I change the subject. "I need to run to the store and buy supplies. You want to come?"

"I bought you supplies. I'll go grab them from the car. I also arranged and paid for a full-time pet sitter for the first six months."

I blink. "You did what?"

"She's a puppy nanny. Allie says she's amazing, but if you don't like her, we'll find someone else. She's going to stop by in half an hour to meet you. She'll even do general assistant work. The idea is that you don't have an excuse for being alone. And you can go to work without worrying tomorrow."

Alone is better than being a fake fiancée to my boss, I think. "I don't know how I feel about the puppy bonding with her and not me."

He laughs. "Already jealous?"

"Yes," I say, an easy admission, especially since I'm not completely talking about the puppy and the nanny.

Soon, Tyler will have his own nanny, a fiancée for hire, eager to tend to all of his manly needs.

And there is no scenario where she will be me.

CHAPTER TWO

BELLA

Puppies equal love, happiness, and a sure way to be up all night and still wake up early.

While all these things prove true with my new puppy, I also credit Molly for allowing me zero bandwidth for all things Tyler. I don't know if it's good or bad, but all my plans to wallow in my emotions and dissect them to pieces while in a hot tub while eating an entire pint of ice cream and while crying just don't happen. I don't even have time to dread a morning confrontation with my bastard boss.

Molly's kisses and snuggles work wonders on my stress levels, more so than that ice cream I'd have regretted tomorrow. I settle into bed, exhausted to the point that I fret none and sleep some, in between the many puppy demands. A puppy really is like a newborn. At one point, staring into the darkness after settling the puppy in from her pee break, I do have one thought. My manwhore boss doesn't deserve credit for my sleepless night. One thing my father taught me was self-respect must exist to expect it from a man.

I shut my eyes with this in mind, blessed darkness consuming me until it does not. Suddenly I'm back in the past.

I'm in my office, against my door, with Tyler touching me, *really* touching me, for the first time ever...

My hand goes to Tyler's hand, which rests on my waist, in my mind trying to control what comes next but all it does is create another connection, me to him and him to me. But he's also simply imitating what Josh did to me out on that patio—where he touched me, how he touched me. But there is no comparison. One is ice and

one is heat. Tyler is the heat. "You are not Josh."

"Why does that matter?" he challenges. "This is an exercise in control. Your control, Bella."

My eyes meet his and I swear, I have that same sensation I had when he first touched me. I feel him in every part of me. "What are you doing, Tyler?" I whisper. "What are we doing?"

"Tell me no, Bella," he demands, his voice low but no less commanding.

"No," I say easily, but it's not exactly the version of "no" he's asking for. I'm not saying "no" to his touch. I'm saying "no" to saying "no" to Tyler. Because I can't seem to will myself any more than him to remove his hand from my body.

Tyler rather obviously senses the real meaning behind my version of "no."

I see that in the way he narrows his eyes on me and I feel it in the flex of his fingers on my waist. There is possessiveness in the warmth of his touch that I might be imagining, but I am so screwed because I really hope that I am not. As if confirming my suspicions, he says, "Define your version of no, Bella."

I push back, rebelling against the command I've read in his tone. "I said what you wanted me to say."

His other hand comes down on the door beside my head, almost as if he's caging me. "Tell me no, Bella." There's something almost raw and angry in his words.

"Tyler—"

He shocks me then, cupping my face, his grip firm but not painful. "Is this how you tell everyone else no, Bella? Because if it is—"

“Don’t be an asshole,” I snap back at him. “I told you, you are not everyone else. And if you think I sleep around to get business, stop touching me and fire me, Tyler. I will happily pack up my desk today.”

Seconds tick by in which he stares down at me, his blue eyes piercing, the air thick between us until he abruptly twines his fingers into my hair, giving the long strands a rough, erotic tug. His mouth lowers, lingering above mine, his breath on my skin. “I do not think you sleep around but damn it, woman, you really don’t take orders well. I said, say no, and then this ends right now.”

“I already did. You didn’t like my version of ‘no.’”

The muscle in his jaw flexes, seconds ticking by before he murmurs, “If there is one thing I’ve learned that you need to understand, it’s that there are consequences to actions. This is what happens when you don’t say no.” His mouth closes down on my mouth, and then he’s kissing me.

The world spins around me with the shock of the moment, and there is no thinking on my part to be found. I know he shouldn’t be kissing me. I know I shouldn’t kiss him back, but I do. I know I should stop this right here and now. No is the right response, he’s right on that point. Because he is my boss, and the repercussions of our actions do have consequences. But the truth is, I just cannot seem to care. I don’t even try. Though my hands don’t move—one remains pressed to his where it rests on my waist, the other on his chest, though I don’t remember how it got there—I moan for him. I sink into the kiss, drinking in every moment of the sinful play of his mouth against my mouth.

When his lips part from mine, I burn for more. I want to pull his mouth back to mine, but he lingers a breath from another kiss, so close but out of reach. Time stands still, expanding over eternity, it seems, and yet in an illogical contrast, too quickly. I am barely hanging onto my sanity as the beats drum by.

Beats that could morph into regret and worry if I'm allowed to think too much longer about facing the consequences of my actions tomorrow. Or even hours from now. I could almost convince myself he was going to find the good sense I do not apparently possess and end this, after what was some lesson to me on why no is no. But that's not what happens.

He leans in and brushes his lips over mine, a gentle touch contrasted by his teeth catching my bottom lip roughly, a promise of something dark and delicious in that act. But I've always known Tyler has a darker side to him. I breathe out with the sensation spiraling through me, and he reaches up and drags the zipper down the front of my dress until it ends just above my belly button. His eyes, emotionless but for the hunger in their depths, meet mine, a challenge in their depths. I don't know if he wants me to say no now or if he's daring me to keep going.

He all but ensures I ride this out, pressing the lace cups of my bra down, exposing my ample breasts and nipples. His gaze lowers, and he runs his tongue over his lips as if his mouth waters at the sight of me. I suck in air as he catches the puckered peaks of my nipples in his fingers. What follows is a rough tug and twist that both hurts and feels so good, so much so, that my knees turn wobbly. My sex clenches, and I'm slick between my thighs all over again, as I haven't

been for a man in a very long time.

Maybe not ever.

It's the forbidden thing I assume, the reason I'm reacting to Tyler with such intensity. This is going nowhere good but the moment, and it has to end. I have to say no.

I gasp and sit up to find sunlight beaming through the window while the puppy sleeps soundly in her puppy pen. Glancing down, I find my breast has slipped outside of my sleep tank. With a hard pull, I yank the blanket to my neck, feeling exposed and used, but do I really even have that right? He told me to say no. I didn't say no.

Not until he slid a contract across my kitchen table.

CHAPTER THREE

BELLA

The puppy whines at the same time the doorbell rings.

In my pajamas with the puppy in my arms, I open the front door to find Livi, my brand-new pet nanny, at the door. She scoops the puppy from my arms. “I got her,” she declares. “And I’ll make coffee. You go catch a few more minutes of sleep or get ready for work.”

She grabs the leash by the door and then she’s gone.

Livi is a red-headed, twenty-eight-year-old published author who calls herself a struggling artist, not yet earning a big payday, but she’s got all my love right now. I hurry upstairs and undress, and when I step outside the door, there’s a cup of coffee waiting on me with a note: *I sent a text to Allie, and she told me how you like it.*

Okay, I’m supposed to hire an assistant I have not hired. I’d say it needs to be Livi but working for me is not Livi’s dream and dreams matter. It also hits me that she’s probably pretty darn excited about this job, considering who my brother is and the fact that I’m his agent. And I’m okay with that. If she’s a good writer, I’ll help her. If she isn’t, I’m not against giving her guidance to get there.

I dry my hair and do my makeup with Tyler on my mind more than I care to admit. The idea that I want to look good for him is exactly why I dress in a fairly sexless, simple black skirt and matching jacket, which I then pair with an emerald blouse. After which, I stare at my image in the mirror—my blonde hair draped around my shoulders—pleased with my conservative look, a look that says *all business, no naughty stuff allowed*. My attire might say *hands-off*, but I’m quite sure all Tyler will see is me naked and all but begging for more of his

body.

My cheeks heat and I cringe.

What have I done to the career I worked tirelessly to establish?

Nothing that can be fully undone, I decide, but I can certainly remind my boss that I do my job and do it well, which means I make him lots of money, but that's all I do for him.

With this coping strategy firmly in place, I head to the living room only to be greeted by a happy little puppy romping here and there and all over my feet. I squat down and scoop up Molly, giving her all the love. "Oh, how I wish I could spend the day with you, little one."

"I promise to send you photos," Livi declares, staring down at me and holding a travel mug. "I made you coffee for the road. I'm guessing you didn't get much sleep last night."

I kiss Molly, set her down, and push to my feet. "How are you this wonderful? And, yes, I'm exhausted but not because of Molly. It's my trip to LA and home again. Too much travel, not enough Nashville."

"I'll bet," she says. "If you need me to run errands or do anything to help, I can. Believe me, your brother paid me generously. I want to be worth the money."

"You already are," I assure her, and head for the door.

It's time to face my boss. Or not. Maybe I can just avoid him today, until I put a little more distance between me, naked, in his arms, with his mouth all over me.

CHAPTER FOUR

BELLA

The drive to work is short, leaving no room for naked memories, but also no time for a pep talk, either.

I'm a ball of nerves as I step onto the elevator of the Hawk Legal high-rise for my ride up to my floor. The car zooms up at lightning speed and the ding that announces my arrival to my destination floor might as well be a punch in my heart by Tyler himself.

The doors begin to part, and I remind myself that all I have to do is get to my office without an encounter with Tyler and let my job take over. There are plenty of clients in need of and deserving of my attention, while Tyler is not. I step into the hallway only to have my heart leap to my throat, and my escape plan dashed. Tyler and one of the house attorneys are standing just outside the office.

He's in profile, and of course, he's facing the direction I have to travel, which will certainly place me in his view, and therefore alert him to my presence.

And damn it, I notice how hot he is in his perfectly tailored and fitted blue suit, and unbidden, I remember him standing in the hotel room, naked, with sinewy muscle, and a thick cock, demanding all kinds of naughty things from me. Running at this point isn't about shame, but survival.

So, I do, which at present translates to cutting right and walking as fast as I can toward the lobby, but just as I think I've escaped Tyler, he calls my name, "Bella!" and his tone is pure command.

The urge to carry onward and ignore him is strong, but so is my desire to retain my job. Therefore, I'm obligated by his role as my boss

and mine as his apparent submissive, to obey. I stop dead in my tracks, draw in a breath, and will my heart to calm. Only then do I rotate to face him and curse in my mind as I discover the attorney Tyler was talking to is now stepping onto an elevator car. I'm now the sole victim of Tyler's attention.

And boy, do I have his attention.

His piercing blue eyes pin me where I stand, and my heart does this insane pitter-patter thing against my breastbone. Worse, my nipples pucker with the idea that his mouth has been on them and about every other part of my body as has mine, his.

"My office," he orders.

"I'd rather not," I reply, and I'm frustrated to realize there's a tremble vibrating in my words.

"It wasn't a question," he states.

With that, he rotates, and with his long, confident stride, walks toward the double glass doors of his private offices.

For a moment, I think I'll stand my ground, but we both know I'm not going to deny him this meeting, not here, not at the office where I am truly his subordinate. Furthermore, hesitating only creates the opportunity for him to watch me walk toward him. I don't want to be watched by Tyler Hawke right now, not when there's too much for his overly perceptive attention to discover.

I double step, catching up to him, erasing the distance between me and him in steps, but nothing can erase the distance that contract he offered me created between us. If he doesn't know that yet, he's about to find out. It might as well be now, so we can both move on with our lives. I can find a real man. He can find his fake fiancée. We can both

get back to work doing the only thing we do well together—making money.

CHAPTER FIVE

BELLA

Tyler opens the double glass door and motions me forward, but those bluer-than-blue eyes of his are locked on me, studying me with an intensity that undoes me and allows zero room for escape. His energy is hungry, a wild animal, who's found his next meal.

And that meal is me.

If I let it be me.

And I will not.

Self-respect, I tell myself. I've had none with Tyler, and that's exactly why he felt it was okay to hand me that contract. He doesn't respect me.

The very idea burns in my belly. My chin lifts and I fearlessly march right past him.

I'm instantly swimming in the brutally masculine scent of his cologne, memories of it and him all over me in that hotel room, working me over. Memories of him dominating me and me liking it. I don't even know why I liked it, but denying the truth—that I did—isn't going to serve me as well simply rejecting anything further between us.

At this point, I've passed him by and I'm standing in front of his secretary's desk, feeling momentarily thankful she isn't in her seat yet to witness whatever my face must reveal right now. Or maybe I should wish for someone, anyone, to place themselves between me and Tyler to offer a buffer of some type. I rotate to face the door as Tyler joins me, his big body shrinking the already compact space to miniature.

He's too close for comfort, towering over me with his six-foot-plus height, and doing so a few seconds too long to be comfortable. My

mistake is the moment my eyes lift to his, my intent to press him to get this over with. Instead, our gazes lock, the air thickening between us, intimate memories ping-ponging between us.

I swallow hard, resisting the urge to fold my arms in front of my aching breasts, which he'd surely understand. And while I dread us alone in his office, it's almost a relief when he breaks the tension between us and says, "Let's take this to my office."

"Whatever you think *this* is, it isn't," I promise him. "Whatever you think you can do to make me okay with anything that happened between us, Tyler, you won't."

In true Tyler alpha form, he replies with, "I'm not accepting that answer," and motions me down the hallway.

In other words, he'll prove me wrong in private.

And we're both fully aware of the fact that once I walk down that hallway in front of him, I'm caged by his office in front of me and him behind, but refusing to do so only makes my rattled, emotional state more transparent. Rattled, emotional people cannot be successful agents. In the end, I have to perform, or I can't continue to work here, and when this thing between us is put to rest—not to bed—we both need to know that's not the case.

I start walking toward his office, and that dream from last night, that memory of me against my own office door and him between my legs, his tongue dancing wickedly along my sensitive flesh, whips through me and reminds me to be strong. The history between us that includes intimacy at work does nothing to establish our future, only our past. No matter what he thinks differently, no matter how hard he flexes his alpha will on me, I will not be getting naked for him in his

office or anywhere ever again.

We are done.

And I hate how much that hurts my heart.

But it's fairly obvious at this point, that I had a thing for Tyler long before a weekend in a hotel, and I don't know how or even when that happened.

CHAPTER SIX

TYLER

I've had women give me raging hard-ons plenty of times, but I've never had a woman taunt me with my own cock. They've tried but they failed miserably. None of them ever had that power. I mean holy fuck, they have to know I have a hand. I can do the job myself or call someone who'll do it better than me. The problem is, I don't want to call someone else, and the only woman I'm thinking of with my cock in my hand is Bella.

She enters my office, a sweet sashay to her hips that has me thinking about her on top of me, sashaying on my cock. If I wasn't hard already, the memories of exactly that would have done the job. And considering the heat flaming between us, it would be easy to see having her to myself as a win, *if* she was any other woman. Because if she were any other woman, I'd go where that leads me.

Translation: she'd be facing the door, her skirt to her waist in about thirty seconds.

Then I'd be inside her, fucking her until I can fuck no more, and where Bella is concerned, that's a lot of fucking. But as good as that would feel to both of us, all I'd do with that action is validate the conclusion that I've turned her into a high-priced whore. If I was smart, I'd go with that. I'd convince her to be that and keep things simple and filled with fuck days and fuck nights.

But for reasons I don't begin to have figured out, it's not that simple.

Not with Bella.

I step into the doorway to my office, and instead of finding Bella on

this side of my desk where I expect to find her, she's placed the small, round conference table between us. And I don't have to work too hard to figure out a way to resolve this. The table is between us because the contract is between us.

And it pisses me off.

I enter my office, shut the door, and walk toward her. Her eyes go wide, like she sees or senses the hunger and demand consuming me as I want to consume her. I stop on this side of the table when I really want to live out my fantasy of a few minutes ago, which ends with me inside her. Inside her would be really fucking good right now. Instead, I lean forward and press my hands on the table. "You act as if any of this is in my control. It isn't."

"Your entire life is about control, Tyler. I told you I would have helped you, but I won't be bought."

"In which case you end up fucked in the wrong ways. I'm trying to protect you."

"You're trying to protect yourself, Tyler. That's why you wanted me to sign that contract. It's a prenup for a year-long fuck session, and I want no part of it. And if this is what we're here to talk about, I need coffee and to attend to my clients." She takes a step and another, tracking a path to the door.

I push off the table and rotate to face her. "We are not done here. Don't even think about leaving my office. And that's not a question."

She hesitates and turns to face me, halfway between the table and the door, but it's no longer between us.

"You're very uncomfortably my boss," she states. "And that's the only reason I'm still standing here."

“I *am* your boss, Bella,” I say simply. “Spend some time thinking about that, because I did before I gave you that contract. If the implications for you didn’t matter to me, they wouldn’t exist. As for why we’re meeting, the studio wants to amend your brother’s contract.”

She blanches. “What? We inked the deal. Please tell me you didn’t agree to this. And what do they want?”

“For Dash to do a true crime TV show.”

She laughs and the tension between us eases. “*Dash?*” she asked incredulously. “He likes to stay behind his computer.”

“They offered him a chunk of change, and it will only help book sales. Talk to him.”

She considers the offer a moment. “I’ll call Allie and see if she can have lunch. If I get her on my side, she’ll help win him over. But even so, it’s a tough sale. Anything else?”

You, I think. She is everything else. “They want to know in the next seventy-two hours. In other words, if Dash says no, you need a back-up we can pitch.”

“I have someone in mind,” she assures me. “I’ll discreetly feel him out.”

We fall into silence and the heat is back, a hot flame between us that damn near scorches the air. “I should go make my calls,” she says, and she quickly walks toward her escape.

I could let her go. I could just move the fuck on, but I won’t.

She’s at the door, her hand on the knob when I step behind her and press my hand to the hard surface. “Not so fast.”

I wait for the fiery personality that defines Bella to kick in and force

her to face off with me, and it does. She whirls around and now she's facing me, nice and close, the scent of woman and some kind of flowery perfume fire in my blood. I expect her to come at me, and I want her to. I want anything but her leaving this office with "no" still her answer, and I want it in a way I don't even understand.

I just know it has to be Bella.

Only Bella.

But she doesn't come at me. All she says is "Tyler," in this breathless, please-fuck-me kind of voice that has me ready to do just that and more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TYLER

She smells sweet and I already know she tastes like heaven.

“My father created the rules,” I say. “This is not how I wanted any of this to turn out, Bella, and that means us. I’m just playing my father’s game and it’s meant to be as wrong as it is.”

“I know,” she says. “I do. I really do, but I don’t want to play at all.”

I tell myself not to touch her, not to feed this bullshit whore mentality she’s created, but I can’t not touch her. My fingers tangle in her hair. The heat between us pulses. Her hands cover mine. “This can’t happen,” she whispers, her voice trembling.

“But do you want it to happen?”

“I’m angry right now. *Really* angry.”

“I’m angry with you, too.”

“Why would you be angry with me?”

“Because you’re basically calling me a bastard.”

“You sort of are.”

“Now you’re making me angry again.”

“Bastards always get angry when someone calls them on their behavior.”

My lips curve. “Is it bad that it turns me on when you scold me?”

“Tyler,” she breathes out, just the way she had when I was doing all kinds of dirty things to her in LA.

I lower my mouth to hers, teeth nipping her lip, tongue the salve to her ache. She breathes out an uneven breath and her hand goes to my chest. But she doesn’t push me away and now she’s touching me of her own free will. “This is not going to change anything.”

“We won’t know unless we try.”

My mouth brushes hers. Her fingers curl around my lapel and my mouth slants over her mouth, my tongue doing a slow caress against hers. One taste of her, and she moans, one of her soft sexy moans, and it’s the sweet sound of submission I crave from Bella. I want her on her knees, I want her on my cock. My hand slides over her breast, and her hand catches mine, but she doesn’t shove me away. Her nails dig into my skin and she whispers, “You’re such a bastard and manwhore.”

“If I was a manwhore, anyone would do, Bella. Anyone won’t do. Only *you*.”

I lock the door.

She just looks at me with those stunning blue eyes I could get lost in as easily as I can any other part of her. I kiss her again, deep and dirty kissing, the kind that says we’re not even close to finished. Just in case she doesn’t get that message, I tear my mouth from hers and say as much, “We’re not finished with each other, Bella. You know it. I know it.” I press my cheek to hers, tug her skirt up, and whisper, “All I can think about is us naked in that hotel room. I want to go back. I want to live there with you.”

I ease back and press my fingers between her legs, shoving her panties aside to press my fingers inside her. “You’re wet for me, aren’t you?”

Her lashes lower and she says, “It means nothing,” again, even as pleasure etches her beautiful face. She pants and I capture the sound with my mouth and this time when I kiss her, she clings to me, she kisses me, and we’re unleashed. I tug at her clothes and her at mine. I lift her, and press inside her, deep, deep inside her, where it’s wet and

tight and ridiculously perfect.

I'm holding all her weight, her naked breasts between us, her pressing against me, me pulling her on top of me. It's fast. It's hard. She leans forward, holds my neck, and whispers "Tyler," and her sex clenches me so freaking hard I can't help but come.

When it's over, I carry her to my desk, set her on top, and hand her a tissue. She accepts the tissue and when she would climb off the desk, I catch her waist. "Don't say that meant nothing. Bella, you—*it's you.*"

"I don't like how all of this makes me feel."

There's a knock on the door and then, "Tyler, it's Gavin."

I lift Bella and set her on the ground, pulling her blouse back into place but she's already fired up again. "He probably wants you to look at your prospective fiancées. I should go." She pulls her skirt down.

"That's an angry reply," I accuse.

"Because I *am* angry, Tyler. Orgasms don't solve everything. Only you would think it does. It's past time for me to go."

In other words, time is up. I can feel that in my bones. If she leaves this office on the other side of this contract, I've lost her. And outside of a contract or an accomplishment, I've never been more determined not to lose. "It has to be you, Bella."

"It's not going to be me, Tyler," is her reply, and when she tries to move away, I tighten my grip on her waist.

"I don't accept that answer," I say, determined to end this drama between us now, but there's another fucking knock on the door.

"I'm not a business transaction," she says and again, "I *don't like* how this feels."

"You think you're a business transaction to me?" I demand. "Really,

Bella?”

Her lips tighten. “I think you made that pretty clear last night, Tyler.”

“I was *protecting you*.”

“We’ve covered this. You were protecting yourself.”

“I wouldn’t offer anyone else what I offered you, Bella.”

“A better-paid whore is still a whore.”

“Holy fuck, Bella. Stop with the whore bullshit. Just to be clear, one more time, you know I have to do this.”

“I know.”

Which means she knows I have to pick someone else. And for the first time since I was a college kid, I feel like I was just punched right in the heart. “I guess that makes *your point*.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not going to try to tell you what anything means anymore, Bella. You clearly have everything, including me, all figured out.”

I release her and step backward.

She doesn’t immediately turn and leave as I expect. Instead, she just stands there and stares at me with tormented eyes I don’t even understand at this point. Seconds tick by and I give her about three more before all bets are off and I’m going to erase all this bullshit angst and she’s going to end up naked this time when I do. Almost as if she hears my warning, she sucks in a slow breath, and I find myself holding my own, waiting for whatever she has to say.

But she doesn’t say anything.

She steps around the desk and all but runs to the door, her perfect, sweet little ass the last thing I see as she leaves me where I stand. For

once, it's not me pushing someone away, it's the opposite and it's a fucked-up feeling. Bella fucks me up. She just saved me from me. I should be thankful. What's more fucked up is that I'm not. I went into this saying no more emotional bullshit with Bella.

This should be a business transaction.

What the fuck is not?

CHAPTER EIGHT

BELLA

The minute I exit Tyler's office I all but run into Gavin, who is as always, dressed in an expensive suit and reeking of arrogance. But then, being close to Tyler demands nothing less.

"Bella," he greets, giving me an up and down that feels as dirty as the contract Tyler offered me and Gavin created. The look that slides over Gavin's face is pure satisfaction, as if he knows Tyler has just fucked me into submission and life is now good. Obviously, he assumes Tyler also inked the deal to make me his full-time bedmate for the next year. I'm job security in his eyes, but then maybe he thinks Tyler will share me, and then I'm everyone's fuck. I don't even like that word, and the fact that it's now part of my vocabulary thanks to Tyler, says so much.

Gavin's smirk deepens, and it's all I can do not to lower myself to an adolescent level and tell him how I feel about his role in all of this. I'm stopped by the embarrassment of pretty much every aspect of this situation. It's a reality that makes it a little easier to do what I should have done the first time sparks flew between me and Tyler...walk on by. We are done. I have no idea why I just let what I let happen. I'm probably a mess, my hair as finger fucked as I am. But if I can just make it to my office without acting like a fool, I might survive this. Turns out the hour is still early, and the lobby and front desk are still free of employees or clients.

With questionable luck on my side, considering everything, my heart races, I hurry into my office and shut the door. Leaning on the

hard surface for stability, I'm already blasted back in time, where I stood in this spot and Tyler's mouth ended up between my legs. The repeat of this memory is obviously my mind's way of telling me this is where this mess started.

When I should have said no.

Well, I'm saying no now.

I shove off the door and set my stuff on the desk before I walk to my window. My view is stunning. All of downtown Nashville wants a view of the city like mine. My mind travels back to the day I was promoted. I'd planned to focus my agenting on literary works as my bread and butter, but one evening I met a certain country singer at a mixer, and she'd been burned by an agent. After a few hours with me, I'd offered her advice, truly concerned for her. She'd shown up at the office the next morning and declared me her agent. Six months later, we signed a huge record deal. It was one of a handful of prestigious deals that came to me in those months. I just love how it feels to change lives, and I was learning that then, riding the joy of it all while enjoying my own success as well.

Shortly after that deal was inked, I'd been at my desk when Tyler called me to his office. I remember the racing of my heart when I'd entered his domain to find him behind his desk, looking gorgeous as ever and radiating command. I've often reacted that way to the moments I came face-to-face with Tyler, and in turn, often blown it off to admiration and respect when deep down, I knew it was more. He always seems to own a room, and I react to that power, to that presence he possesses. That day was no exception.

I sit in front of his desk, and he stares at me with those brutal blue

eyes, seconds ticking by with unnerving slowness before he says, “I thought your brother was going to be your career ride?”

I bristle. “Excuse me?”

“I’d rather not,” he declares. “I’d rather you keep doing what you’re doing, even if it means you burst into my office demanding answers at the most inopportune times.”

“You mean like last week? In the rooftop bar?”

“Of course, I mean last week. We were closing a deal with one of the largest studios on planet Earth when you burst in and insisted on talking to me.”

“You know I had a client about to walk.”

“You were immune to my irritation.”

In response, I shift uncomfortably in my seat and his lips curve. “I liked it.”

I blink. “What? You liked it?”

“I’m giving you a raise, a promotion, and a better office. See my assistant for the details. Now, go back to work because if you slack off now, I’ll be pissed, and not even your brother will save you.”

“Are you saying my brother saved me at some point?”

He laughs this low, deep laugh I feel a little too low in the belly for comfort. “No. He has not.” His tone hardens. “And he won’t. Ever. Don’t forget that.” He softens his voice again. “You were a good gamble, Bella. The rich girl didn’t need the money but wanted the success. You’re like no one I’ve ever hired. Or known, for that matter.”

The office—this office—is a status symbol, much like his expensive suits. A signal to all that I’m on top, offered to me for a job well done. If anyone found out that I slept with Tyler, it would be assumed I did

so to earn this office. I should be angry, and I am, but there is so much more going on inside me right now. Some part of me not only wanted him to make this right, I *expected* him to make this right.

But I'm not really sure how I thought he'd do that.

Declare he has real feelings for me?

As if Tyler loves anyone but himself. *Not that love has anything to do with any of this*, I think, with an irritating twist of my gut. But to me, marriage is a sanctuary of sorts. It's about love and commitment—the kind of love and commitment my parents shared—but, of course, Tyler wouldn't understand such things. His parents were not in love. They barely tolerated each other. His father didn't know how to stay in his own bed. His father also forced all of this on him. Good Lord, now I'm making excuses for Tyler actually offering me that contract instead of talking to me instead.

Bottom line, he needs an employee, and the contract is appropriate under those terms.

He'll do what he has to do, and I'll just do my job. But the idea of his engagement announcement guts me, which is telling. I'm way too emotionally invested in a man who sees me as nothing but a contract.

My cellphone rings and I walk to my desk, retrieve my phone and note my father's number on the caller ID. Settling into my chair, I answer, "You're early, Dad."

"I had a charity breakfast. The things I do for sick kids."

"Would make Mom proud."

"Believe me, I feel as if she's on my shoulder during these things. But listen, I miss you. How are things?"

"Good. I closed that huge Hollywood deal for Dash. It's life-

changing for him.”

“And you, as his agent?”

“It’s something I’m proud of, yes, Dad.”

“Then we should celebrate. I have a big expedition race next weekend in Dallas. Can you and Dash—and his sweet thing Allie, of course—come on over and I can take you out for a hell of a celebration?”

“I’d like that. I’ll talk to them. If they can’t, I can. I think I need a little family time.”

I can almost see his eyebrows lift before he says, “What’s going on?”

“I got a new puppy. Dash got me a Golden to celebrate the contract.”

“A puppy? Damn, you know I love me a puppy. Okay, it’s decided. I’m coming to you. I have to see this puppy. Girl? Boy? Name?”

“Molly.”

“Better be a girl,” he jokes, and adds, “I’ll get a private flight after the race. I’m going to have to go, but are you sure you’re okay? You avoided that topic as sure as your mother was sure of everything.”

“I’m good, Dad. I promise.”

We disconnect and I set my phone down. My father is coming into town, and I have no doubt he made that decision when he sensed something was wrong with me. I’m lucky to have him in my life. And the truth is, that he and Dash together will do my aching heart right.

Because the idea that it aches for Tyler is all wrong.

Romance 101, per my mother—you never give your heart to a man who has no heart.

CHAPTER NINE

TYLER

I stand at the window of my office while Gavin lectures me about my inheritance and the security of the company, but it's all white noise. Right now, I couldn't give two shits about anything but what just happened with Bella. What happened with Bella last night, and in LA.

Just like that, I'm transported back to the hotel and the hotel room bed. I'd woken on the first morning sharing a room with Bella, with her naked and pressed to my back. The crazy thing is how much I liked it. How much I didn't want to be anywhere but right there with her. That's not who I am. I don't stay over. I don't do the morning after. And yet, I'd laid there a good half hour, savoring the feel of her freely, willing, lying with me that way, as if I'd turned away and she'd sought me out. I'd known the moment she'd woken up, sensed her panic at her boldness.

Before I could react, her cellphone had gone off, offering her an excuse to flee or try to flee. I wasn't about to let that happen. The fact that I wouldn't, that I couldn't let her go any more than I can now, has me thinking back to that morning, reliving it, and asking myself what this woman is doing to me.

She tries to shift away from me and I catch her hand where it rests on my hip. "Where are you going?"

"My phone's ringing," she declares, obviously eager to escape the embarrassment I don't want her to feel. Yeah, she's spooning me, but I can feel her puckered little nipples pressing into my back, and it doesn't get much better. The only thing hotter right now would be me

spooning her and my cock buried as deep inside her as I can get it.

“I couldn’t give two fucks about your phone when you’re naked and your breasts are nuzzling my back,” I inform her, rolling toward her and guiding her hand to my rock-hard cock.

“Oh my God,” she whispers.

I laugh and say, “Just what every man wants to hear from his woman.” I close my hand around her hand where it holds my shaft and give both a squeeze. Ask any man. There’s not much in life better than having a woman holding his cock in her hand. Except, of course, when it’s in her mouth.

Bella’s eyes go wide, her expression incredulous. I’d like to think that reaction is about my cock being as large and hard as it is right now, but instead, she says, “I’m not your woman, Tyler.”

She’s clearly shocked by my words, and she’s not alone. They came out easily, a possessive feel to them on my tongue that should send me running. Instead, they leave me wanting her on my tongue.

I shift and roll us to our sides, facing each other, molding her closer, nice and snug, the thick press of my shaft between her legs. “You feel like my woman to me,” I murmur, stroking back hair from her eyes and tilting her gaze to mine.

Her dark lashes lower as she whispers, “I don’t like this game, Tyler.”

I don’t even hesitate. I cup her face and when her eyes meet mine again, all I can think is “mine.” I want her to be mine, but all I say is, “It’s not a game.”

She rejects this idea as readily as logic says I should but cannot. “You have obligations and I’m your—”

I press inside her. She moans as I slide into the heat of her body, the snug squeeze of her muscles drawing me in deep. “You are so hard,” she pants.

“Glad you noticed,” I reply, squeezing her sweet little ass and arching her hips, lifting her onto me and finding that perfect, sweet tight spot that I’m going to want to find over and over until I come. “And I’m so fucking hard,” I add, “because I’ve been thinking about laying you across my lap and spanking you.”

I ease back and thrust hard into her, and yeah, oh, yeah, I find that spot again.

That’s when she stops fighting the moment and decides to live inside it instead. I see it in the parting of her lips and the pleasure etched on her pretty face. Feel it in the bite of her fingers against my flesh. I want to see more of her...all of her. I want to experience her in every possible way. I roll to my back and pull her on top of me.

CHAPTER TEN

TYLER

For a moment, I slip out of the memory, aware that Gavin is still talking. Aware when his cellphone rings. "I have to take this."

Fuck yes, I think, my gaze returning to my window while my mind slips quickly back into the memory, trying to understand what it's telling me...

It's broad daylight and the sun illuminates her, and she is ridiculously hot. Too hot for my sanity, and I don't even think about hiding that fact. I devour her with my eyes, letting her see the lust she stirs in me. She starts to move, riding me like a queen I swear, her breasts high and full, swaying with the rock of her hips. I enjoy the view, shift with her, lift my hips, watching the pleasure roll off her beautiful face. But I've never been a man to sit back and watch too long.

I sit up and cup her breasts, tugging on her nipples, only to swallow her moan with a kiss and a lick. Holy fuck, she tastes like everything I never wanted and everything I have to have.

I can't get enough of her.

I drag her down against me, and her fingers tangle in my hair, tugging roughly, and fuck, I like it. The more I play with her nipples, the harder she presses her body against my cock, and the harder her body squeezes my shaft. The silky heat of her around me, with the tight grip of her sex, is heaven and hell. I am not going to last much longer. Now I catch her hair, giving it an erotic tug, and when I plan to turn her over and claim my control, again, she gasps and clings to me, her body trembling against me. That's all the encouragement I

need. I pull her down and thrust inside her, once, twice, I lose count, and then I shudder into release. It's a hell of a release too, a full-body, rock-me-to-my-core kind of experience. When it's over, I don't want to let her go.

I don't fucking want to let her go.

The idea rocks me to the core.

This is unfamiliar territory, this sense of being at another person's mercy because they matter to you. It's fucking scary as shit. I don't like it and yet, I can't deny it and I oddly don't even want to try.

"You're going to be the death of me, woman," I murmur, in no rush to pull out of her. Instead, I scoot off the bed, stand up, and carry her with me to the bathroom. When we're all cleaned up, I settle her onto the edge of the counter and press my hands on either side of her, my mood shifting as reality starts to kick in, and it's not a good place to be. It's not the place I want to be with this particular woman, now or ever.

"Bella," I murmur, my eyes meeting hers, and I don't hide anything. I let her see the truth of what I feel when I let no one see anything but stone-cold me. "I don't know what to do," I confess. "I don't want anything my father has forced on me."

She swallows hard and presses a hand to my face, and I'm rocked by how much her touch affects me. "We're friends who had a moment, Tyler."

My anger bristles. "We're not friends, Bella."

She blanches as if I stabbed her with my words, and I react. My hands come down on her knees, expanding on my reaction. "I don't like how that simplifies what is going on between us. But, yes, of

course, we're friends, and that's what makes this different for me. 'We're friends' is not a statement I make about anyone I fuck, Bella."

"I get that, I do," she says, "but it doesn't change us, really. We can still be friends and not sleep together. And I'm not leaving the company unless you decide you want me to. I just—I can't have this come out, or everyone...you know what they'll think."

"I'm not going to let us hurt you, Bella. And why would I want you to leave? You're one of the best decisions I've ever made, and there is a boardroom of partners who would agree with me. I don't want any of what comes with my father's will. You have to know that."

"How damning is the case he threatened to take public?" she asks, clearly going down the same rabbit hole of questions I did when I first heard about the will. "Are you sure it's as bad as you think?"

"Yes," I confirm grimly. "It's bad. If it would have happened ten years later, or even five, I would have stopped it. I was a young buck trying to please my father. A father I should have hated at that point in my life."

"There has to be a way to deal with this problem and then you can go to court over the will."

"All I can do is everything I can do to stop this before I'm forced to marry. I have six months to act out a public engagement farce to make that happen."

"Are you listening to me, Tyler?"

At Gavin's question, I snap out of the past but continue staring out my window, ignoring him. He's been rambling for what I estimate to be a good half an hour at this point, demanding answers he doesn't want to hear. I'm not sure why he thinks anything has changed now.

“Damn it, Tyler,” he continues. “If she’s out, you need to look at the list of prospective fiancées and do so now. This is about the security of the company and your fortune.”

Now I rotate and I do so with Bella’s words in my mind “*There has to be another way.*” She’s right. Not only does there have to be another way, there’s always another way.

With that in mind, I focus on opening the door to another way. “Did you review the case file my father is using to threaten me with a public shaming over?”

“Of course,” he replies. “But unless we pull archives, there’s not much to see.”

“Order the archives. And I need everything you can get me on anyone who was working the case. Use that PI we’ve used a few times and do it now. “

“With what endgame?”

While I encourage my legal counsel to be opinionated, Gavin doesn’t seem to know when to talk and when to listen, and that could become a problem. “Just do it.”

“Okay,” he concedes, “but at least look at this.” He holds up a folder. “Your options that are not Bella in one concise list.”

“Keep it,” I say. “I won’t be needing it or them.”

“Then Bella said yes?”

“Not yet, but I’m a long way from done with Bella.”

“You know the clock is ticking.”

“Then I guess you better get me the information I asked for.”

His jaw clenches and his energy is utter frustration. “I really hope you know what you’re doing.” He leaves, shutting the door behind

him.

I decide I agree with Gavin on at least something this morning. He's not the only one who hopes I know what I'm doing. But unlike him, I'm coming from a place of knowledge and an understanding of my father he doesn't possess. He tested me, pushed me, and asked the impossible of me and when I achieved it, that achievement was dismissed. In a heated confrontation only a few months ago, he told me *there is always one more test*.

Except that he is dead and there can only be one final test.

The one he left in his will.

With one final test in mind, I conclude that I remember the details of the Allen trial. But I was young and green and learning too much too fast, all while my father rode me like a damn horse he was trying to break. Maybe there was no suppression of documents, and there is no real blackmail. And somewhere in heaven or hell, my father is laughing because I have yet to do what he always preached for me to do—always know the facts, or you're acting on fiction. Fiction is entertainment. Real-life operates on facts.

And those who operate in a fictional world in real life setting deserve what they get in return.

With my father's thinking guiding me, I can't assume there was actually anything done during that trial that would screw me and the firm over. It would be just like my father to test my attention to that detail. The truth will be in the case files. And maybe, just maybe, I've figured out the obvious and I've passed the test.

If there's no threat to the company hanging over my head, I can go to court and fight the will. It will get press, but if that's what I have to

do to claim the company and not lose Bella, I'll go to court.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BELLA

The first thing I do when I disconnect with my father is text Allie: *Are you working at the office today or from home?*

It's still hard to get my head around the fact that Allie started with the company filling in for the other Allie. Allie took a leave of absence, or so we all thought. She was actually dead at the hand of Tyler's father. The same Allie who dated Tyler. The screwed-up nature of his family should be enough to scare me away, and yet, when I was in his office this morning and he kissed me, I just wanted him to keep on kissing me.

I shove aside thoughts of Tyler yet again. Bottom line, Dash's Allie—my future sister-in-law—now handles the company's charity program, including our annual event. She also works from home with Dash more often than not these days.

She replies to my text: *I'm actually in my office. Want to meet for coffee in the café? Or even down the street?*

Café, I reply. *I have so much work to catch up on. I need to stay close.*

And as a bonus, I think, she won't feel as comfortable drilling me over Tyler here at the office.

Now? she asks.

Yes, I reply. *Headed that way.*

I'll order, she replies, in what drives home our growing, sisterly bond.

It's going to be hard not to say too much to Allie, but she'll tell Dash what is really going on and I can't deal with my brother's protective

bear routine right now. I need time to think and process.

A few minutes later, I step into the company-run café and scan the tables to find Allie waving me to a corner spot. Allie is petite, brunette, and gorgeous inside and out. The inside part is what matters though, and I am beyond grateful for all she has done for my brother. Dash was set to self-destruct personally and professionally in those fight clubs. He was hurting, and that was the only way he knew to deal with the pain.

Until Allie.

“Allie!” the barista calls out, and I point to the counter and hurry that way. I grab both coffees and headed to the table, joining Allie and setting her cup in front of her.

She’s in a black dress today, with contrasting red lipstick that works for her, but wouldn’t for me.

“How’s the puppy?” she asks.

“Sweet as she can be. I can see myself finding reasons to work from home.”

“At the rate you’re closing deals, I’m fairly certain Tyler will agree.”

“Unfortunately, I have a lot of clients to deal with at the office. Though,” I add, “I do believe that pup you two gave me is going to lure me to work at home at times I wouldn’t otherwise.”

“Dash told me his idea about you going out on your own.”

“Did he tell you why I won’t do it?” I ask.

“He did, and I understand why. The powerful people you represent need a powerful firm with resources behind them. But Dash also needs a business manager.”

“I’m his business manager.”

“You’re his agent,” she reminds me, which is technically true. “He needs a business manager to manage his empire.”

“That’s putting the cart before the horse,” I say. “It won’t be an empire if we don’t get the studio to move on making his show.”

“If you were his full-time business manager, you could make that happen,” she points out. “You’re brilliant with people and even more brilliant with him.”

“He has you and besides, *again*, cart before the horse.”

She’s not done. “If his empire grows as big as I think it might, he’ll need us both.”

“My father says he needs me to manage his career as well,” I reply. “But he and Dash know I won’t ride their coattails. I need my own identity.”

“You *created* Dash’s identity,” she counters, “and I bet you’ve been involved in your father’s career.”

“I haven’t. He’s had the same agent for his entire career, and I would never intrude on their relationship.”

She gives me a thoughtful look. “It must be incredible to have a famous father and brother.”

“And mother,” I add. “Everyone knew her. She was a household name.”

“She was,” she agrees. “She really was.” She tilts her head and studies me. “You don’t want to talk about Tyler.”

“No. But thank you.” I use that as a segue to business. “But I do want to talk about Dash. The studio called and wants to amend the contract.” Her lips part and her eyes go wide.

“What?” she asks incredulously. “I thought it was all inked. A solid

contract.” She grips the table. “What’s happening now?”

“They want to amend with an added opportunity,” I explain. “Which means more money. Nothing changes but that add-on.”

“Oh,” she breathes out, relinquishing the grip on the table. “This is unexpected. It’s all such a turnaround for a studio that passed on Dash’s books to start with. It makes me suspicious. What opportunity?”

“They want him to host a true crime show. I actually think it would be great for his career.”

“Well, that’s unexpected,” she repeats and laughs. “I already said that, right? I need to process this for a minute. True crime. It makes sense. He’s a former FBI agent.”

“It does. And he’s interesting. His mother was a corporate big wig and the only living parent to influence him, but he became an FBI agent.”

“And you didn’t.”

“No, and we’ve talked about that. I was always obsessed with the idea of being my mother’s protégé of sorts. He was obsessed with crime and mysteries for as long as I can remember. He needs to do this.”

“I’ll work on him,” she promises. “He hates being in the public eye.”

“I know, but if this Hollywood deal takes off, he will be anyway, and filming in a studio behind a camera is not like standing on a stage.”

“Good points,” she agrees. “And I’ll need them all to convince him.”

“Why do you think I came to you first?” I ask. “We’ll have to double-team him to win him over, but this will push his book sales, too. And the film projects. No other authors will have the strength of his

platform. Not even King. He'll have longevity on Dash, but that's all."

"Just more good stuff for me to use," she concludes. "He's at Cupcakes and Books, working on his book. I'll go over and chat with him. Then maybe you can join us after I get a few minutes with him?"

"Perfect," I say, "because I have to respond to this quickly. Studios change their minds quickly. Deals fall apart in seconds, and too often deals are signed in Hollywood and nothing comes from them. The more invested the studio is in Dash, the more likely they'll make his TV show and do the right things to promote it as well."

"In other words, he needs to say yes."

"It's in his best interest. And to me, this says the studio head wants to go all in on Dash. It's a good sign that we're going to see development action quickly."

"All right," she says. "I have a meeting with a donor this morning and then I'll head over to talk to Dash. You want to join us for lunch?"

"Only if lunch is a cupcake," I say. "I swear I need one right now. This has been an intense few days."

"So it seems. One more chance before we hurry on our separate ways. You sure you don't want to talk about 'other' things?"

If only I could spill it all to Allie. "It's not a matter of not wanting to talk. More like I have too much to do. I'm buried from being out of town."

She lowers her chin and says, "In other words, you don't want to talk about Tyler."

Translation: she's going to make me talk about Tyler.

I don't know why Allie reading me like a book and refusing to be dismissed surprises me. That sisterly closeness I remembered fondly

upon seeing her today naturally comes with equal parts nosiness and stubbornness. It's also a bond solidified by honesty, so it's time, to be honest.

I'm going to lay the truth and nothing but the truth on her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BELLA

The truth is, I'm probably in love with Tyler. I'm a fool for it, too, but not because his father killed someone. I have known Tyler too long to allow him to be defined by his parent. I'm a fool because I'm nothing but a contract to him. Because if he really cared about me honestly, his feelings and limitations would have been his offering to me, not a contract.

Maybe.

I don't know.

I could be being hard on him.

Maybe that's the real fool that I am?

But since I still need to decide these things and face my foolish self in the mirror before I show her to anyone else, I mentally backtrack before I ever spill my guts. My new but still honest version of the truth is, "I'm not going to talk to you about this Allie. I don't want Dash involved."

"You're talking to me, not Dash."

"Same thing. You'll feel obligated to tell Dash. Then Dash will feel the need to punch Tyler, and both our worlds would become immensely more complicated for it."

"I thought you told Dash this situation is professional, not personal."

"It is. To Tyler, at least."

Her brows furrow. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not talking about this, Allie," I repeat.

"Okay," she says. "Then I'll talk and make general observations

about Tyler, in case they help in any way. I thought he was an asshole for a while, I really did, but ultimately, he helped us get Dash out of the fight clubs.”

“He embarrassed Dash by dragging you to the fight club.”

“Because Dash had an addiction,” she says, defending Tyler. “Though I didn’t believe it at the time, hard as that was on Dash, it was necessary to stop his self-destructive behavior. I believe that.”

“You forget that Tyler has a financial interest in Dash.”

“So do you,” she points out, “but does that make you care about his money, not him?”

“No, but I’m his sister.”

“They’re friends, Bella. Tyler and Dash are more alike than I realized at first. I really think Tyler’s asshole alpha routine is simply his armor. Just as Dash’s friendly, good guy routine made it seem like nothing was ever wrong with him when that was far from the truth.”

“In other words, Tyler is always looking out for Tyler,” I say.

“Protecting himself, Bella, which is not the same thing as looking out for himself. Think about who his parents are and how they must have treated him. I can tell you firsthand from personal observation, his father treated him like he would never be good enough to run this company.”

And now, he’s holding the company over his head from the grave, I think. I don’t envy him his position right now, but it changes nothing. If I help him, I become the next victim of that will. “You’re not wrong,” I say. “But Tyler has some challenges facing him right now after his father’s death that he needs to deal with, and I have to give him space to do that properly.”

“Maybe space isn’t what he needs,” she suggests.

“Are you actually advocating for me to be personally involved with Tyler?”

“Aren’t you already?” she counters.

Was, I think. I was involved with Tyler. “No,” I say. “No, I am not. And that’s how it’s going to stay, so neither you nor Dash need to give this another thought. I need to go back to work.” I lift my cup and sip. “Text me and let me know the temperature of the room with Dash before I head over for that cupcake.” I start to get up.

She catches my hand. “His father killed someone. He must be feeling like he’s the same kind of monster. He must feel like he isn’t even safe to be around.”

It’s the first time I’ve actually considered such a thing. “I, ah... maybe he does.” I ease into my seat again and her hand falls away.

“Does that possibility change how you feel right now?” she asks. “I mean, I can’t see how those thoughts are not in his mind. It has to affect him both professionally and personally.”

I’m reminded of his claim that he’s protecting me. Could there be more to that than meets the eye? I’m confused. It’s a theme where Tyler’s concerned, which is why I say, “I don’t know, Allie. I just don’t know. That’s why I’m not ready to talk. I don’t know what to say. I really need to go.” I start to get up again.

She grabs my hand again. “Wait,” she warns urgently. “Unless you want to walk straight into Tyler’s path, just wait.”

I swallow hard. “What’s he doing?”

“Watching you while he waits on his order,” she says, “and he’s being far more obvious about it than I’d expect from Mr. Stone Cold

himself. If you're wondering if he's as affected as you, he is. I'm certain of it."

A storm of emotions I don't dare name washes over me and makes landfall in my belly. A twisty, turning, sickening sensation follows and has me attempting to check myself. And Allie, for that matter. She's turning this thing with Tyler into romance when it's a contract. "I've obviously misled you, Allie. You're making this romantic when it's business. He's not affected by me, but rather by the 'no' I gave him on a business matter. Plain and simple, his ego is hurt."

It's at that moment, with those words spewed from my mouth, that I look up to find Tyler standing above me. "If you're talking about me, Bella, maybe you'd be better off saying whatever you want to say to me. I'm right here."

Apparently, Allie left his close proximity out of her warning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BELLA

I'm in disbelief as Tyler pulls up a chair and sits down with us.

"Do you have something to say to me, Bella?" he asks, his intense gaze locked on me, and I swear I am naked beneath the heat of his scrutiny. I can feel him in every part of me. It's uncomfortably addictive and awkwardly unprofessional. It's also an example of everything forbidden that I've promised not to allow to happen between us summed up in one moment.

Most likely feeling the inappropriateness as well, Allie grabs her cup and stands. "I'll text you," she murmurs, and then just like that, she's gone.

I cut my gaze from Tyler's and watch my future sister-in-law depart and then I glower at my boss. "What are you doing, Tyler?"

"What about my ego?" he challenges, ironically still proving my point as he's clearly determined to make everything about him.

"It's obvious you're king," I say, "since you assumed that conversation was about you."

He arches one of his brows. It's an arrogant act and oh-so fitting of *this* man in *this* moment. "Wasn't it?"

I roll my eyes. "If your head grows any larger, it might burst. In general, we were talking about Dash."

"Until you weren't," he supplies dryly.

"You just can't stop," I say. "Allie's going to go talk to Dash about the true crime show this morning. I'll meet them for lunch.

"Good thing," he says, "because the studio wants to do a Zoom with Dash and us at five, our time."

“Today? That’s lightning fast.”

“Now that they’ve decided they want him, they really want him. The same way I feel about you, Bella.”

My cheeks heat, fingers curling into my palms as I bite out a soft warning, “Stop.”

“I don’t want to stop.”

One of the employees sets his cup next to him and hurries away, eager to please him but equally as eager to avoid him. God, how I know that feeling. Somehow though, I have the mental fortitude to seize the opening I’ve been given. I pick up my coffee and stand up as if all either of us was waiting on was his order. He follows me to my feet, and before he can speak, I say, “I’ll call you after I talk to Dash and let you know what’s going on. But I can’t rush this. I need to let Allie talk to him first.”

“And what is Allie going to say to him?”

“Good deals die untouched. The offer of an extended contract only drives commitment and that commitment is what we need.”

“Good deals should never die untouched,” he replies.

Suddenly—or okay, actually not suddenly at all—we’re no longer talking about Dash anymore, and I end up right in the heat of the flames he’s throwing. “Everything isn’t a deal.”

“Marriage is a contract.”

“Gone into with love,” I counter before I can stop myself.

He goes still, his shoulders sharpening, his mood instantly darker. “Is that what you want, Bella? Love?”

My belly knots. Why is he doing this? And why is he doing it here, in public? “What do you want from me, Tyler?”

“I want you to answer the question.”

“I want a lot of things that my boss will not, and should not, ever understand.” I step around him and start walking, imagining the entire café watching me when I doubt anyone notices me at all. This is not the first time I’ve sat at a café table and talked over a deal with Tyler, and it won’t be the last. But the difference now is that if anyone found out about me and Tyler, no one would believe any of those meetings were professional. No one would believe I’d earned my office any way but against that door with him between my legs.

That’s not the legacy my mother left behind that I’ve tried to honor.

And part of her legacy is her love for my father and his for her.

I will never settle for less. I’d rather be alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BELLA

I don't allow myself time to analyze what just happened with Tyler. Okay, I allow myself a few moments and no more. Once I'm in my office, I deep breathe, replay the entire interaction with Tyler, and realize my mind is going in a direction that simply isn't safe for my heart. I'm not going to stand here and lick my contract-induced wounds.

Therefore, I march to my desk, sit my butt in my chair, and proceed to lose myself in my work. I start checking in with my clients and following up on their pending deals. With each conversation I dive into with my clients, I'm reminded of how vested I am in each career, and how much I enjoy helping them rule their version of the world. I love what I do, and I'm reassured that my clients and track record tell a story beyond me and Tyler ever being exposed. But I know how people would talk, and how easily gossip affects the caliber of clients I work with. Many of them can't risk being connected to a scandal.

A scandal that would produce a headline that would read something like a *Country Music Agent Who Reps Some of the Biggest Names in the Business Muddled with a Romantic Scandal that Hits Close to Home*. Included in the article would be a laundry list of my clients. Maybe it wouldn't matter to most of them, but maybe it would, especially to those clients who battle their own scandals. How hypocritical of me, considering my lectures about avoiding such a thing. It's stressful to think about, and when my phone pings with a text, I expect the worst. I find adorable puppy photos from the puppy nanny, and I can feel just a little edge to my mood fade away.

Tonight will be all about puppy love, and that will be good for me.

It's already on the backside of lunch when Allie finally ends her silence and pings my phone. *He's all yours*, her message begins before she adds, *I have a meeting I have to get to. I think I softened him up.* My brows dip. Okay, then. That doesn't sound positive. My brother is going to make his own career more difficult than it has to be. Or he would, if I'd let him.

I will not.

Considering the Zoom meeting with the studio is in a few hours, I officially have a fire lit under me, plus my stomach is growling. I need food. I check the weather app and decide it's warm outside, and unworthy of a jacket. Snatching up my bag, I head for the door then the lobby, thankful to pass through the offices without a Tyler encounter. Not that Tyler spends a lot of time roaming the building and intimidating people, but it happens. It happened this morning.

On that note, how is this only Tuesday?

I exit the building into the hustle and bustle of a busy downtown Nashville sidewalk.

The wind is high, the air colder than the temperature promised by the weather app, but it's a welcome chill to the heat Tyler and I have been throwing in that building. I need this escape, if only for my lunch hour. Besides, the walk is short anyway. It's only two blocks, and in a quick few minutes, I've already arrived at the bakery side of the bookstore. I enter the cozy spot to chimes on the door, and my gaze lifts above the cute wooden tables in the center of the room, to my brother's favorite corner nook. Sure enough, he's there, his head down,

his fingers banging away at his keyboard, his hair a finger-mussed mess. That's my brother, the handsome, always mussed-up famous writer.

I'm proud of his success.

I just wish he wouldn't be quite as stubborn on some things.

I start the short walk to greet him and note the full cup of coffee and sandwich sitting across from him, which does not seem a good sign. Not if it means Allie spent her time here trying to talk sense into him rather than eating and drinking.

Convincing Dash to do a show starring him, not an actor, is going to be a mammoth undertaking, and I need food and a bathroom before taking on that beast. Based on the present state of my body, it seems I haven't actually done either of those things all morning. I arrive at Dash's table and he eyes me with a smirk on his lips. "Why am I not surprised to see you?"

"We both know why, stubborn boy. But I have to pee and get food. It's been a hell of a week, but the puppy makes it better and the nanny is amazing."

"Bella—"

I hold up a finger. "I *really* have to pee and order food." With that, I rotate on my heel and march away.

I eye the counter and find someone I don't know at the register, darn it. Otherwise, my order would be placed on arrival. That's how regular I am here.

A group of people step to the counter just before me, and while I'd prefer to wait until the line dies down, I have no choice but to eat in a fairly immediate fashion. I'll kill my brother if I don't get food before

we fight and I can feel a fight coming over us. It's a sibling thing. We know these things. But as I stand in the same spot, unmoving, it's clear the six-deep line has a lot of talking happening and no ordering. With that sign, I decide a bathroom break is necessary anyway. I head to the little cutout nook where they're located and cut right to the ladies' room hurrying through the necessities. With a ham and cheese croissant and a cupcake on my mind, I pray the line is now nonexistent.

With a forceful push of the door, I exit the bathroom and come face to face with a man exiting the men's room, which is placed a little too close for comfort. Especially considering that man is Tyler.

And why does he smell good and look better? Damn him.

Damn him so much.

My heart leaps and adrenaline surges through my veins. "What are you doing here?" I demand.

"I thought you might need back-up to deal with Dash."

"Are you serious? You didn't trust me to handle my own brother?" I shake my head and then lean in closer, a hiss in my tone as I challenge, "And yet you wanted me to run an entirely new division?"

"First of all, I texted you a warning that I was headed over here just in case you were here. Just in case you wanted me to stay away. You didn't reply. And as for the new division I offered you, you and I are exactly what this company needs, Bella."

"Whatever, Tyler." My lips press together. "You know Allie said you might be struggling. That you might actually have a complex about your father that keeps you from feeling anything real. I don't believe that for a minute. You were this way before he ever did what he did to

Allison.”

His eyes sharpen, the sea-blue darkening to a navy color. “What feelings do you want me to have, Bella?”

“Any feelings, Tyler, would be better than none. But what you feel or don’t feel has nothing to do with a paid employee, which is what I am.” It’s out before I can stop it but I don’t even regret it. I don’t even feel like a friend, let alone more. And I did before all of this. “I need to go deal with Dash.” I try to step away and he catches my elbow.

Electricity charges up my arm and across my chest, puckering my nipples. Why are my nipples so in tune with this man? Our eyes collide in a punch of awareness that steals my breath. “Don’t,” I whisper. “My brother’s here. And I’m not yours to touch, Tyler. I didn’t sign your agreement. Remember?”

He flinches, as if he really cares when we both know he doesn’t. “Damn it, Bella,” he murmurs, and then he releases me, settling his hands on his hips, under his jacket.

I hate how much a part of me wishes he’d have held on.

“What did you say to Dash?” I ask.

“I didn’t tell him about us, Bella, but he knows. He can feel it between us. We made it pretty obvious last night.”

“I told him it was work-related.”

“All right,” he says and that’s all he says. Just *all right*.

I dislike that answer for reasons I can’t name.

“But he’s not stupid,” he adds. “We’re on fire together and you know it.”

I do know, but I don’t say that.

And he’s right. Dash is not stupid. But he only thinks he knows

what's going on.

I should be walking away right now. I have my answers. I need to keep a distance from Tyler, but I don't walk away. I don't know why, but I'm just still, standing here, lost in whatever this pull is between me and this man. Sex, I tell myself. It's all about sexual attraction, and that is not a reason to lose everything.

With a pull of air into my lungs, I rotate away from him and I do what saves me from complete destruction. I walk away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BELLA

My brother's little corner booth allows him a nice cushiony seat and there is a chair to his left, right, and across. When I arrive at my brother's table, I ignore the seat across from him I favor and sit to his right instead.

He chuckles. "I take it you figured out Tyler is here?" He shuts his computer and offers me his full attention.

I, in turn, scowl at him. "You could have warned me."

"I tried. You had to pee and eat, which was the story of our childhood, by the way. Also, you didn't order food." As if on cue, the waitress sets a cupcake down next to Tyler's sandwich.

"That looks delicious with all that fluffy white icing," I say wistfully. "I really love the icing on the cupcakes here."

"Go order."

"I'll get it to go. I have another meeting soon, anyway."

Dash grabs the cupcake and sets it in front of me. "He can order another. If you don't eat, we all die."

Considering Tyler is headed in this direction with his arrogant, long-legged stride, and that somehow renews my anger, I decide he's right. Tyler claims his seat, and I feel the pulse of his presence, damn him. I reach for Dash's unused fork. I use it to point at the cupcake and then at Tyler. "You can order another," I say, just in case he wonders if this is his or not.

Tyler smirks and then sets his sandwich in front of me. "You might as well take it all. We all know you're a bitch when you don't eat." Then, for an extra little jab, he goes all in and places his coffee cup in

front of me. “You’re also better company when you have caffeine.” He then has the nerve to stand up and walk toward the counter.

“Asshole,” I whisper, though a part of me thinks he was kind of gentlemanly, even if we both painted it otherwise. I mean I *do* get really weird when I don’t eat, and while after five years he should know that about me, I didn’t think he actually did.

Dash shifts in his seat to eye me. “Why is he so comfortable giving you his food? And how does he know you’re a bitch when you don’t eat?”

In this case, the answers he demands are really not awkward at all, nor do they require any real thought. “I’ve worked with him five years, Dash.”

“So have others in that office, and I bet they don’t know *that*, Bella.”

“Jeez, brother. Rein in the protective bear.”

“I saw how you were last night. You were crying, Bella. You never cry.”

“It was the pooch, who I love, by the way.”

He scowls and I sigh.

“Fine,” I say. “You want to know how he found out I get hangry?”

“Oh, yeah. I want to hear how he knows. I want to know a lot of things about you and Tyler, and you’re both a little too tight-lipped for me not to read into this. He will hurt you, Bella.”

He already did, I think, but what I say is, “Are we talking about my diet or what?”

“Are we?” he challenges.

“There was a meeting once between Tyler, me, and a big country star I was about to sign who started acting like an arrogant ass. We

knew he had that in him, and I warned Tyler before the meeting that I hadn't eaten and my patience would be low." I sip the coffee and it's cold but good enough to still be decent. It's not really something that strikes me as a Tyler drink—chocolate and cinnamon, I think—and I like it. Once the cup is back in the saucer I add, "You know the joy of having money is that you can't be held captive by money."

"Do I even want to know how this played out?" Dash asks.

"Very similar to any fight we've ever had when I haven't eaten. I was *that* Bella." I chow down on a bit of my sandwich, which is technically a croissant.

"Yeah, I know *that* Bella well." He curls his fingers at me. "Bring it. What did you do?"

I shrug and swallow, reaching for the cup again. "I told him that I thought it was best he find another rep, after which I excused myself and went to the café, where I inhaled a yogurt cup. I even remember the flavor. It was cherry and it tasted really good that day."

"Who was the singer?"

"You have to hear the rest of the story to appreciate who it is. I left the meeting around two o'clock. An hour later with a bowl of soup down me along with a chunk of bread, and mental clarity restored, I was pretty sure I'd be fired."

"But you weren't, obviously. Unless you were and then got rehired, and I never heard about it."

"I wasn't fired." I set my cup down, remembering that night as the night I truly turned a corner with Tyler, at least as boss and employee. It was the night I felt he respected my decision-making. "It was probably seven that evening and I was working late, talking myself out

of going ahead and packing my things. And then he was just there, standing in my office door.”

“Tyler?”

“Yes, Tyler. I held my breath, waiting for him to tell me to hit the road.”

“And?”

“He stood there for all of a minute, stared at me, and then said ‘You have a big set of balls for a woman, but you did the right thing today. Once a problem, always a problem. Get some rest.’ I’d blinked, and he was gone.”

“How inappropriately Tyler,” Dash comments.

“Yeah, but you know, for the most part, I’m used to him, and he’s taught me a lot about this business. I would never have closed your deals—any of them—without him as a sounding board.”

“Didn’t seem like you were used to him last night,” he observes, a little too clearly.

I simply remind him of what I’ve already said to him last night. “I explained that last night.”

“You tried,” he says, letting me know he buys none of it, but for now he moves on. “What happened with the client?”

“I arrived to work the next day to a gorgeous arrangement of flowers and a five-thousand-dollar gift card to Chanel.”

“Tell me that was not Tyler, because that is over the line.”

“Of course, it wasn’t Tyler. Why would my boss send me gifts for losing a giant client?” I don’t give him a chance to answer before I add, “It was the client, and there was an apology note attached.”

“You’d think the client would understand money doesn’t motivate

you after you gave him the proverbial finger. And I can't believe you didn't tell me this story when it happened."

"Yes, well, I go home with so many, it's hard to share them all. As for the financial motivation, you're right. Gifts don't motivate me. But I like the money I earn. You know my goal is to leave Mom's money untouched for retirement."

"Then what did you do with the gifts?"

"I gave him back the gift card, gave the flowers to the receptionist, and agreed to another meeting. He's a top client now. We've done well together. The studio loves how humble he is."

Tyler rejoins us and obviously having heard the conversation adds, "You talking about Carter?"

Dash eyes him and me. "Carter Carson?"

"It is Carter," I confirm and somehow, I've managed to inhale most of my sandwich.

"He's a super nice guy," Dash says. "We've gone to drinks with him. Was he really an asshole that day or were you just *that* Bella."

Tyler surprises me by coming to my defense. Sort of. "She was a bitch, but he deserved it. She probably had more money than he did at that point in his career and yet he acted entitled. He talked down to her, but he wanted her to manage his career. He was shocked when she left the room and when I supported the decision. Bella was a reality check for him he would have gotten from someone else down the road, with harsher results."

"I don't think I've ever heard you compliment Bella," Dash replies, his eyes narrowing on Tyler.

"Then you weren't listening," Tyler replies, and then the tension

between the two men crackles.

“Speaking of reality checks,” I interject quickly, and both men look at me.

Now I have to actually finish that sentence when I had no idea what I was going to say and finish it in a way that draws attention away from the idea of me and Tyler sleeping together.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BELLA

Tyler saves me.

“Yes, a reality check,” Tyler states. “There’s a moral to Carter’s story, Dash. You write books, but the art of doing so has a business side. All business has its ups and downs. Those who know this are the savvy ones who operate like The Rock and create a brand that is many things, not one thing. When one is down, other aspects are up. Create a brand everyone wants to get on board with.”

“He’s right,” I say. “You know what Mom said. Diversity is king.”

“Yes, she did,” he agrees thoughtfully, his fingers thrumming on the table. “And you both think this true crime gig is the way to do this.”

“I do,” I say.

“As do I,” Tyler says. “And this isn’t about making us more money. We could sell the studio on someone else. That’s not a good outcome for you, though.”

“You know that trade sales are down, Dash,” I add. “But yours are not. What if next year, the industry stays down and you sink with it? I’ll say it again. Diversity is king.”

“I’ll do it,” he says, and much easier than expected. Obviously, Allie worked him over pretty hard. “If,” he adds, “you both go away and let me write, I’ll do it.”

Unintentionally my gaze goes to Tyler’s and we share an incredulous look before our attention turns to Dash. “You’ll do it?” I confirm.

“Yes,” he agrees. “I’m going to hate it, but I love what I do. I’ll do what I have to do to support my writing career. And I don’t want to

start thinking I'm too high up to fall. That makes the fall hard."

"The studio wants to have a Zoom meeting today."

"I was told," he says. "Allie had a lot to say on the topic. Brief me while you eat, but I really need to get what is in my head on the page or there is no new book to benefit from this."

"There's no real prep for this," I say. "Come see me fifteen minutes before the meeting but essentially, they're going to ask you how you feel about doing a television show."

"I'm going to have limits," Dash replies.

"Just remember that sometimes the truth is dangerous," Tyler says, as someone sets a new cup of coffee next to him.

He's right. The truth is dangerous in so many ways.

At least where we're concerned.

"But so are lies," I say, and there is this undertone in the conversation that is not about Dash and the studio, but me and Tyler, and it's acutely uncomfortable. "Use noncommittal words and statements," I add, "that show interest but say little to nothing interesting, and tell me more, that kind of thing. We'll do the bulk of the talking."

"We'll use the contract to set limits," Tyler adds, and that's it. That's my limit. I'm done with this conversation.

"I need to run. I have a client call in half an hour." I slide my purse onto my shoulder. "Be at the office at four thirty."

"That's not fifteen minutes," Dash challenges.

"Pretend I said thirty." With that, I grab my purse, leave my cupcake—that's how desperate I am to get out of here—and head for the door.

I exit into the wind again, hug myself, cut to my right, and start the walk, my heart thundering in my chest at the memory of Tyler's words, "*We'll use the contract to set limits.*" Exactly what he did to me.

I've only made it just past the bakery windows when I hear, "Bella!"

It's Tyler's voice, and my body quakes, nerves jittering inside me. I keep walking, but he persists. "Bella, stop."

I can't stop or I'm going to yell at him all over again. Or do something else I will later regret. But there is no escape from this moment with this man. Suddenly, his hand is on my arm, and he pulls me around and way too close to him. "What are you doing?" I demand, but he doesn't listen. He just keeps on moving and so do I, thanks to his hand that is somehow holding mine.

The next thing I know, we're inside an old office building that I didn't even know was open. Tyler maneuvers us outside of prying eyes, away from a window and behind a wide post, with him standing in front of me. His hand is on the wall by my head, but he's not touching me. I want him to touch me. I want him to leave me alone.

He's just so big and close and suffocatingly male, and my body betrays me, heat flushing my skin. His touch that was here and gone, his closeness that is here and now, is too much. There's a sense of intimacy to this moment in time that triggers memories of us touching each other, sharing time with each other, wanting each other.

And so far, he's said nothing. He's just staring at me, and I can't take it.

"What are we doing, Tyler?" I ask softly, and I wonder if he can hear the beat of my heart thundering in my chest.

"That contract was to protect you, Bella."

“We’re on repeat, Tyler. You say that. I say this. That contract was a business transaction.”

“That’s not what we are, but that is what the will my father left behind is. There is no normal way for us to figure this thing between us out. You’re angry at me for something I can’t control. The company, jobs, and lives are dependent on what I do next. I’m obligated—”

“I know,” I state tightly, and in that moment, I do know. I’m angry at something he can’t control and that’s not fair. He’s trapped, but so am I. “I know,” I repeat. “It’s an impossible situation.” I hug myself and add, “I hate how this is happening.”

His eyes narrow. “Is this where you tell me to pick someone else again?”

“If I say anything else, where does that lead us? Where does it lead me, you, or the company?”

“It leads to a better place than now.”

“It’s your company, Tyler. You score. I’m the whore.”

“Damn it, stop saying that shit. I didn’t make you my whore.”

“Do you really think that’s not what everyone else is going to say?”

“Fuck everyone else.”

He pushes off the wall and gives me his back, and my heart jackknives when I think he might leave. I’m such a mess. I want him to stay. I want him to go. But he doesn’t go. Instead, he stands there with his back to me, hands on his hips, chin tilted up. He rotates to face me, and his eyes are not stone and ice, as he shows the world, but rather layers and layers of torment, “I say I’m not like my father and yet I stand here, asking you to risk everything for me. I have to do this because it’s what protects the company and all of the employees, but

you don't. I just want you to. And if you give me the chance, you need to know that I'll convince you that's exactly what you should do. Yes, that's a warning. It's the only one I have in me."

"Why, Tyler? Why do you want it to be me?"

I don't know what I want him to say to me right now. Just something. Something that makes this risk feel like more than a contract. Yes. That's what I want to hear. What I *need* to hear because I'm so on the edge of committing career suicide for this man.

"Damn it, woman," he bites out, and then he's in front of me again, and I know I should move, push him back, anything to keep him from touching me. Because I can't think when he touches me. But I don't, I can't. And now it's too late. He cups my face and tilts my gaze to his. "My father was a selfish man. Maybe I'm more like him than I want to admit, but the answer is just plain, I want you. Only you, Bella. It has to be *you*."

It has to be me.

Those words could mean so many things. For instance, I have money, and don't want his. I'm safe. But that idea feels pretty bad, actually. They are not the reasons I want him to want me. I ask again, "Why?"

"I trust you. I want you. I'm obsessed with you. I can't stop thinking about you. I *like* you. There are people who love each other but don't like each other. I don't want to hurt you, but I also don't believe anyone will believe you slept your way to the top. Not with your track record. But maybe that's me being selfish. It's hard not to be selfish with you, Bella. I just can't help myself."

His mouth slants over my mouth, then he's kissing me, and oh,

God, when this man kisses me, he consumes me. And this is not *just* a kiss, it's a claiming. He drinks me in and I drown in the rush of heat and emotion he stirs in me. I drown in my need for him. The only thing that saves me is another slide of his tongue and the feel of his hands on my body. I'm clutching his jacket when he ends the kiss and says, "*That's why*. And if I don't walk away right now, someone is going to walk in on us fucking against this wall."

He releases me and walks toward the door. I push off the wall and step toward him, intending to stop him, but he stops on his own. He pauses at the door and looks at me. "You needed to know why and I told you why. I know you well enough to know now you have to think about what I said, and I respect that. But don't think too long."

That's all he says. And then he's gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TYLER

Insanity is what my father would call where I'm headed with Bella. Everything was a contract to him.

He'd tell me to control everything. Control her. Control my enemies. He's my damn enemy, and even with him in the ground, I'm doing a shitty job of controlling him. I didn't even realize the way I was emulating him. I am not like him. I will never be like him. And it's about time I make that clear to everyone including him, because the bastard has to be hanging around to enjoy this shit.

I enter my office, walk to the bar, fill a glass, and down the smoky bite of the bourbon.

I told myself this contract was a good way to fuck Bella out of my system without fucking her over. I convinced myself I was offering her security. But when I put myself in her shoes, and I think about her maybe, just maybe, feeling like I do about her about me, and it's not as simple then. I screwed up and now I have to fix it.

My intercom buzzes and Debbie calls out, "Gavin is here."

I down the last swallow of my drink and leave the glass behind. Once I'm at my desk I sit down and hit the button. "Send him back."

When the bastard walks into my office, he's got nothing but a briefcase on him. "Where are the files you promised me?"

He shuts the door. "There are boxes on top of boxes on that family. You really want to go through all of those files?" He dumps his briefcase on the table and walks to the bar.

"The Allen family is attached to this firm and being used against me. I want to read the essays they wrote in grade school if that's what

it takes for me to figure out how to control them.”

“You don’t control these people, Tyler,” he says, filling a glass with one of my more expensive bourbons. “Do this the easy way.” He downs the contents of his glass and joins me. “I’ve narrowed your fiancée list to five good, solid options. And don’t worry, I made sure they’re all arm candy.”

“You know I’m involved with Bella.”

“Involved?” he challenges, grabbing a folder from his briefcase. “You mean you’re fucking?” He sets the folder in front of me. “Look at the list. Debbie’s on there. I had her checked out. She’s hot, she’s sweet, and she actually comes from money. She doesn’t have to work, she just wants to. Sound familiar?”

“You want me to fuck my secretary?” I ask. “Really, Gavin?”

“You’re fucking Bella.”

I toss the folder to his side of the desk. “Keep it. I don’t need it.”

“You have everything to lose.”

Including Bella, I think, but Gavin would never understand why that matters, which is why I don’t bother to tell him. “Get me those boxes. Now. This afternoon.”

“If as much as a whisper of you looking into the Allens gets out, they will come at you.”

“Unless you’re a double agent who’s going to tell them, get me the boxes.” I wave him off. “Go. I have a meeting on my schedule and work to do first.”

He scoots the folder back toward me. “Take it. Look at it. Make a choice. It may be the way of the old, but this is an arranged marriage that saves your assets and provides security for those who count on

you—your employees. Either get Bella onboard or move on, Tyler.”

My jaw tics.

He stands up, grabs his bag, and walks toward the door.

“Get me those files!” I call after him. “*Today.*”

He lifts a hand and exits the door.

Damn it to hell.

I tab through the address book on my phone and make the call I should have already made. Dierk Jordan is an ex-CIA agent and a man who will do about anything for a payday. We’ve used him in random situations that were critical to the firm and its clients. He’ll do security work, but he prefers the grittier stuff, and that’s what I’m going to give him. I need him to find out everything there is to know about my father and his legal and financial teams. And, yes, the Allen family, without them ever finding out I dug around.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BELLA

My lips tingle from Tyler's kiss and my mind races.

The walk back to the office is a wild ride. I can't seem to calm the sensations Tyler has once again created in my body any more than I really, truly, understand what just happened between me and Tyler. I'm fairly certain he just admitted to having feelings for me.

I think. I don't know.

Maybe this thing between us, whatever it is, is just plain about sex and a contractual obligation he has to meet to protect the company. Not that he doesn't like me well enough. I actually do believe he'd rather suffer this fifteen-month sentence with me rather than someone else, but it's hard to decipher exactly what that means when we're one big lust bomb. Only it's more than lust to me. By the time I plant myself in my chair behind my desk, I decide that means that one of the two of us is going to get hurt, and it won't be him.

I don't like how that feels already, and when my phone rings, I'm eager for a distraction that turns into chaos. One of my clients was just exposed for cheating on his wife by a notoriously brutal gossip rag. This translates to about ten calls and a Zoom meeting with him and his PR person, trying to save his reputation. Even his wife calls me and rather than screaming and shouting, her soft voice radiates pain I feel in every part of me. It's a reminder that love is always a risk, especially when one person is more committed than the other.

The only commitment I have from Tyler is a contract.

Tyler isn't a commitment guy. In all the years I've known him, there has never been one woman. Of course, I can't say much better of

myself, but I was willing to find the right guy. I'm not sure Tyler can say the same of the right woman, which is perhaps how he ended up with me, the person he trusts because I'm a friend. It's a strange, confusing place to be.

I really don't know if I'm going straight into the fire or veering left or right.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TYLER

Hour after that kiss I shared with Bella, I can still taste her on my lips.

It's fucking nuts, considering I've been busy as hell.

My afternoon is a clusterfuck of clients and one difficult partner who just can't accept we've moved on from my father's scandal. Nowhere in this picture is food, and since I never went back to talk to Dash, my lunch ended up his. I'm about to head to the café and grab something to eat before the Zoom meeting when Debbie pokes her head into my office.

"Boss, I don't know what's going on. There are literally several stacked carts of boxes in the lobby right now, addressed to you. Do you know what that's about?"

"That's the delivery from Gavin I told you to expect. Have them brought into my office."

Her eyes go wide. "Oh. Wow. Okay. Are you sure? It's a lot of boxes."

"Positive."

"Okay," she murmurs, seeming anything but convinced, but then she has no clue how important those boxes are to the future of this company, nor will she find out. "I'll make it happen," she adds, and when she would leave, I hold up a hand.

"Wait," I say, my conversation with Gavin rightfully on my mind. I motion her into the room. "The boxes can wait. Come, sit."

She hurries inside and joins me.

Debbie's a pretty blonde, with delicate features and a soft voice that

I have no doubt plenty of men find her hot. But when she walks into my office, she's an employee. Bella is another story. When she enters a room, there is a shift in the air, a change in me, an awareness of her as a woman. I force myself to remember she's my employee. Or I did. That ship has sailed.

Gavin didn't wake me up to Debbie as a woman.

She's worked for me for two years and he knows more about her than I do. How shitty a boss does that make me? She settles into the chair across from me, and I lean forward in my seat. "Tell me about your family, Debbie."

She blanches. "What?" The look that follows is akin to a deer in headlights. "Why are you asking that? You've never asked me anything personal before now."

I don't bother to blame my father's teachings. I'm the one who chose how I managed. I'm the one who makes my own decisions. "I'm not proud of that," I admit. "I think it's about time I know who you are and what you want out of your career."

She motions behind her, a nervous tremble to her hand. "Shouldn't I take care of the delivery?"

"Debbie," I say, a push in my voice.

Her lips press together. "My family owns Genesis Cable Network."

"Genesis Cable Network," I repeat, digesting the fact that Debbie's family is the powerhouse behind a major network. "And why, exactly, are you working for me and not them?"

"Your father and my father would have gotten along. I do not want to work for my father."

Considering we all now know my father killed a co-worker he was

sleeping with, that says a lot without saying much.

“I made a deal with him,” she continues. “I get five years outside the company, then I have to work for him or I don’t inherit. Sometimes I don’t even know if I care about the money or the empire anymore.”

“Why?” I ask, truly curious. I always wanted to prove I could run the empire.

Always.

“The problem for me,” she explains, “is that I don’t like being the boss. I don’t like pressure.”

“I don’t find that to be true of you at all. You handle pressure and do it well.”

“I appreciate that, but I’ve learned a lot working for you. Starting with business is not personal. It’s business. That premise has served me well in life in general and it’s helped me deal with my father.”

That’s about all I’m going to teach someone like Debbie, I decide.

The truth is, she’d be well served to work under someone like Bella, who could teach her how to go at things a bit more gently but just as effectively as me. But the idea that Debbie is on that damn list of Gavin’s, and Bella will one day find out doesn’t sit well. I do not want Bella to feel as if I was interviewing Debbie to be this stupid fake fiancée Gavin believes I need and decide to pair her with Bella. Despite it being untrue, I do not think that would go over well.

What I know, though, is that long-term, Debbie would be better off adding diversity to her resume. “I believe that old saying: do what you love, and the money will follow. I love this company. What do you love? What is your passion?”

“Animals,” she says with no hesitation. “I volunteer at a shelter. I’d

work to help animals every day if I could.”

“Allie, Allison, who I know you know—”

“Yes. She handles the company’s charity division, and she’s engaged to Bella’s brother, Dash.”

“Yes. She needs an assistant in the charity division. I’m sure there is a way to incorporate your love of animals into what she does. I’ll throw your name into the hat if you’re interested in being interviewed.”

Her fingers curl on the arms of her chair. “I’m confused. Am I not doing a good job?”

“If you weren’t doing a good job, I’d fire you, not help you get a job you’ll enjoy. Think about it and let me know. And on that note, I’m going to get a bite to eat. I need the big screen set-up for a Zoom meeting at five.”

“Of course,” she says and stands up. “I’d love to be considered.”

“I’ll let Allie know.”

“Thank you,” she says and she heads for the door.

“Debbie,” I say as another question comes to mind.

She rotates. “Yes?”

“That guy that comes and picks you up sometimes. Is that your boyfriend?”

“Yes. That’s David.”

“What does *he* do?”

“He works for the animal shelter where I volunteer.”

“Does he know about your family money?”

“God, yes,” she confirms. “He wants me to walk away from them and all that comes with them.”

My eyes narrow on her. “What about the money?”

“David wants me to walk away from it all and marry him. But my father doesn’t approve of David. If I marry him, I’m also disinherited. It’s a challenge.”

“Why? You clearly don’t love him.”

“I do,” she says quickly. “I love him.”

“But not more than the money.” It’s not a question. It’s a fact, I’m certain.

Her cheeks heat, a wash of what reads as guilt to me. “I’ll handle the delivery,” she says, and she doesn’t wait for my reply, she’s out the door.

I’m enlightened on the character of my secretary, and with that enlightenment is a lesson on knowing those who work for you. Debbie is all about money, which some might think I’d find a valuable trait. But nothing I’ve ever done was about the money, it was about the challenge. About proving my worth. About showing my father I was a winner. When you live for money, the water tends to muddy in dangerous ways.

Bella’s willingness to walk away from a client like Carson over disrespect, and the lesson and yes, respect that followed, has actually made her, her client, and the company more money. The way Bella doesn’t want to be seen as bought or as sleeping her way to the top is all about her hard work and character. We are suffocating in my father’s demands and if it was only about money, I’d walk away in a heartbeat. I can’t ignore my father’s demands, not without risking a hostile takeover that jeopardizes jobs. But I’m also not going to blindly do my father’s bidding, not when losing Bella is the price I will pay.

Holy shit.

I lean back in my chair with a realization.
I'm in love with Bella Bailey.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BELLA

An hour before my Zoom meeting with Dash and Tyler, I'm already dreading my brother's arrival. Dash will try and corner me for information and if he can't, he'll watch me all intently and judge every interaction between me and Tyler. Not to mention the awkwardness of not really processing and understanding what happened between me and Tyler on the walk back to the office.

Not a combination easily tolerated when I'm still running on nothing but a croissant. With this in mind, I hurry to the café where I order the egg salad sandwich that has been Allie's obsession, and thanks to her influence, now mine. It takes me about five minutes to inhale it, after which I order a cookie and latte to go, and turn toward the door only to blanch when I find a potential client I've been hoping to land walking toward me. Becker Moses is a man most women call a tall drink of hot man in blue jeans, with wavy brown hair, a strong chin and jawline, and a charming smile. He's also the hottest voice in country music in years, currently riding a wave of fame.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, smiling a greeting. "How are you even back here?"

"Looking for you, of course," he declares in his country drawl, oozing charm. "The receptionist sent me here to wait while she hunted you down, but it seems it's my lucky day. Here you are." He gives me a once over and says, "Sunshine and honey, babe. You're all kinds of sunshine and honey."

I laugh. "Thanks, but we both know that's the country song you've been singing to everyone these days. Great song, by the way."

“Inspired by you,” he assures me.

I wave him off. “Whatever. Don’t you live in Texas? What brought you into town?”

“I agreed to play at Aldean’s. A favor to him. And it gave me a good excuse to see you.”

It’s hard not to be charmed by Becker, it really is, but of course, there is a heavy pull for me in another direction these days. A strong one, too, as I appear immune to Becker’s flirtation. Besides, performers tend to flirt with their public even from the stage, to the point it becomes a way of life.

“And here I thought you came over to make me your new agent,” I say.

The door behind him opens and there is a charge in the air, a rush of power that is as familiar as the man himself. Tyler's eyes meet mine, and there is a punch of awareness between us that I feel in every part of me.

Reluctantly it seems, and rather obviously I think, he forces his gaze to Becker. “Becker,” he greets, shaking the other man’s hand, but even with his attention elsewhere, it’s unnerving how aware of him I am right now. “Are you finally signing with us?”

Becker’s attention is on me now. “You know I’m loyal to Alex.” Alex, being his agent and he says those words almost as if they’re an apology.

“If I change agencies, Bella, it will be you all the way.” He glances at Tyler. “Which is a good reason for me to stay in touch with her.”

The chef, of all people, appears beside Tyler and motions him toward the counter. Tyler’s jaw tics but he says, “I’ll be right back.”

The instant he steps away, Becker shifts his attention back to me. “I’m actually headed to Memphis to film a video. My show here is Friday night. You want to come?”

“Sure,” I say, with no hesitation. Becker is a prospective client. I go to see clients and prospective clients play all the time. “I’d love to come. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up at six,” he says. “We can grab dinner if that’s cool with you?”

“Yes, great,” I say. “That will be fun.”

“Should I pick you up here?”

“Actually, I have a new puppy. I’ll want to go home and check on her. I can meet you.”

His eyes light, a love for animals written all over him. “What kind of puppy?”

“A Golden Retriever.”

“Ah. I love Golden Retrievers,” he says. “I have two. I have to come and see the puppy. I miss my boys. I take them with me when I can.” He pulls out his phone and shows me a photo of two smiling, gorgeous boys. “That’s Tuesday and Wednesday, which seemed great until I was trying to make a vet appointment. Wednesday is on Thursday and Tuesday is on Monday.”

I laugh. “Oh, gosh. That’s funny. It does sound like a song though.”

“I think you’re right. I’m inspired to write it, too.” He slides his phone back into his pocket. “Send me your address. I want to come and see your cutie.”

There is a twist in my belly. This suddenly feels a little more personal than professional. Worse, Tyler rejoins us as Becker asks,

“You still have my number?”

Tyler’s energy bristles and a stab of unfounded guilt pinches in my chest. This is ridiculous. It’s common for agents or even prospective agents to do this kind of thing. “In my address book,” I confirm.

“Great,” Becker says. “Text me and we’ll work it all out. See you Friday, sunshine.” He winks and turns to Tyler. “Good to see you, man.” He glances at his watch. “Gotta run. I have a plane waiting.” He heads for the door.

Tyler’s full attention slams into me like a freight train on a downhill track. “What was that?” His voice is low, terse.

I play it cool and professional. “We’ll see. Hopefully, he’s not as happy with his agent as he says he is. He invited me to his show at Aldean’s.”

His eyes darken, and if his mood was dark minutes ago, it’s a tornado now. “He rejected you as his agent, but he invited you to his show?”

The word “rejected” bites a bit, but I set it aside and I keep my tone matter-of-fact. “I do stuff like this all the time. I’ve had clients I got to know for years before they finally changed over.”

“You said *yes*?” There’s an incredulous quality to that question. He steps closer, too close for a business café. “He wants to fuck you, Bella.”

There are people nearby and I lower my whisper, “Stop.”

“No, Bella. *No*.”

He means no to Becker’s show and I bristle. “You can’t tell me no. This is a smart business decision. Besides, after hours—”

“*No*.” That’s all he says.

He rotates away from me and starts walking toward the door.

My eyes go wide and my heart leaps. Oh my God, is he going after Becker? I launch myself forward, but Tyler's already exiting the café. I follow closely behind, ignoring Allie as she tries to intercept me, zooming past her and entering the lobby. Becker is at the elevator, not far out of Tyler's reach, when I call out, "Tyler!"

He takes another step and I try again, more forcefully. "Tyler!"

He halts, his spine stiff, and I race forward and step in front of him. "What are you doing?" I bite out softly. "He's a potential client. A big one."

The elevator dings, a signal that Becker is one step closer to out of the line of fire.

Tyler steps right, and while I know the receptionist might see, I step with him. "Please don't do this."

His eyes simmer with barely contained anger. "Careful," he warns tightly. "Someone might think you want to fuck me, not him."

That's a hit. He's hit a nerve and it's a gnarly one. My fingers curl into my palms. "Bastard. I don't know why that surprises me. You always have that in you, don't you, Tyler?"

"I don't like sharing."

"As if I'm trying to fuck everyone with legs?" I demand, but I don't give him time to reply. "Don't worry, *boss*. I won't stain the firm's reputation. I'll do my job, the only one I want. And that job requires I go to see Becker play his show while trying to figure out how to partner him with Hawk Legal."

I'd step around him, but Dash and his damnable timing, once again, appears next to us. He must have been with Allie when Allie tried to

stop me from chasing after Tyler. I wasn't oblivious to his approach. I rotate to face my brother. "Let's go get your prep work done."

Dash flicks a look between us, obviously reading the room I don't want him to read, not when we're in a public place. I catch his arm and try to get him moving. He holds his ground, and now he and Tyler are staring at each other. Great. Just great. If the two of them want to go at each other in public, I'm not going to be around for the slaughter. Though I doubt either is that stupid.

I start walking. If they want to talk, they can talk. I have work to do. My guess is my brother will follow me to my office and ask a lot of questions. I'm not sure I have it in me to keep my mouth shut. I have a lot of feelings about Tyler right now, and a lot of words that I want to spew out at him, not Dash.

But Dash will do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BELLA

I need a space to breathe that I don't share with Tyler, and space to calm down before that Zoom meeting.

I'm about to exit the lobby where he still resides with my brother when I hear, "Bella! Wait."

I'd keep going but it's not Dash or Tyler calling me.

It's Debbie, Tyler's assistant, which means this is about that Zoom call.

Business is business, and this business is about Dash's career. With a grit of my teeth, I rotate to face the group. Tyler and Dash are staring at me as if they were watching me leave in the first place, but it's only Tyler's attention that I feel. Only his attention that charges my anger. I don't know how I thought this man cared about me. He's all about his contract.

I'm done with him.

I meet his stare and I hope, I just hope, that the "done with him" message is exactly what my eyes tell him. I don't know if it's her personality or if she senses the tension in the room, but Debbie clears her throat and shifts from one foot to the other. "The studio is on the line early," she explains to us all. "They wanted to find out if you can do the call early. One of their people has to leave town tonight rather unexpectedly apparently, but they're eager to talk to Dash."

"What do you say, brother?" I ask. "Can you stay positive and let us guide you through this?"

"I'm not sure I'm the problem in this particular meeting," he replies dryly, "but yes. I can do my part. I've decided to do this true crime TV

gig. I'm going to do it right."

He will do it right. That's what we were taught by Mom. If you're going to do it—anything at all—do it to the best of your ability. And how you do one thing is how you do all things, be it putting the laundry up properly or attending to your job.

Tyler glances at Debbie. "Are we set-up?"

"We are," she confirms. "We're in your conference room. I'll go tell them we're ready in five."

Tyler lifts his hand in approval and returns his attention to me and Dash. "Is there anything you want to talk through before we go live?" Tyler asks Dash.

Meanwhile, I am scolding myself for noticing Tyler's hands and thinking a little too hard about them on my body. I hate how much I like his hands. They're strong. They touch me like I matter even if I do not. I shake off the thought, and motion to Dash and then toward my office. "I need to grab my contract notes."

I turn away and exit the lobby—this time without a delay—and hurry to my office. Morgan, the receptionist who I've been promising to interview as my assistant, appears in my doorway. "You seem stressed. What can I do? I can stay late if you need me to."

I snatch the folder from the desk. "I appreciate that, Morgan, but I just don't even have time to show you what to help with. But let's have lunch tomorrow, and we can talk about my assistant's job."

Her eyes light. "Yes, please. I'd love that."

"Great," I say. "I do need help. Proven by the fact that I don't even have time to interview. I appreciate your being patient with me. Right now, I have a Zoom meeting with a studio."

“Oh, yes. I’ll get out of your hair but I’m looking forward to lunch.”
She backs into the hallway.

I’m at the door when Dash appears in my path. “You okay?”

“Just peachy.” The icing on that bitter little statement is a bitter laugh, which I barely recognize as my own.

“I obviously can read between the lines. I know you and Tyler got involved.”

My eyes go wide. “Please tell me you didn’t say that to him, and why are you saying it to me right now?”

“So you won’t try and run away from me after the meeting. And, no, I didn’t say that to Tyler. Not yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“I’m still processing.”

“Bella—”

“Fine. I’ll tell you everything over waffles this weekend, but you and Allie have to come to me. I have Molly now.”

“I’m not waiting until weekend waffles. After the Zoom meeting, I’ll take you to dinner. It’s been too long since we had a dinner alone anyway.”

“I have to go home to Molly,” I argue.

“We can order pizza then, at your place. It’s really been too long a time since we did a one-on-one, Bella. This is the night to fix that.”

He’s not wrong. I love Allie, and she’s my brother’s heart, but we never do just us anymore. I actually really appreciate him realizing this before I did. “Okay, yes. That sounds fun. And you’re right, it’s been too long. Right now, let’s go work on your empire.”

He nods and backs away, but I say, “Dash.”

He steps close. “Yeah, little sis?”

“Sit between us.”

“Oh, I’ll sit between you, all right. That wasn’t even a question.”

I nod my appreciation and we exit to the hallway together. I don’t know what I’m going to tell Dash, but I know that right now, in this moment, I’m reminded of how lucky I am to share the bond I do with him. Also, I never got my cookie or latte.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TYLER

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I pace back and forth in my office, trying to calm the hell down. I don't know what happened to me in the café. I lost it. I really lost it. Never in my life have I felt jealous, but it's a brutal emotion. It's not even close to gentle.

There's a knock on the door and Debbie pops her head into the office. "We're ready." Her eyes narrow, and her head tilts. "You okay, boss?"

Holy fuck, Debbie is asking me if I'm okay. No, I am not fucking okay when she has to ask if I'm okay. "I'm coming," is all I say. "Give me five. I'm waiting on a call I have to take."

"Oh, of course."

She disappears behind a shut door, and I scrub my jaw. I have to get it together, I really do. My cellphone rings and while I'm not waiting for a call as I told Debbie, I snake my phone from my pocket to find my mother calling. Oh, hell no. I do not have the patience for her and Becker in one day. He will not sign with us, ever. That is not happening, so Bella can just forget that idea here and now, and I don't care if she's pissed off about it.

At all.

I'll pay her for the loss, but even that will probably insult her. While I appreciate her independence on the financial side, there are times she's too extreme on that point. I slide my phone back into my pocket

and decide I have to go to this Zoom meeting.

And I will behave.

Until after. Then, I won't have to.

Bella and I need to have a conversation, and while I'd prefer to do that naked, she'll just tell me I'm making her a whore again. It's time to step back and start over. It's time I ask her on a date, with dinner, flowers, and all the things I never do, but will for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BELLA

Me and Dash arrive at the conference room a moment before Tyler, with Debbie following us. “They’re already live, waiting on us. Hurry, everyone. We need to connect.”

Hurry translates to claiming a spot in front of a long conference table. We’ll all sit on one side, facing a big screen on the wall in front of us. I place myself on the far right of the Zoom screen, as far from Tyler as I can get, but as Dash steps to my side and I turn in his direction, somehow my eyes collide with Tyler’s, and the zip of awareness between us steals my breath. I can’t breathe and there are butterflies in my belly, a reaction he doesn’t deserve from me. Not after all he has done to treat me like I’m an employee he pays to sleep with him. Even if it’s not true, Tyler doesn’t seem to have it in him to do anything in a way that isn’t cold and hard.

I’m not sure he’s capable of love.

Just owning things.

Like me.

Angry all over again, I jerk my eyes from his and when Dash sits down, I follow. Tyler is now forced to sit on the opposite side of Dash to be visible on the screen. This worked out as planned. Nothing else has, but this did.

The screen flickers and I lean over to Dash. “Follow my lead.”

“Unless they piss me off,” he says.

I scowl at him. “Oh, my God, Dash—”

“I’m kidding. Chill, Bella. *Chill.*”

Tyler says something to him, and Debbie calls out, “Sorry, technical

issues. I think I've got it handled."

The screen goes live and we're instantly in the presence of three Hollywood executives. Just like that, my business side comes out to play, and the personal stuff between me and Tyler disappears. In fact, as always, as we did back in LA, we play off each other and it's magic. Dash follows our lead, and while the call extends a good hour, it ends with an agreement to sign the contract tonight. The call ends and Debbie says, "They just sent the contract. I'll go print it out."

This leaves Dash, Tyler, and me alone in the room, but we're all still focused on business. Dash rolls his seat back to allow a conversation with me and Tyler, and Tyler eyes Dash, not me. "How do you feel about how that went?"

"I think I need to ask you and Bella that question. How did it go?"

"The talking points are good," Tyler concludes, "but I always hold my judgment until I see it in writing."

"Exactly," I agree. "We never know the answer to that until we read the contract and make sure they didn't sneak anything in on us."

We debate for a few moments about the meeting but then Debbie is already back and sliding copies of the contract in front of us all. "Does anyone want anything to drink?" she asks.

"I would kill for anything cold," Dash says.

Debbie laughs. "Well since you're ex-FBI and write about an assassin, I think that means I better get you something cold to drink."

"Just make sure it's not diet," Dash says. "Then I really will have to kill you."

She laughs like a schoolgirl, pink on her cheeks. My brother does that to people. It's hard to watch when I'm in sister mode. Amazing

when I'm in agent mode. I glance at my watch and realize the café is closed. I'm just not getting my latte. "I'm good," I say. "And bring him diet. I like to irritate him and I won't let him kill you."

She laughs again and looks at Tyler. He waves her off for himself. "I'm fine, too. Thanks, Debbie."

I don't remember him saying thank you to people in the past, but maybe he did. Maybe I just notice everything about Tyler now. Lord knows, I'm hypersensitive to his every move, which is why I turn my attention to the contract and put my lawyer hat on. Two revisions later, we have a deal, and my brother will start filming in three months.

"We're done," Tyler says. "Go grab Allie and take her out to celebrate."

The two of them exchange a few words, no awkwardness between them over me, but they have known each other forever. They are friends. They seem to compartmentalize things between work and personal.

We chat a few minutes more and nerves jitter about in my belly, with my worry that I'm going to end up in a confrontation with Tyler after this that I won't handle well. Not in my present state of mind.

When Dash finally heads for the door and I would follow, Tyler says, "Wait, Bella."

My heart thunders in my chest and I turn to face him. The room is hotter now. Maybe it's me who's hotter now, but I can feel the tremble of my knees that's pure adrenaline.

"Shut the door," he orders.

The problem is that I know what happens with us behind closed

doors, and it doesn't work in my favor. But he's also my boss. I can't say no. I shut the door and say, "If this isn't business, don't say anything to me right now. I need space. I need to think."

"I won't apologize for protecting you."

He's closer now, but apparently, I don't care. I push off the door, step into the room and swipe at the air. "Are you kidding me? He's a future client. You were going to...I don't know what you were going to do, but it was wrong and foolish. And I've never known you to be foolish."

"He wants to fuck you."

"Because men always want to fuck everything that moves. Case in point, you."

He steps closer. I back up and point at him. "Stay back."

"That's not true, Bella."

"It is true, and all I did was lay down and spread my legs like every other woman does for you, and you have no idea how ashamed I am of that. Because apparently, you think I do it for everyone."

He flinches, almost as if my words really have the power to hurt him. "Come on, Bella. You know—"

"Is this business or can I go home to my new puppy?"

"Let's go somewhere—"

"No," I bite out. "No, and no again. In case you didn't hear me, *no*. That's your thing, right? I have to say no. Can I go now, boss? Or do I even have a job?"

His jaw tics and he steps backward as if pushed. "I would never let our personal relationship affect your job. Never. And now that you said that, as much as I want to pull you close and kiss you and keep

you here, I feel like I can't. I have to let you go, but I don't *want* to let you go, Bella. *Don't* go."

"It's now or in fifteen months. I choose now." With that, I turn and exit the office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BELLA

I can't get to my office and then out of this building fast enough. I also have to face the fact that I don't know how I keep working with Tyler. I'm fighting to save my career and I've ended it. And this is exactly why I need out of here to think. But when I step into my office, my brother is there waiting, which, of course, he is. We have a lot to celebrate. We have plans.

"Hey," I say, trying to put on a brave face, but I'm pretty sure I'm trembling from my encounter with Tyler. "I just need to grab my things."

Dash pushes off my desk where he's leaning. "Do I need to talk to Tyler?"

I hold up my hands. "I beg of you, do not. This is between me and Tyler."

"That's up for discussion. You're going to talk to me over dinner?"

"I need half a pizza down me before we talk. That has to be the deal."

He studies me for a few beats. "All right. Should I go and grab ice cream? I know how you are."

He means how a pint a day keeps the tears away. Okay, maybe not a day, but in a crunch, it works better than a therapist. "I like that new Black & White Cookie Häagen-Dazs one. If not, then I'll take the Ben & Jerry's Mint Chocolate Cookie. If they don't have that then—"

"Häagen-Dazs Cherry Vanilla. I know my sister." He steps forward and kisses my temple. "See you in thirty."

"Actually," I say. "Let me walk down with you."

He arches his brows. “You really want to avoid him, don’t you?”

“Not avoid. Just buffer.”

His lips curve. “Same thing, different name.” He motions to the door. “I’ll be your huckleberry.”

I laugh. “Tombstone? Really? That movie is as old as you.”

“But it’s so good,” he says. “The characters and the way they play together. It’s written and acted to perfection.”

He has me laughing by the time we’re safely alone in the elevator, but on the ride down, reality hits pretty hard. Tyler and I have to find a way to work together or I have to leave Hawk Legal. It’s not the first time I’ve had this thought, but it’s the first time it’s felt this real. I have so many clients who trust me and whose careers feel personal to me.

Tyler’s words play in my head, *“I would never let our personal relationship affect your job. Never. And now that you said that, as much as I want to pull you close and kiss you, and keep you here, I feel like I can’t. I have to let you go, but I don’t want to let you go, Bella. Don’t go.”*

I can’t go.

I cannot leave. Tyler and I have to figure out a way to work together that doesn’t include getting naked. I have to find a way to cope with him and a new fiancée.

Once I’m in my car, and Dash is on his way to get ice cream, I just sit there and process a moment. I don’t know if my head is on straight. I have to talk to someone and that someone is Dash or Allie, but in the process, I can’t have Dash deciding to beat Tyler’s ass, either. I start my car because I have no idea how long I’ve been sitting in the garage. I’m directly across from the elevators and I watch the doors to one of

the cars open and Tyler steps out.

I suck in a breath, too affected by him for my own good, and watch him stride athletically toward the parking area. He halts abruptly and oh, God, he sees me here, but how can he not? I'm in the spot right in front of him.

Our eyes lock, and a million moments in that LA hotel play in my mind. God, his mouth, his hands, his body pressed to my body. How am I going to work with him when he's playing house with someone else? But I have to, for so many reasons. I have to. I place my car in drive and I accelerate out of the parking spot. I drive away, but all I can think is that I want to be that woman. But I want it to be real.

And now, I've lost it so badly, I might actually lose everything because of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BELLA

An hour later, me and Dash are sitting on the floor in front of my couch, munching down on pizza and Molly doesn't even care. She is crashed on the floor next to me with her head in my lap. "I love this puppy, Dash. Thank you. I'm stressed about leaving her alone, but what you did for me with her and the nanny is amazing."

"You're alone too much, Bella. I want you to find someone like I did."

"You know from experience it has to be my version of Allie."

He shuts his pizza box and turns to me. "Talk to me, sis."

I shut my box and shift as much as I can without waking the puppy. "I don't even know where to begin. And I can't have you beating my boss' ass, Dash. I'm just as active a player in this as he is."

"I promise not to beat his ass."

"Do you really? I mean no matter what I say, you promise not to try to fight him? We both know how you like to fight."

"I'm not going to try to fight him. I *promise*."

I huff out a breath. "I think I need the ice cream."

"I can make that happen."

He starts to get up and I catch his arm. "Not yet. I love you, Dash, by the way. I'm really lucky to have a brother that's here for me."

"I feel the same, little sis. You don't even have to tell me that. I know. Talk to me."

"I think I always kind of had a thing for Tyler. Maybe it's why all the other men I tried to date didn't work. I was too engaged with him. I mean, I have always gone to him to game plan things, and we just

connect and talk things out, and he's not the Tyler he is with everyone else when we're doing that."

"And you went to LA and it came to a head."

"Yes. I slept with him. I spent days with him. It kind of started right before that, and I don't even know how it finally erupted. If I'm honest, it was just always there between us."

"And what happened when you came home?"

"It's more what he confessed when we were there."

"Which was what?" he asks.

"His father's will is a problem."

"How does that affect you?"

"You'd think it couldn't, right? But his will was like a final stab at Tyler."

Dash grimaces. "Of course. What did he do?"

"Tyler has to get engaged and make it showy for a certain window of time before he marries. Then and only then can he inherit his father's shares. If he doesn't do this, the company stock will sell off. This makes the employees and clients land in utter chaos and instability." Dash opens his mouth and I hold up a hand. "It's worse. If he doesn't do it, the attorney will make a case that was handled by the firm that was fishy, at the very least. go public. Every case the firm's attorneys handled will then be questioned."

"Holy fuck. Holy *fuck*."

"I know. It's brutal."

Dash narrows his eyes on me. "He asked you to be the woman." It's not a question.

"He did, which honestly, as a favor, I would have done it, but Tyler

gave me this ridiculous contract that paid me off at the end and gave me my own division. It made me feel dirty. That's what you walked in on when you brought me Molly. And he said it's to protect me. I just...I don't want to be his whore, Dash."

He scrubs his jaw and pushes himself up to the couch, staring down at me. "I can't believe I'm about to defend Tyler. First, Bella, he doesn't even know how he looks at you. I've always believed he had feelings for you and you for him. You look at him the same."

"What does that even mean?"

"It's just there, Bella. The connection. And Tyler is much more likely to connect himself to someone who doesn't have a role in his professional life. I know he had the Allison thing, but that wasn't his thing, which is why it was so shocking. And to repeat that mistake, no way. Except this is you, Bella."

"He wants to pay me to have sex with him, and I lose my reputation, Dash. People will think I slept my way to the top."

"Will they? Look how successful you are, Bella. You didn't make that shit up. Look what you did for me. Tyler knows this. You are the only one who doesn't. And as for the contract, he also knows you have money and success and don't need his. If he wanted you to go away, would he make you a bigger part of the company, Bella? He couldn't. I know Tyler. No way."

I don't reply. I don't know what to say. Okay, I do. "It feels dirty."

"What does he say he wants from you, Bella?"

"He said something about feelings. Too many feelings."

"Tyler doesn't do feelings, sis. Step back and think about this. I don't want you to get hurt, but I don't want you to walk away from this

for the wrong reasons.” His lips press together. “Look, Mom is always on your mind. And she’s a great example of doing things right, but you judge yourself in her eyes when you don’t really know how she would feel.”

“She wouldn’t want me to sleep with my boss.”

“She’d want you to find the man that makes you feel like your dad did her.”

Dash’s words radiate through me and settle in my belly, where butterflies flutter about here and there. It’s hours later when I’m lying in bed, staring into the darkness with my emotions and thoughts a jumbled mess that I decide I’m scared. Scared of being hurt. Scared of looking unprofessional. Scared of seeing Tyler with another woman on his arm. My mother told me to never do anything scared. I’m not sure how that translates to me and Tyler, but I have to find out before I walk back into that office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TYLER

I sit on my balcony with the fireplace crackling with flames and a glass of whiskey in my hand.

The remainder of my DoorDash dinner is on the table in front of me, right next to my phone, and a copy of my father's will, which I've read from front to back three times. At this point, I regret not taking my mother's call before the Zoom meeting because I need to pick her brain on all things my father, and she won't call me back. If anyone knows how to beat him, it's her. And if anyone knows what to use against the firm managing his will and threatening me, it's her. If I can get out of this will, I can win Bella back.

I have to win Bella back, not that I ever really had her.

My mind flashes back to that night in the hotel, with her sitting across from me in the hotel bar when I'd told her about the will and my situation. I'm right back there, with her, this beautiful woman I'm crazy about, watching her face as she digests my arranged marriage.

The blood runs from Bella's face, and she cuts her gaze, her fingers twisting together in front of her. I can feel the pulse of her emotions and I'm both wildly, ridiculously happy she cares but brutally tormented by the fact I cannot change what has been written.

"This is crazy," she murmurs, and her voice trembles, a hint of betrayal in her voice that I actually understand when I should not.

We are not a couple. We are not even an appropriate matchup, but there is something between us that is indescribably right when everything else in my life right now is wrong.

I don't even know what to say to her. I search for a brilliant word I

can somehow place with more words to miraculously heal this problem, but come up empty.

She lifts her glass and downs the contents, choking a bit with the volume of the liquid. "I need to go." She attempts to stand.

I capture her hand and the heat between us flames. God, I want his woman, not some name on a list. "Bella—"

Her gaze jerks to mine, her tormented eyes meeting mine. "Please, let go of me," she says softly, her voice raspy now. "I know you don't understand how I feel right now because I don't either, but I'm upset. I have no right to be upset, but I can't change the fact that I am. Upset. Very upset. I just...I need space. I need to go to bed and sleep and I'll be me again tomorrow."

"Don't do this," I urge softly.

"What is it I'm doing, Tyler, besides what you tried to do when you sent me to my room? I'm sparing us both a complication we don't need."

"I didn't plan on whatever this is between us any more than I want to be in this position. Jobs and lives will be affected if I don't do this."

"You owe me no explanation."

The waitress reappears by our table. "How are we doing over here?" And holy hell, she smiles at me and bats her eyes in the worst timing known to mankind.

Bella reacts, her expression tightening, anger flinting in her gaze. "Maybe she can go on the list," she suggests and then jerks her hand from mine. The minute she's free, she slides out of her seat and rushes away.

There's no hesitation in me. I'm not letting her leave like this.

“Bella!” I call out, but she doesn’t look back at me. I stand up and the damn waitress is still standing there. “Do you know the meaning of privacy?” I snap. “Charge my room.” I step around the table and stride toward the bar exit. I manage to reach the elevators right as Bella steps inside.

I scan for a stairwell and once I locate the door in question, it’s not long until I’m taking the stairs two at a time. I shouldn’t have told her, I think. No. That’s wrong. I had to tell her. What kind of asshole would I be if I didn’t? But I don’t want to hurt Bella. I don’t want to end whatever this is with her.

I exit the stairwell and look right to find Bella at her door, struggling with the key. I watch her lower her head in a defeated act I know is more about me than the key.

“Bella.”

Her head jerks in my direction, her eyes wide with shock. “What are you doing, Tyler?”

By the time she’s asked the question, I’m in front of her, inhaling her floral scent and dragging her to me. “This,” I declare, my mouth closing over her mouth.

I blink back to the present, remembering that kiss. It had been what sealed my obsession with Bella, though I’m not sure obsession is the right word. But it’s not exactly the wrong word, either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TYLER

Thunder rumbles overhead followed by a crash, a flicker in the sky, and a sudden crush of rain. It was raining on the day of my father's memorial as it was for Allison's as well. I used to love the rain, but tonight it reminds me of death. It reminds me that my father killed Allison. It reminds me why I shouldn't be involved with Bella. But it turns out I'm the bastard boss who wants her too much to walk away.

I'm better with her. I think she's better with me, too.

We are better together.

How insane is it that my father stands between us from his grave?

But then it's not the first time he's inserted himself in my love life. That started way back in college. Fuck me, why am I going there?

My cellphone rings and I grab it to find Gavin calling. I decline the call. I read the fine print of those documents. I can buy time before I go public with a fiancée. It delays the finality of my inheritance, which is dangerous for the company, but it doesn't destroy it. That means I have time to secretly see Bella and figure out where we are going before we go public. If she'll have me. I have to *make* her have me and I won't do that like a bull in a china shop, which is my preferred method. I have to step back. I have to try a softer approach.

Maybe.

Maybe I just need to get her naked again. Then she'll listen.

I dial Dierk, hoping my Mr. Fix It has found a way to fix this. When the call goes straight to voicemail, I text him: *I need an update. What do you have for me?*

He calls me back and I answer with, "Talk to me."

“I don’t need to tell you the Allen family is no joke.”

“Exactly why my father did what he had to do to make them happy,” I conclude.

“Right. And nosing around about them, even by someone like me who knows what I’m doing, is dangerous. This leads me to a couple of points. If the law firm managing the will exposes you, your firm, and the Allen Family, then they’re in deadly territory. I’d tell you to make sure they know who they’re dealing with, but that takes me to point two.”

“Which is what?”

“One of the law firm’s clients is a close connection to the Allen family. That doesn’t mean this is all one big bluff, but it’s possible.”

Which fits the idea of my father testing me one last time. “It’s worth a cat-and-mouse conversation with whoever you’re dealing with at the firm. But let me dig some more before you move forward with that plan. You need as much damning ammunition as you can get.”

“Agreed.”

My phone beeps and I eye the screen to find my mother calling. “I need to go. Thanks, Dierk.”

“Always, man. There are other ways to deal with this, but they get pretty nasty, and I know that’s not your thing. More soon.”

He disconnects and I click to my mother. “Did you know what Dad did to me in the will?”

“I feel like we’ve had this conversation.”

“You’ve avoided this conversation.”

“Does it matter?” she asks. “It’s done.”

“There you go again, avoiding a real answer, but then you’re good at

that. There's a lot of things we both know you knew went on between me and Dad, but you pretended you didn't."

"I don't know what that means," she says, but we both know she does. It was a dark moment in my life, of my father's creation.

"I need to know how to undo what he did. What's his loophole? Because we both know he had to give me one last test I have to pass."

"You've always passed his tests. You can do it again."

"This affects a lot of innocent people, Mom. I need the answer to his test."

"He shut me out. I don't know anything about his business."

"You were a part of Hawk Legal for years," I argue.

"You have no idea what that was like either, though you should. You had to suffer him, too. I don't know what you want me to say. I can't help you with this. The man is dead. I don't know what you want me to do. Besides, I had all of his personal items trashed or given to charity. I didn't want them there when I get back."

"You did what?"

"He killed somebody, Tyler. Who knows what else he did. I don't want to risk knowing what I should not, and do not, want to know. What did you do with his office?"

"There's nothing there. I spent a week after I took over going through every document. Where's his computer?"

"I told law enforcement to trash it."

"Holy hell, Mother," I curse, scrubbing my jaw.

"Everyone copes their own way, son."

"I know, but I'm not sure if you're grieving or celebrating."

"Considering he killed his mistress, I think it's fair to say a little of

both. It's embarrassing and painful, Tyler. Why do you think I'm in another country? It's hard to face the world there." Her voice cracks. "Really hard."

Damn, I think. "I'm sorry, Mom. I know. Of course, it is. I should have realized that's what was going on. What can I do?"

"Win," she says. "You can win and beat his test, and I assure you, you're right. It's a test. You know how he did things. He absolutely wants you to prove one more time, for the millionth time, you deserve the company. There's a way out of this. You just have to find it."

We talk for a few minutes and then as we hang up, she says, "I love you, son. I know I should have fought for you more, but I can't undo the past. When I get back, I want to sit down and try to start fresh."

My father didn't believe in expressions of love. My mother, on the other hand, learned to overcompensate for his flaws by throwing around the word "love" as lightly as "hello" or "good morning," which is why I often ignore the endearment. But today, it reads differently.

"I love you, too," I say, the statement awkward on my lips, unnatural to me, but not without truth. My mother won't win mother of the year, but I also know much of her behavior is a product of my father's behavior. She developed coping mechanisms just as I did with him. I learned to shelter myself, to avoid intimacy, because those closest to us can hurt us and try and take our money.

"When are you coming back?"

"I need a little more time. I'm trying, though. Maybe you can come and see me?"

"I have a test to pass. When I win."

"Yes," she says. "Win." She hangs up.

I set the phone on the table and watch the rain race past me.

Funny thing about winning is that it looks different now than it did a few months ago.

Because now there is no win that doesn't include Bella.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

BELLA

I don't sleep.

I lie in bed and listen to the rain on the roof, pitter-pattering about, and thinking of that night I went to Tyler's apartment. It was raining then, too. And now what am I doing but standing in my kitchen, in my robe, sipping coffee while the pup eats, and I'm still thinking about it. I'd needed to go to the bathroom, and I just didn't see it anywhere. Maybe I subliminally wanted to see his bedroom. I don't anymore. He'd knocked on the door and when I'd opened it, his anger had been brutal.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" he demanded.

I'd been flustered and confused. We'd had a disjointed exchange and he'd grown impatient and snapped at me. "Coming here was not a smart decision. You need to leave."

"You're being a jerk," I'd declared, but then he knew that. He excels at being a jerk, and yet, I chose him to fall in love with. Of all the men I've crossed paths with, who I didn't even say yes to dating, I chose *him*.

I'd followed my brilliant "jerk" insult with a statement of fact. "You're being a bastard."

"Because I am a bastard, Bella," he'd proclaimed. "You've been warned. I won't warn you again."

He'd warned me all right, and I listened about as well as a two-year-old listens to anything. I need to step back from what is happening between me and Tyler and think about that warning a little harder. I'm going to work from home today, I decide. I need to put off Morgan's

interview. I can't hire her when I don't even know what I'm doing right now. I might have to leave the company. My stomach knots at the idea. I press my hand to the churn in my belly. I love my job. The problem is that I also love my boss. And hate him. The fine line and all prove true.

He lost his professionalism over Becker.

Maybe that means I'm not nothing to him, or maybe it means he really is worried about how he looks when I'm on his arm.

I grab my phone and text the nanny: *I'm working from home, but please do come. I can't be on a call when the pup needs to pee.*

Right about then, Molly starts sniffing the floor and I scoop her up. Fifteen minutes later, I open my laptop and email Morgan to reschedule our interview. The next email is the harder one. It's to Tyler, only why does it have to be hard at all? Short and simple, I tell myself.

Tyler,

I'm working from home, but I have my pet nanny here with me so the puppy won't interfere with my work.

—Bella

The nanny line was to deter him from showing up here and thinking we're going to end up naked, and then I'll bend to his will. I won't, even if we ended up naked. Except while we are naked, but after, I'd come to my senses. Okay, I can't let the naked thing happen. Maybe he's like a drug and the more I have of it, I have to have more.

I'm angry with him.

I won't sleep with him.

Said every woman who was in love with a man who was using her.

It's mid-morning and I'm at my desk, talking to the client with the cheating scandal when my phone buzzes with a message from Tyler. When I don't answer, a message pops up on my computer screen: *Call me back on my cell.*

I grimace and type a reply that is tapped down with the tone of a submissive—okay, not submissive—*respectful* employee: *On the phone dealing with the cheating scandal. I'll call you as soon as I hang up.*

Fifteen minutes later, I draw in a breath and punch in his number. He answers on the first ring. "Bella," he breathes out, a low rumble of masculinity I feel in every part of me.

"Yes?" I say softly.

"What are you doing?"

I don't love the naïve game, but I also am not ready for this conversation. "This cheating thing is causing the press to go nuts and —"

"You know that's not what I'm talking about."

I pant out an uneven breath and just say what I feel. "I'm struggling with all of this, Tyler. I'm having a hard time separating the man who is my boss and all the personal stuff. And clearly, you are in the same boat. I'm starting to think...I don't know what to do."

"Starting to think what, Bella?"

"Becker is a big potential client. You would never let something come between you and a client in the past. I tell myself it's the stress of the will—"

"I could give two fucks about Becker or the will. It's *you*. It's *us*."

"That's not a good thing. You were so obvious yesterday, Tyler, it was like you wanted to out us. If you make me the agent sleeping with

her boss, it's already out and that's no longer an obstacle, right?"

"I would never do that to you, but then I already know you question my motives at every turn, which is starting to piss me off."

"I guess pissed is a theme."

"Damn it, woman. We need to talk. Can I come over?"

"You're asking?" I laugh without humor. "When do you ever ask?"

"I'm trying here, Bella. And I don't want to fuck you in front of your nanny, but I might if you don't get rid of her."

My chin drops and my eyes shut, and all kinds of wild sensations zip through my body. "I can't do this, Tyler," I whisper.

"I'm trying to get out of the contract. There's hope."

"And then what? We fuck until we get caught and I'm ruined anyway?"

"That's not what I want."

"Maybe you just want me because you can't have me."

"Seems like you're making excuses now. Maybe you're just afraid, Bella. But relationships are never without risks. Anything worth having—"

"I'm angry with you. You keep making me feel—"

"Good? Because I keep trying to make you feel good, and I'm not talking about orgasms, though I have plenty of those to give."

"Dirty, Tyler. You keep making me feel dirty."

"Depending on the context of *dirty*, Bella, that's not a bad thing."

I shake my head as if he can see my rejection. "You're not listening."

"I *am* listening."

"No, you're not, Tyler. You're one of the smartest people I know. You're just choosing to twist what I say to your liking. Dirty was fine

back in a hotel in LA. It's not fine here at home, not the kind of dirty I feel."

"Bella, baby—"

"Don't call me baby. I'm not your baby, Tyler. You send mixed messages. Here's the contract so I am easily disposed of."

"You know you send your own mixed messages, Bella. You said you'd throw everything away as you seem to see it, as I asked, but when I add a way to protect you—"

I groan. "That again? Don't say protect me."

"It's true. We need to talk. You need to look into my eyes and see the truth."

"I look into your eyes and end up naked."

"Because that's what happens when what's happening between us happens."

"Which is what?"

"Why don't you give us a chance to find out?" he challenges. "Let me come over."

"Not today," I say, certain I will make all the wrong decisions if I allow that to happen. I've proven I'm not level-headed where Tyler's concerned. "I'll be back in the office tomorrow, but just...I need the weekend." I quickly change the subject. "The studio emailed me about the press release for Dash's projects. They want to do it sooner rather than later. I'll email it to you when I have it for approval."

"You know you're not just some name on a list to me, right, Bella?"

"No, Tyler. I'm not. I'm your employee." I hang up.

I press my hands to my face and I drop them. Maybe I'm being unreasonable over the contract. Maybe the whole "whore" thing I'm

throwing at him is unfair. Or not. I'm not objective about Tyler. After all, Dash is right about a lot of things. I have money to lean on and I have a solid reputation as an agent and a legal professional. But I still can't do what Tyler wants.

I've seen how he flies through women.

And I will never survive a fake marriage and a real divorce with Tyler.

Maybe with a few days of space and logical processing, I can get to a place where I just admit that to Tyler. I can't do this. It's not the contract. It's me. It's him. It's the aftermath. Though my career would survive in the end, my heart would be crushed.

I'm fairly certain that would scare him into backing off.

And isn't that what I want?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TYLER

The next morning, I'm standing in my bathroom, looping the navy silk tie I'm wearing with a gray pinstriped suit when I decide *fuck the waiting*.

Fuck waiting on Dierk to find out more.

Fuck my father.

Fuck the will and the contract that came with it.

And fuck my father's head games.

And most definitely, fuck Becker.

I need all of this out from between me and Bella, and the company that I worked my whole life to run.

Withers deserves a visit and that's what he gets.

Forty-five minutes later, I walk into his office and right past his receptionist. Adrenaline is like fine wine in my blood, or maybe more a stout whiskey, lighting me up. I stride down the hallway and lucky me, his door is open. I step inside and he's behind his desk. He pushes to his feet, spry for an old man, with gray hair and a lined face.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Hawk?"

I shut the door and cross to stand in front of him, towering over his aging frame and rounded shoulders. "How well do you know the Allen family?"

He blinks three times fast. It's like an SOS for help that isn't coming. "What business is that of yours?"

"You'll be the person to release documents to the press if I don't meet the requirements of the will, correct?"

"Your point?"

There's a genuine baffled quality about him. "Did you look at the documents before you agreed to meet that requirement?"

"I was instructed not to. He said it wouldn't be necessary. You'd do as he ordered."

I smirk. "He always had an overinflated opinion of himself. Read the documents. They're all about the Allen family. I know you have a connection to them. So, either you're bluffing, and you can go ahead and sign me up for everything I have coming to me, or we can both dig our graves because you're going to put us in them."

"I can't change the terms of your father's will."

"Can't you?"

His lips press into a thin line. "I think it's time you leave."

My stare burns into him. "I'll expect to hear from you. Otherwise, I'll go to the Allen family and discuss our precarious situation, which rests in your hands."

"That's blackmail."

"It's me telling you my plan of action."

"All this does for you is offer you the freedom to challenge the will," he snaps.

I'm thinking of his connection to the Allen family when I say, "It'll be interesting to pull back the veil and take a close look at your business practices. I'm sure the court will find it enlightening."

I turn and walk away and he doesn't stop me.

Fifteen minutes later, when I walk into the office, I don't go to Bella. I go to my office, where stacks of boxes await. I can't rule out something going on with Withers, the Allen family, and the will, which I don't yet understand. I need to know everything there is to know

about the case my father used to threaten me and attempt to force an arranged marriage.

CHAPTER THIRTY

BELLA

I haven't been nervous about going to work since the first week I joined Hawk Legal. After that, I simply felt a lingering urgency to prove myself to Tyler. The ride up the elevator has my heart racing. It's insane. What is wrong with me? I know Tyler. I know him so well, more than probably anyone except maybe Dash, and I'm not even sure that's true. I've spent a lot of time with this man, and I'm comfortable with him. I have always looked forward to my game-planning sessions with him.

The elevator dings, and I puff out a breath, straighten my spine and step into the corridor. At the same moment, someone steps out of the next elevator and it's just a reflex. I look left and my heart stops as I find Tyler standing there. We rotate to face each other, and he steps closer. "Good to see you back in the office."

"I almost stayed home but I have a meeting this morning, and I owe Morgan an interview for the assistant job. We're having lunch."

"Then I can only assume your plan to handle me and us is to run from me."

Not until I suffer through him and his fiancée. "Not yet."

His jaw sharpens. "In other words, if you could have avoided me, you would have?"

"I told you—"

"You need time," he supplies.

"Yes."

"You know what I need?" he asks, his voice low, rough.

"A wife," I say. "I'm quite clear on that point."

“You, Bella. I need *you*. I’m not doing this with anyone else, so if that means I spend the next six months convincing you of that, I will.”

“You can’t—”

“You mean you won’t. Go to work, Bella, before I drag you to my office and change your mind.” To my shock, with that warning, he rotates away from me. He starts walking away and not with his normal arrogant saunter, either. It’s a long-legged stride that radiates anger.

I’m angry, too, but now the reason has shifted.

He can’t put the outcome of the will on my shoulders, and he is.

That’s blackmail.

And I both love and hate his willingness to stoop to such levels. Just as I love and hate him.

He opens the door to his office, and I jerk around and start my own unsteady pace toward the main lobby.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BELLA

My office has always been my sanctuary and playground as much as my home.

That's how much I love what I do.

But today, I've barely claimed my plush leather chair, another perk of the success I've worked hard for, when my cell buzzes with a message. I shove my purse in my desk and dig out my phone only to feel a twist in my belly at the caller ID. It's Becker, and I've forgotten dinner and his show tonight, which any other woman would call insanity.

Pick you up at six? his message reads.

Guilt over Tyler turns that twist in my belly into full-on gut-wrenching, which is ridiculous. In fact, let me count the ways.

I do not want Becker.

I'm not even Tyler's woman or baby or sex bunny, for that matter. Okay, for a weekend. But that's all.

Becker is a potential client Tyler himself told me to score for the firm, and I've proven patience breeds success. I have three huge clients that came by way of social connections.

I wait for all of those things to wash away my guilt, but that's a big nope. Still feeling it.

I set my phone down without answering it. I'll make a far more level-headed decision when I'm not thinking about how good Tyler smelled in the corridor five minutes ago.

Another text alert sounds and I'm certain I'm about to be forced into handling this now when I'm in the wrong state of mind, but turns

out this one is from my father: *You're coming to my race, right?*

I am, I reply. I really need out of town. Dash and Allie will probably come. I think I asked them. I can't remember. I'll ask again.

Perfect. Love you.

Love you, too, Dad.

My lips curve at his timing. He always seems to send me a message at those moments when I'm spinning out of control. Almost as if Mom whispers in his ear, *now. Contact her now.* Not that my father doesn't get credit for being a good dad. He has to have an ear to the sky with me on his mind at just the right time, as well.

I shoot a message to Dash about the race, and apparently, I'd already talked to him. I'm consumed by Tyler, I swear. After Dash is confirmed yet again, I line the nanny up for that weekend but vow that when Molly is older, I'll take her with me. I'll love that so much.

I also love the busy morning that follows as it helps me get out of my own head.

My assistant interview with Morgan is over lunch in the company café. After the incident in the café, I'm uneasy about staying at the office, but too busy not to as well. Luckily, as it turns out, there are no signs of Tyler. Almost as if he's now hiding from me, which isn't true. He's almost never in the café anyway, but I really hate that there's a pinch of disappointment in my chest with every push of the café door open that produces a person who is not him.

Morgan's a sweet girl, who is the only person in a big family who isn't a doctor. She hates blood.

I like her. I think she'd make a good agent, and I know her attention to detail is spot-on from working with her here and there. I'm just too

unsettled about my job right now. On the other hand, I managed some difficult challenges today and came out ahead.

I like my job.

My mother would be appalled if she knew I allowed myself to have sex with my boss, let alone run away because of it.

With her on my mind, I arrive back to my office and claim my seat, turning my attention to her photo on my credenza. She was gorgeous, a Christie Brinkley lookalike people always tell me, with a business savvy to admire. If only she were here to talk to me. I think she'd tell me I'm being pushed to go on my own and steer my own ship, as she did. Or maybe she'd tell me to take what I want, which is this job, and Tyler.

With that thought, I turn my attention to work and my email. Tyler still hasn't responded to the press release I sent him for Dash, and I have to get back to the studio. I ask myself what I would have done before all this personal stuff between us. I decide I'd go to his office. If I'm going to stay, I have to act like me. I grab the paper version on my desk and don't give myself time to think, I head to Tyler's office.

I'm lucky yet again because Debbie is not at her desk. I don't know where that woman goes all the time, but it works for me. In a rush of carefully placed steps, I end up at Tyler's door. Again, no time to back out. I knock on the door. It opens almost instantly, and I jolt to find Gavin standing there.

He gives me a once-over and smirks.

I dislike this man.

"Hi," I say. "I really need Tyler."

"And he needs you," he states, and I suddenly feel dirty again, like a

girl who's been auctioned off to the highest bidder, who happens to be my boss.

He backs up to allow my entry and I walk in to find Tyler missing from behind his desk and there are boxes everywhere. "Over here," he says.

I glance right and he's on his couch with boxes surrounding him. "What is this?"

"The Allen case," he says. "My father liked to test me and to play head games. I'm making sure there's even an issue to be worried about."

I close the space between us and sit down in the chair to his left. He smells good again, and I notice his hands. Again. And when my gaze lands on his handsome face, I do exactly what he said he wanted. I search his intense blue eyes for the truth. "You really think that's possible?" I ask.

Warmth flows from him to me, but he promises nothing. "I'm motivated, Bella. The good news—the attorney handling the will has an attachment to the Allen family. I threatened to go after them. I believe I can sue, and there will be no repercussions."

"The bad news?"

"I don't know why I read I had fifteen months on this wedding bullshit. I have twelve. And there is always the chance that if I sue, the story lands in TMZ and it's another scandal the firm can't handle."

"He needs to get married!" Gavin calls out.

My lips press together. "I think he's right," I say and the words are choked because my throat is just so ridiculously tight.

"You know how I feel about that, Bella. And you."

No, I think. I really don't. Not unless he means he wants it to be me he marries. "What's with all the boxes if the Allen thing is handled?"

"My father liked to test me. I can't help but think there is an answer in these boxes to get out of this. Hell." He scrubs his jaw. "Maybe there's even another will. That's the way he rolled."

Anger at how his father treated him burns in my belly. How can any parent treat their child in such a way? I'm reminded of the torment he must feel over his father, which was the entire reason I showed up at his apartment the night of the memorial. We, as human beings, hunger for our parents' approval and to want it and still hate him must be confusing. And to see his parents as his relationship role model? No wonder he prefers sex to intimacy.

My eyes meet his and the connection between us is palpable, and I just don't believe that can be faked, nor does it feel all about sex. But don't women always turn sex into emotions? Or is that some sexist bullshit I should throw out and stop using as an excuse? With that in mind, I allow myself to consider the idea that it really might be about those "feelings" he confessed. Maybe, just maybe, this is more than sex. Or—I stop myself before I go down another dark tunnel of negativity.

He motions to the paper in my hand. "What's up?"

"I have the press release I need to approve and get to the studio." I offer him the document.

He accepts it and not by accident, he catches my hand in his and caresses his fingers along my fingers. A tingling sensation slides up my arm and across my chest, my nipples pucker. This man and my nipples, Lord, help me. Not to mention the pinch between my thighs. I

feel like it's been years since his hands were on my body when it's been days. He glances down at the paper, and I study him studying it. He is just handsome, plain, and simple. Perfect bone structure. Perfect lips. Perfect hair, thick and styled and finger ready. Perfect body, hard all over.

His gaze lifts to mine, and I'm caught in my inspection. "Do you approve?"

I'm acutely aware of Gavin behind us somewhere. I'm also aware that he's not talking about the press release. He's talking about my inspection of him. And the truth is, I approve wholeheartedly but what I say is, "Acceptable."

He surprises me with a low rumble of laughter. "All right, then. You're a tough audience." He grabs a pen and makes a few notes before handing the paper back to me.

I reach for it and his fingers brush mine, an electric charge zipping up my arm. "See how that works," he says softly.

My God, I even feel his words low in my belly. This wicked attraction I feel for my boss simply refuses to be dismissed. I'm warm all over, and there is this ache forming low in my belly. How can I work with a man who makes me want to be naked all the time? How can I live without ever being naked with him again? How can I live with him walking around with another woman on his arm?

He arches a brow. I jerk my gaze to his changes. All I see is him naked in my mind, on top of me, riding me, his face distorted in pleasure in the most amazing way. I blink twice and force myself to read. "Good points," I say. "Thank you. I'll go handle this and come back to help. I have some time this afternoon. If you want me to, that

is?”

“Gavin will leave when you get here,” he promises.

And just like that, I’m fairly certain I just agreed to have sex with him in his office.

At least my body did.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

BELLA

When I sit back down at my desk, my body is humming from my encounter with Tyler while my phone buzzes with a text message. I grab it from where I've just set it on the desk to find Becker on the caller ID. *You've officially taught me that it doesn't matter if I'm famous, I can still be blown off. Talk about humble pie, but I suppose we all need that. Though I'd rather learn this lesson from someone other than you, sunshine.*

My lips curve. Silly man. And the truth is, from what I've seen at least, Becker's actually a really humble, sweet guy. I can't just blow him off. *I'm sorry. I'm just insanely busy. I just got a massive deal for Dash. A TV series for his book and a true crime hosting job.*

He replies with: *Holy shit. Congrats! That's badass, Bella. But you're always a badass. I still think you're blowing me off.*

I consider for a moment my reply and ask myself what I would normally do in this situation if Tyler wasn't consuming my mind and body right now. My answer comes fast. *I'll meet you at the show, I reply.*

He pushes for more: *What about meeting the puppy?*

Not this time, is my quick reply and a firm one at that. Going to a concert is a thing we agents do. Inviting the prospective client to our homes is not.

I get it, he answers. *Gotta prove my honor to meet the kiddo.*

I laugh and type: *I'll see you tonight.*

I set my phone down but swallow hard, reassuring myself all is well. This concert thing is not an issue. I'll talk sense into Tyler. I can't be

an agent and not have client dinners and shows to visit. That's a solid must in this business, no matter if I'm with Tyler or not. I have no secret to keep, only logic to force on Tyler for both our own good.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

TYLER

So much for Bella returning to help.

I glance at the clock that reads five o'clock and toss my pen down. I thought hearing the news about the legal side of the contract would at least show Bella I'm trying to fix this, but I really solved nothing. I'm still in the same boat. Still forced to fake an engagement and marriage. And she still doesn't want that to be her.

"Go home," I order Gavin, who is sitting at my conference table, reading one of the many files in the boxes.

"Here's the thing, man," he says as if we're in the middle of a conversation we're not having nor am I in the mood for, either. "We're wasting time looking for some nugget your father might not have even left. Sure, keep looking, but you have to get the clock ticking. Based on the contract, if you announce an engagement now and marry in six months, you are free in nine months. Just get it done. Keep looking, but start the clock."

"No," I say. "I'm going to work around the clock until these boxes are cleared."

"I'm sorry, man. I respect you. You're my boss, but a delay is foolish. It opens you up to a board challenge. What if your father also has a back-up punishment for crossing him you don't know about?"

I process that with a brutal slice of reality. He's right. He's too damn right. I haven't considered the bounty of my father's viciousness or desire to punish me for living when he's dead.

"Every path but a woman will lead you to your demise," he adds, "and frankly, there are worse curses than a hot woman in your bed."

And I don't give two fucks if you bang Bella all day and all night, but she needs to agree to this engagement and marriage now or you have to move on." He reaches into his bag, pulls out a sheet of paper, and sets it on my desk in front of him. "The other names in case you threw them away. You need to look at them. You need to seriously consider them. If there was something between you and Bella that was real, she'd say yes. She's not saying yes."

A tight fist of anger forms in my gut. I ignore the list. "Go home, Gavin," I say tightly, and he must sense I have no rope left to extend to him. His lips flatten and he snatches up his bag and heads to the door, but of course, he can't leave without a final word. "I'm the only person brave enough to tell you the truth, man. I'm only trying to protect you."

He opens the door and exits, his words floating about in a puff of nonsense. He's looking out for himself. I curse as I realize how much I must seem like Gavin to Bella. No matter what I say or do, I need her for a business transaction. I stare down at the damn list and think about a *business transaction* yet again. There's a knock on the door and Debbie pokes her head in.

"I brought you coffee," she says. "I know you like a boost when you work late."

I need bourbon right about now not caffeine, but contrary to what most people think, I can be nice. "Thank you," I say.

She steps into the room and walks toward my desk. My phone buzzes with a text and I glance down at the message to read: *Just do it, man, from Gavin. Do her too and get her out of your system, but read the list and pick a woman.*

There's no getting Bella out of my system. He doesn't understand that. Not too long ago, I wouldn't have either.

I set the phone down and realize Debbie is on this side of the desk. My brows dip. "What are you doing?" She leans in to set the cup down and trips. The end result is coffee all over my desk and me.

"Oh my God," she says. "Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I'll get napkins." She races for the door.

I stand up and grab the trash can, using a piece of paper to drag the liquid into the can, which miraculously gets rid of the puddles.

Debbie appears in the doorway. "I have napkins."

"Just get the desk so I can clean up."

"Of course," she says.

I stride forward and past her and head to the bathroom. Once I'm there, I'm irritated as fuck that there are no towels. With an agitated growl, I exit the bathroom and walk into the kitchen. I grab a cloth towel, which actually seems a better option, and soak up the liquid. "Let me help," Debbie says from the doorway.

And what the fuck. She charges toward me and grabs the towel from my hand and starts pressing it on my chest. Her free hand is on my upper arm. "What are you doing?" I grab her wrist.

There's a gasp from the doorway and I look up to find Bella standing there. Oh, shit. "Bella. This is not what it looks like."

She's gone. Not a word is spoken and she's gone.

"Oh God," Debbie murmurs again. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Gavin said you needed a wife and I saw my name on that list on your desk and my family and your family and—"

"Go home," I snap. "And don't come back to work until I decide

what to do with you.”

The blood runs out of her face, but I’m already walking away, chasing after Bella, and I don’t give a damn who finds out either. I’m in the corridor between my lobby and the main lobby, certain I will catch her. That is, until the elevator to my right and in front of me opens and one of the top executives in the music industry steps out into the corridor.

Duke Dorman—a tall, broad, heavy-set cowboy in a hat and boots—rotates to face me and blocks my path in the process. “Looks like you had an accident here, son.” He eyes my shirt and says, “Why don’t you get cleaned up and take me up to that fancy rooftop and get me drunk? Who knows what I might agree to.”

Duke’s eyes lift to the space behind me and I rotate to find Debbie had exited my lobby, her eyes bloodshot and Jesus, her hair is all over the place like she just got fucked or something. I motion to her. “Take Duke up to the rooftop and get him started with a drink. Duke, I’ll be right with you.” Bella exits the lobby but I focus on Duke. “I’m going to grab a shirt from my dry cleaning in my car.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agrees good-heartedly before his eyes find Debbie. “Hello, there, darlin’. Take me to the drinks in the sky.”

Duke steps out of my path right as Bella steps onto the elevator.

I follow her into the car and punch the “close” button before anyone can join us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TYLER

The elevator shuts and I turn to Bella to find her facing me already. “Go away, Tyler. Do you understand me? *Go away*. I don’t want to be on your list.”

“That’s Gavin’s list, not mine.”

“And yet, Debbie is on it and was all over you?” she challenges. “Seems like it might be yours. And that’s fine. I said no. You have a right—”

“Holy shit,” I growl, “leaving that list on my desk was a fuck-up and a half. I get that. Gavin shoved it at me and I tuned it out. And I would have shown it to you anyway, Bella, just not like that. I haven’t lied to you. You have to see that.”

“You and Debbie—”

“Gavin was behind that, Bella. He told her to come on to me, which may well have cost her her job. I told her not to come back to work until I decide what to do with her.”

“Marry her, Tyler,” she says, her voice choked up. Her throat bobs and she adds, “Because I am not your fake fiancée and that *will not* change.”

“Nothing about us is fake, Bella.”

“The only thing real about us, Tyler, is the sex.”

The damn elevator is too fast, and we’re already on the lower level. “I have a lot to say about that statement that I can’t say properly in the next thirty seconds. I have to deal with Duke. I’ll come over afterward.”

“I won’t be home.”

“Are you really serious right now Bella? No to Becker.”

“You don’t tell me no, Tyler. It’s business, and you should be happy I still want to do this job. I’m going to sign Becker, not fuck him. Unlike you, fucking is not all I have on my mind. Do not show up at the show and embarrass us both or I swear to you, Tyler, you’ll have my resignation in the morning.” The doors open and there are about ten people waiting to get on.

If I could shout at everyone and not have the police called on me, I would right now. And that’s not me. That’s not even close to the cool, calm, in-control person I was raised to become. Bella exits the car and I intend to follow, but three fuckers get on instead of waiting for me to get off. The minute I can shove my way out, I’m running after Bella, but it’s too late. She’s already on the garage elevator. I rush down the stairs but when I exit in a huff of deep breaths, her damn car is pulling away. She must have run to her car. I’m running to her and she’s running away from me. And to Becker.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m sitting across from Duke with a clean shirt on, a whiskey in my hand, and Bella on my mind, when he says, “I heard Becker was here the other day. You signing him?”

I down my drink. “I’m not going to answer that question right now for fear I’ll say something we’ll both regret.” I set my glass down a little too firmly.

“I was afraid you’d say that, but I respect the privacy issues. Just know his current management is not playing ball. We want to play ball.”

The only thing I’m going to play with Becker is a fist to his face, but

for now, I refill my glass. I might not know where they're going to dinner, but I know where to find them later tonight. I'll be going to that show.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BELLA

My heart beats so hard and fast I think it might explode.

I arrive home, kill the engine, and just sit in my car with my father's famous quote playing in my head: *Be fearless in the pursuit of what sets your heart on fire*. I don't think he meant my boss, but I don't give him enough credit for inspiring me or supporting me. The man is a wildly successful NASCAR driver and he didn't get there the easy way, either. He struggled to get sponsors. He struggled to get the right car. His parents thought he needed a real job.

My parents are warriors.

I'm a warrior, too. Tyler will not break me.

I huff out a breath and force myself to exit the vehicle, aware that the nanny and my puppy await me. They are both wonderful, but only one of them will lick my tears. The other will ask questions I don't want to answer. But I've survived brutal executives without tears, and I can survive a walk through my apartment without falling apart.

Molly greets me at the door, and I bend down to love on my little ball of joy. The nanny is as sweet and eager to help as possible. "I thought you had a show to attend tonight?"

"I do. I have a bit of time though and I want to rest and freshen up." I kiss Molly. "And see this darlin'."

"Of course," she says. "I know it's hard to be away from her. She's really learning her potty training, too. "

I manage a smile. "Oh, good! I'm so glad. She seems smart."

"She is," she assures me. "You for sure got yourself a smarty pants. She knows where we keep the treats already. I'll hang with Molly while

you're freshening up unless you want her?"

"I do, but if you can hold onto her a few, I'll give her lots of love before I leave."

I manage a bit more small talk and then lock myself inside the bedroom. There's a swell of emotion in the center of my chest and I push off the door and drop onto the mattress and punch in an autodial for my dad. The call goes to voicemail. He's probably on a date. He's always out on a date, chasing women. Okay, not chasing them. More like they chase him, like they do Tyler. For all I know, Tyler was keeping his options open with Debbie.

No, I tell myself.

No, he wasn't doing that.

I cannot deal with the idea of him doing that.

And yet, he's imprisoned by that will. Have I really left him a choice?

The burn in my eyes pisses me off. I am not crying over Tyler and his list of women. If he thinks being number one on a list of ten makes me feel better, it does not. I can also be objective enough to know that I'm not objective at all right now. I hurry into the bathroom and change into tights to keep me warm, a blue jean skirt, and a cute pink top. I finish off with boots. This is the cowgirl Nashville way.

When I stare in the mirror, I don't see myself. I'm back in time when I'd gone to Tyler's office to help him. I'd had this silly moment where I thought I'd sit in his chair to wait on him. It would be me crossing the line between boss and employee and it would set a tone. I wanted to be fucked, it would tell him. It was crazy, yes, but at that moment, I just wanted to touch him again. I didn't care about the cost.

Turns out, the cost was me seeing the list. Anger had twisted me in knots and I'd sought a confrontation with Tyler. I'd found him in the kitchen, with Debbie all close and intimate with him. I can't even think about it without it feeling like my insides are on fire.

I force myself to shut down my thoughts. Becker's expecting me.

And I swear, I want to ink this deal and make it my first on my own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

BELLA

I Uber it to the bar.

Not because it's not drivable because downtown Nashville is not a far drive from my house, but it's also chaos on the weekends, with loud music and party buses. Parking is a nightmare and roads are closed off near Aldean's where bars line Broadway like cereal boxes on a grocery shelf. People crowd those few blocks shoulder to shoulder like sardines in a can all smushed together.

The driver drops me on a side street near the bar's staff entrance, which I can access with one of the VIP passes Hawk Legal holds for performances.

Once I'm on the sidewalk, I begin the short walk toward Aldean's and check my phone. I tell myself I'm hoping my father will respond, which isn't wrong, but there's a stab in my gut when there's still nothing from Tyler. His silence pushes me to believe he's made a decision to move on with Debbie, which means he doesn't deserve more of my fretting. If only it was that easy to shut down my feelings for him.

I've just slid my phone back inside my purse when I look up to find a cowboy striding in my direction, his hat low across his face. I frown and try to sidestep his path, but he's in front of me before I can maneuver far enough to avoid him. He steps in front of me and thumps his hat back. "*Becker?*" I say incredulously. "What are you doing on the streets of Nashville, especially here? Are you crazy? Do you want to get mobbed?"

"Nobody thinks I'd actually walk around in downtown Nashville, so

they aren't looking for me, plus the entrance is back here anyway. Come on." He grabs my hand and starts walking.

Guilt over Tyler zig-zags through me at my hand in Becker's hand, but I'm like luggage being pulled by another human being right now. Becker holds onto me and doesn't even let me go once we're inside the bar's private staff area. He leads me down a hallway and we end up in a dressing room with clothing racks on one wall, a vanity area in the center, a couch, and a small table with two chairs. He shuts the door and there's a knock that follows, almost as if he shut the door in someone's face without realizing it. He opens the door and talks to someone before he shuts the door again, and now he's holding two bags in his hands.

"Burgers," he says, and my nose approves of the savory smell. "You hungry?" he asks. "Or did you blow me off and eat without me?" His eyes are pure mischief as if he knows there's more going on than meets the eye.

I'd like to say no—I mean, I did decline dinner to behave professionally—but there's a hollow feeling in my belly that refuses to be ignored. "I actually haven't eaten," I admit.

"Good." He motions to the table and moves in that direction, setting the bags on top. "Bacon cheeseburgers," he informs me as he snatches two waters from a cooler.

"I love a good bacon cheeseburger," I say, claiming the seat on this side of the door.

He joins me but he doesn't reach for the bag. The table is small, which means we're a little too close for comfort, and at present, he's staring at me with his famously bright green eyes that girls swoon

over. They're intelligent eyes, warm with interest. A ridiculous number of women would melt under his attention and rip their clothes off, for that matter. Of course, I'm the crazy one they'd say, because all I can think about is Tyler.

I should tell Becker I'm taken, *but I'm not taken*, I think. Why am I declaring myself off the market when I'm one of ten on a list to Tyler?

"I'm shocked you're here early after you turned down dinner," Becker finally observes.

"I got away from work earlier than expected."

"I see." His lips curve and he reaches for one of the bags, offering me a burger.

I accept and our fingers brush, but there's no rush of heat. Why isn't there a rush of heat? Becker's a good-looking, talented, sweet man, but he's not Tyler. "How was your business in Memphis?" I ask, focusing on agent-appropriate questions.

"Good. A real estate deal I'm considering. I'm trying to be smart and take the money I'm making and turn it into more."

"I know a good investment guy," I say. "Me and my brother use him. I find a lot of entertainment people take up with the wrong investors and get screwed. Our guy won't take advantage of you."

"I guess you make a lot of money repping guys like me. And doing a fine job of it from what I hear."

"Well, I'm glad that's what you hear about me. And, yes, I do but, of course, I inherited it from my mother. I'm trying to make her proud and handle it smartly."

His brows dip. "Wait. I feel like I'm missing something. I know your dad's a badass NASCAR driver, but what's the scoop with your mom?"

I set my burger down without taking a bite. “Why did I think you knew who my mother was? She was Alice of the Alice Shopping Network. She founded it.”

“Holy shit. Really?”

“Yeah. She was brilliant.” Pride radiates through my voice, even to my own ears. “She taught me a lot about business that I try to apply to my agenting. Which is why I say, at least talk to my investment guy. I get no perks other than doing right by my clients and my future clients.”

He laughs. “Positive thinking. Gotta love it. Shoot me his name and I will.”

“What about your parents?” I ask, because, yes, I want to rep him, but I’ve spent a week cleaning up another client’s scandal. I’d like to know if Becker has his head on straight. “I bet they’re proud.”

“Oh yeah,” he confirms. “My dad’s in real estate, which is why I’m headed in that direction. He’s done well for himself. My mom’s a voice actress. She voices *Mariah*, the kids’ cartoon. I have a sister following in her footsteps.”

Mariah being the hottest cartoon on TV right now. In other words, he comes from stability and professionalism, at least on the surface. Tyler is an example of what can seem right and be wrong behind closed doors.

“Then we both have badass families,” I observe.

“Yeah,” he says, but his eyes are warm again. “You’re beautiful, Bella. You know I really want to stand up and come over there and kiss you.”

I can almost feel my cheeks flush. “I’m flattered, and I should be

falling at your feet but—”

“You aren’t—” He sits back. “Well, hell.”

“Sorry. I just—I want to rep you and I can’t be a romantic interest and do that properly. I think I could do great things for you, but if not, if you don’t have an interest in me repping you, I hope you can consider me a friend. A good one who you can trust.”

There’s a knock on the door and someone pokes their head in. “They want you for a sound check.”

Becker lifts a hand. “I’ll be right there.”

The door shuts and he says, “It’s Tyler, right? I felt it between you two.”

My heart begins to race. “You know Tyler’s my boss...”

He laughs. “Right. It’s Tyler. And no one cares who you sleep with if you make them the kind of money you make your clients.”

“This is where I point out that you aren’t my client, and with you offering so much praise, that’s kinda crazy, right?”

He laughs. “You never know how the tide will turn. There might actually be an opportunity there. My situation isn’t as rosy as I painted it.” He taps the table. “I got you a front-row seat. Enjoy the show and if you want, I’ll give you a ride home.”

“I have to go home early. New puppy, remember?”

“Right.” He starts to get up and sits back down. “If I sign with you, I won’t keep hitting on you. There are lines. I know where to step.” He motions for me to get up. “Come on, I gotta impress you. Make sure you want to sign me.”

Laughing, I stand and he opens the door for me. I exit the room with him at my back and find Tyler standing in front of me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BELLA

My heart slams against my breastbone at the sight of Tyler standing before me and oozing confrontation with as much confidence as he wears his pinstriped suit. He hasn't been home, which could lead me to all kinds of dark places I can't go right now when he's clearly going to do something we'll both regret. What is he thinking? I'm going to kill him if he blows this deal for me or ends up in the news and in jail.

Which I can't let happen.

I don't even think before I act.

I step into Tyler and press my hands to his chest. It's not discreet. It's not something I would do to "my boss," but it's a desperate move to halt whatever it is he intends to do right about now. "What are you doing?" I demand. "Don't do something stupid."

His jaw tics and his gaze lifts over my shoulder to Becker. "No, Tyler," I warn again.

"See you out there, Bella," Becker says, and I can hear his footsteps fading, thank God.

"Tyler?" I press, still not sure the situation is defused, considering he's watching Becker depart.

Finally, his gaze lowers to mine, seconds passing—long, long seconds, it seems—before he catches my hand and starts walking. Once again, I'm luggage being pulled down the hallway, but as angry as I am with him right now, my hand still tingles with his touch. My body still hums with his presence. The power he has over me is terrifying. How can I sit with Becker, a major country star, a *gorgeous*, major country star, who was hitting on me and I don't feel these

things, but I do with Tyler? And Becker wasn't with Debbie today.

He exits through the door I'd entered with Becker, and the space beyond is an unused parking lot. The minute Tyler halts and turns to look at me, I confront him. My finger goes up.

"Are you crazy? He's a potential client."

"He wants to fuck you, Bella. He will never be a client of Hawk Legal."

"You're acting like I'm yours. I am *not* yours, Tyler. I'm not even close to yours. And I'm not a damn fool. I established a business-only relationship with him tonight, and guess what? He *does* have trouble with his agent. I'm going to sign him."

"I don't want him signed, Bella. I told you—"

"Stop. Just stop. Why is this even an issue? I work for you, and we had sex. Get over it. I mean clearly, you have with your damn lists and Debbie. So, I repeat, why is this an issue at all?"

"I was not with Debbie."

"And you know what?" I challenge because I'm not done spewing my anger at him. "I might have plenty of money, Tyler, but I need an identity beyond that money. I love what I do. I like the money I earn by being good at what I do. Don't blow this for me or you, because you want to own me for a few months."

Before I know his intent, he scoops me close, his powerful legs pressed to mine, one hand between my shoulder blades, fingers splayed wide. The other hand cups my face. "I don't want Debbie, Bella. She walks into my office and I feel nothing. You walk into my office and I feel *everything*. It's always been that way. I swear to you, nothing happened." His mouth closes down over mine, a hot slide of

his tongue against my tongue. I tell myself to resist, that this has gotten too complicated, and I'm going to achieve anything by crying over this man.

But he's impossible for me to resist.

I sink into the kiss, melt into the warm cocoon of his arms, and for just a moment, there's no fight, there's no list, there's no contract. There is no Debbie. He tastes of whiskey and man, and everything forbidden I cannot ever truly call my own. So much so, that when our lips part, I want to pull his mouth back to mine. I want one more moment of not caring about anything but how he feels.

But Tyler's fingers twine in my hair and he forces my gaze to his. "I don't want Debbie," he repeats. "I want you, Bella. Just *you*. And I don't want you to be with anyone else either. I want to take you somewhere." He laces the fingers of one of his hands with mine. "I want to show you something." He tugs my hand and shifts to move.

I tug him back. "Tyler—"

"Not to bed, Bella. Not yet. That comes later." He kisses my hand and it's this tender, sweet gesture I didn't know he had in him. And that little touch of his lips travels all through my body, and I am putty for this man who is my boss.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

TYLER

It took every ounce of willpower not to act a fool in the middle of one of Nashville's biggest industry hot spots. But seeing Bella walk out of Becker's dressing room, her eyes lit up with a smile, I was one wrong word away from trouble. The kind that ends in a *Like Father, Like Son* sort of headline.

"We probably shouldn't be holding hands," Bella says. "You know people might see us."

I halt and look at her. "I'm not doing this to try and force you into this contract. I just want to hold onto you. Is that a bad thing?"

Confusion flickers in her eyes. "Why?"

"Because it feels good. Because I don't want you to get away. Because I'm trying to show you that while yes, I want to fuck you every minute I'm with you, it's not all that's between us."

"I don't know what to say to that," she whispers. "For so many reasons. Where are we going?"

"A hole-in-the-wall spot I go to sometimes. I think you'll like it, but you have to hold my hand to get there."

This earns me a hint of a smile that lights me up with encouragement. "Yes?" I ask.

"Yes," she says.

That's all I need to set us in motion, walking hand in hand. No wonder she's confused. She's known me for five years and I've never been the hand-holding kind of guy. But something shifted inside me with Bella, the same way Dash changed after he met Allie.

"So this place you go to," Bella says, "you go alone?"

“I do, actually. The food is good and so is the music.” I point across the street to Mel’s Southern Cooking. “It’s there. You ever been?”

“Never,” she says and she casts me a pretty blue stare. “Show me.”

My lips curve and I pull her in a little closer, and guide her across the street. I can smell her sweet floral perfume and with it, memories of us in that hotel room. If I had my way, I’d take her home and repeat all of it, but that isn’t the right move right now. This time it’s talk first, the rest later.

At the door, live music beats tease us with a show. There’s no line and once we’re inside, the hostess shows us to a combo booth-and-chair table facing the stage. Bella slides into the booth and I don’t hesitate, I join her and my hand settles on her leg. Her eyes jerk to mine and the air is thick between us, crackling with sexual attraction.

The waitress sets menus down and then asks, “Drinks?”

I glance at Bella, arching a brow. “This is probably a mistake, considering I don’t hold my liquor well, but I’ll take the pineapple margarita I saw on the board on the way in.”

“It’s good,” the waitress promises.

I order a top-shelf whiskey, and Bella’s hand comes down on my hand on her leg. “What are we doing, Tyler?”

“Trying to figure that out.”

A new singer takes the stage and his voice fills the air. It’s a cover for a Patrick Droney song, “Brooklyn”. It’s a haunting, sexy song, but when I would lean in to kiss Bella, she says, “He’s good.”

I laugh. “Yes, and this is why I brought you here. This place is ripe with hidden talent I knew you’d be hungry to recruit.”

Her lips curve. “Really?”

“Really,” I confirm. “Are you going to recruit him or kiss me?”

“Both,” she says, her mood lighter now. “But first him before he gets away. You don’t want me to sign Becker, which we’re going to fight over. But I need a back-up plan.” She digs in her purse. “Give me a minute.” She gets up and walks to the stage, hanging at the side, and she starts swaying to the music, smiling up at the singer.

Now I’m smiling. She’s so fucking hot and brilliant and everything I didn’t know I needed, but I do. The lyric “we were falling with our feet on the ground”—that’s how I feel. Like I’m falling, but when I’m with her, my feet are on the ground. The song ends, and Bella motions to the singer. He walks to the edge of the stage and kneels in front of Bella. When she hands him her card, the guy grins from ear to ear.

The waitress sets our drinks on the table and I wave her off on the food order, at least for now. Bella returns with that sweet sway of her hips, heating my blood. When she sits down, she says, “I think he’s going to be a star.” She sips her drink. “Becker hit on me. I turned him down. And he guessed it was about you. He said we were pretty obvious, which I blame on you, since you wanted to beat his ass.”

“Guilty as charged,” I say. “But I don’t apologize.”

“Of course, you don’t,” she says and then gasps, “Oh my God. I just told the guy on stage our names, and our company name, and it’s ridiculously obvious we’re not platonic. That was not smart.”

“I have about ten things I want to say about that statement, but I think it’s a little early in the night for me to go there.”

Her brows furrow. “What does that mean?”

“Later.” I change the subject. “Duke wants to work with Becker. He says his current agency isn’t playing ball.”

“I’m fairly confident he’ll sign in the morning. I *want* to sign him.”

“Fine. Sign him. Just don’t fuck him.”

Her expression darkens and she starts to get up. I catch her hand.
“Don’t go.”

“I work with people like Becker all the time. Not once have I so much as kissed one of my clients, Tyler. I don’t deserve comments like that.”

“I’m not used to being jealous, Bella. It’s not a gentle emotion.”

“Is it jealousy or fear of losing your perfect fake fiancée?”

“Both, but not for the reasons you seem to want to believe. I re-read the will and all the fine print. I only have twelve months to get married, but the whole public engagement is six months. I have six months. I can wait—”

“No,” she says. “You can’t wait, Tyler. What if the board catches on and they challenge you? What if something, *anything* goes wrong? The more time this lingers on, the more chance, it backfires on you.”

I stroke her hair from her face. “Then do this with me, Bella. Just do it *with me*.”

“I don’t think I’m made for this, Tyler. I...you need to know I’m too emotionally involved.” Blood rushes to her cheeks and her lashes lower. She breathes out before she looks at me again. “You need someone who’s not going to get attached and the truth is, I already am.” She pushes away from me. “I need to go to the ladies’ room.” She stands up and starts walking away.

I think she thinks she just scared me off.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I down my drink, stand up, and follow her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

BELLA

My knees are weak, and I feel like I might be sick.

I rush around the corner and halt in front of the bathroom to lean on the wall, trying to calm my racing heart. Why did I just admit that to Tyler, other than the fact that it was the truth? I have feelings for him. I'm in love with him. I'm spinning out of control. I should have just said no to everything to spare us both the awkwardness. Now maybe he'll feel we can't even work together.

"Bella."

I blink and realize Tyler is standing in front of me. "I just need a minute. I'll be right back. I don't think I ate enough and—"

He steps into me, his powerful legs framing my legs, his hips to my hips, one of his hands possessively at my waist, the other on my face. "Why are you here instead of out there with me?" he asks, his voice a low, rough demand, that is something sexy and intimidating right about now.

"I told you—"

"Tell me the truth."

I draw in the scent of his cologne that's a bit like a drug to me. He is like a drug to me. "I've come to the conclusion that I can't do a fake relationship just for sex and show. That's just not how I'm made."

"Damn it, woman," he murmurs and his lips brush mine, a delicate tease of his tongue, and I'm already melting right here where I stand. No matter how I try to protect myself from the heartache I know he might bring me, there is not denying the seductive pull between us.

"Tell me that feels fake," he whispers, his breath warm on my cheek.

“I don’t doubt you want to get naked with me again,” I reply breathlessly. “I doubt that I can keep doing it and still be okay.”

He eases back and looks at me. “Yes, I want to fuck you, always, anywhere I can, as often as I can. But I *keep* wanting to fuck you, Bella. That’s not what I do. I don’t come back for more. I fuck and I move on.”

I bristle. “That’s not making me feel better. I know you think it is, but it’s not. I can’t, Tyler. I don’t want a man who fucks everything that moves.”

He catches my chin. “Why do I think that’s not about me?”

“It is about you.”

“It’s that fuckface guy you dated, right? I hated that bastard. Did he fuck around on you?”

“I don’t want to talk about this in a hallway in some bar, Tyler, but yes. I was apparently arm candy and a payday.”

“Well, like I said, he’s a fuckface and I will beat his ass if I see him now that I know. But I also understand a lot of what is going on now. You don’t want to be arm candy and a payday even if it’s not from your own bank account.”

Realization hits me. God, yes. That’s exactly what is going on. That’s exactly why the Debbie thing hit so hard. Exactly why the whole fake fiancée thing feels so wrong. “I don’t think that’s what you’re doing to me,” I say quickly. “But you’re right. The past is hard to make the past.”

His jaw flexes. “Did you love him?”

“It’s hard to be objective about that after you hate someone. But, no, with some time and space, I don’t believe I did. He works for NASCAR.

He was older. I think it was all some weird need to connect with my father, which sounds creepy, but it's not. Travis was like a connection between me and him, though ironically my father did not like him."

"I wish you would have told me sooner."

"How could I tell you what I didn't even understand until right now? I mean, I've been hard on you. I know you can't control a lot of this stuff happening. I know that's hard on you, too. I mean, the Debbie thing hurt. I thought—"

"I'm not Travis. There has never been a woman I committed to and cheated on. I'm damn sure not going to start with you. Look, Bella, I'm not used to talking about my feelings or even having them at all. But you *know* what's going on between us is more than sex, but in case you really don't, I'm going to stop screwing this up tonight and use your own words. I'm *emotionally involved*, and I'm not even running from it. Whatever magic Allie worked on Dash, you're doing it to me. If I'm honest, you've been doing it for five years."

My lips part in shock that maybe shouldn't be shock, but I've really worked myself up over all of this. "What? I mean, *really*?"

"Yes, *really*. I can't believe you don't know already. Why do you think I just wanted to beat Becker's ass? And don't say what I think you're going to say. It's not about the contract. It's about us. Usually, I'd be thanking a guy like Becker for getting rid of the woman clinging to me. I wish you'd get at least a little clingier. Or just give me some semblance of a chance. I feel like I've been saying all of this from the beginning, but we've already established, I'm bad at this. Just to be sure I get it right now, I'm crazy about you, Bella. I can't stop thinking about you. I don't to be without you."

Emotions well in my chest. I love this man, I do, but there are so many things between us. My hand goes to his chest, this need to touch him uncontrollable. “Travis hurt me. You could destroy me. That’s how emotionally involved I am. And the contract just feels dirty. And fake.”

He covers my hand on his chest, and I can feel the heavy thrumming of his heart. “I really was trying to protect you. I just went about it the wrong way.”

“Yes,” I confirm adamantly. “Yes, you did. It’s almost like you don’t know me.”

“But I *do* know you. I knew you’d be worried about your job. I knew I had to do something. But the contract wasn’t the answer. No more contract. I don’t care about the damn contract. I care about *you*.”

A woman rounds the corner, and Tyler catches my hand. “Let’s go back to the table.”

I nod and as he guides me that direction, I’m aware of the singer on stage I talked to earlier watching us, but I can’t seem to care. Right now, I’m in a Tyler bubble, and it feels like a dark night, with millions of stars, and a moon that glows almost like sunshine. I don’t want to leave my bubble. Not just yet. Be damned the consequences tomorrow.

CHAPTER FORTY

BELLA

We settle back in our seats, our bodies angled toward one another's, our legs touching and he says, "Tell me what happened with Becker."

"Are you serious? I thought we were past Debbie and Becker?"

"I'm not stirring up trouble. I really want to hear the details—the professional details."

"You want more. I get that. He hit on me, but he didn't touch me. He promised to be professional and respect the line in the sand. I believe him. I think I can sign him before he leaves town. Of course, we left his show, so maybe not."

He studies me a moment, his jaw ticking before his shoulders soften. "I know this matters to you. Let's go back."

"No, that is not a good idea."

"He's talented. He's a good addition to our list. I'll kill him if he ever touches you, but if you want to sign him, I'll support you. Let's catch the end of his set."

My heart warms with his offer, and I lean in close and catch his hand in mine. "No. No, I appreciate your trying to do this, Tyler, I do. But I really want to stay right here with you."

His lips curve, and he really does have a beautiful mouth. And a very talented mouth, at that. "You know you took my hand in public?"

"Yes, well, I don't seem to care who's watching right now."

Tyler glances at the stage and then back at me. "Your recruit has all kinds of eyes on us. It will get around, Bella."

"I might care in the morning," I admit, "but not now. Tell me something I don't know about you, so at least I know everything about

the man who breaks my heart.”

“I’m not going to break your heart, Bella,” he promises, stroking my cheek, and his touch is tender and sexy, and pretty much everything to me right now. “But you might break mine,” he adds.

“Only if you hang out with Debbie and let her touch you, and that’s really a joke.”

“I know, but damn Gavin for even making that joke possible. Now I have a problem in Debbie I have to deal with, and it’s not an easy one.”

“Meaning what?”

“I’d fire her if I felt I could, but she could claim I came onto her, and just the idea that I might have, will blow up into chaos. Especially after my father killed Allison. Or she could run her mouth about me needing a wife. Thankfully, she’s short-term anyway. Her family is the Genesis Cable Network. She’s only working to satisfy some challenge by her father to inherit.”

“Really? That sounds like your father,”

“Yeah, it really does,” he agrees, “but Debbie is not like us, Bella. I asked her about her family after Gavin told me. And, no, I wasn’t interviewing her for a fiancée. It just seemed odd that she’d be working as a secretary.”

“And?”

“She tried to come off as a victim, but she’s not a good actress. She’s all about her inheritance and money, not about achievements that prove something to herself and the world. And I’ve seen time and time again that people who only want money are dangerous.”

Like my ex, I think. Travis wanted my money, and a status connection to my father and apparently, other women. I shake away

the thought, but not the concern it and Tyler's discoveries about Debbie have now stirred. "If that's the case," I say, "what exactly did Gavin tell her and how can that be used against you, Tyler? Because if the partners find out—"

"I know," he says grimly. "Believe me, I know. He's not answering my calls, either."

I shift out of our romantic seating arrangement to study him more closely. "Okay, I don't like how that sounds or feels. Not one little bit. What is going on here?"

"I'm sure Debbie told him what, and he's trying to figure out how to save himself."

"What if he buries you, Tyler? What if he plots against you with the partners? I'm worried. And are you sure keeping Debbie near you is good?"

"No," I say, "but as I said, this is a tricky situation."

He surprises me then and pulls me close, his arm around my shoulder, and me tucked in close to his body. "No one worries about me or with me but you, Bella."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yeah, baby, it is. When I said we'd be good for the company together, I meant we're just plain good together." He brushes his lips over mine, and I swear I melt like milk chocolate on a scorching-hot sidewalk.

"Let's get out of here," he says, and all I can think about is how much I want to be alone with him.

"Yes," I say. "Please."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BELLA

We exit the restaurant with Tyler's arm around my shoulders. Turns out he's parked nearby and we walk to his Porsche, which is a sleek, sexy car that fits him. I'm starting to think I might, too. He opens the door for me, but when I would climb inside, he kisses me, his hand caressing up and down my back, and over my backside. "You're beautiful, Bella. I've almost said that to you so many times over the years."

"You should have said it sooner," I whisper.

"Yes, I should have. And if you don't get in the car right now, I'm going to fuck you right here against my Porsche."

Oh, yes, I think, but voices lift in the near distance, and I decide, *oh, no*.

I'm breathing hard when I climb into the car, my pulse pitter-pattering to a rock tune, when Tyler and I have kind of become one of those slow country songs. He settles in the car beside me and when I struggle with the seatbelt, he reaches over and helps me with it. Our hands collide and it's just insane how my nipples pucker and my body tingles from that small connection.

He starts the car, and I'm obsessed with his hands all over again. I'm in so much trouble with Tyler. I still think I'll end up hurt, but I don't know that I have any power to change that now. I think I'm all-in now. There's no turning back.

The ride is short and when we exit the car and arrive at my door, we're a ball of combustible heat. So much so, that it's at the last minute when I have a realization. I turn to him, hand on his chest. "I have a

puppy and a nanny. I can get rid of her quickly.”

His hands frame my waist and he says, “I’m not going to come in.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“I want to stay. You have no idea how much I want to stay, but you were right. I made us a business transaction and I want to start over. Considering you keep saying I’m making you a whore and that this is all sex, I figure the best way to do that is to show you it’s not. To show you I still want you and us when we remove that from the equation.”

“That’s not necessary,” I say quickly. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t need that. And I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’ll call you before bed. And next time I can meet the puppy. I’ve actually never had a dog.”

“Never?”

“Never. My mom thinks they’re dirty. She always said no. Then I was off at college, and so busy after graduation, I just never got one.” His lips curve. “A pet nanny is a lot weirder when it’s a guy hiring that person.”

I laugh. “Maybe yes. Maybe not.” I grab the lapel of his jacket. “Don’t go.” I feel those words to my core. “We talked tonight. That’s what I needed. That’s what we needed.”

He presses his forehead to mine. “I’m so damn into you, Bella.” He kisses me hard and fast and then walks away. I can’t even believe this is happening. I want to run after him. I’m embarrassed by how much I want to run after him. And I actually kind of want to cry again, for no reason. I’m falling apart. The good news is the puppy is a sweet wonderful girl who has me laughing in minutes, but I can still smell Tyler’s scent on my skin and it’s driving me crazy.

About fifteen minutes later, Livi leaves and the puppy falls asleep on me.

I sit on my bed and try to process what just happened.

My cellphone rings and I snatch it up, a little too eager to talk to Tyler, only to find my father's number. "Hey, Dad," I greet. "I guess you saw me on caller ID earlier?"

"I did. I was on the track. This is going to be my year, I can feel it."

"It's always your year," I tease, which really isn't even a joke. It really is always his year. He knows how to drive and win. "I miss you," I say, and my voice cracks.

"Whoa. What was that? Talk to me," he orders.

I pant out a breath and drop back on the mattress. "Remember when you said one day there would be a man?"

"Aw, shit. Who is he?"

I swallow hard and force the admission. "I did this really stupid thing. I got involved with my boss. It was kind of a thing that was always between us, but we didn't act on it. I say a 'thing' because I really don't know what this is."

"But you acted on it," he states and it's not a question.

"It just...it happened. I can't go back."

"That's a complication to manage, sweetheart, but it's not impossible to navigate."

I frown. "You're supposed to tell me it's wrong."

"I'm supposed to tell you my honest opinion, which I can't fully offer because you haven't told me everything. Keep going."

I spew out everything—the contract, the promise he's protecting me, the list, the payouts. How deeply emotional I am over Tyler. When

I'm done, he whistles. "That's some deep shit you're wading in."

"Tell me about it," I murmur.

"The ways of the heart are complicated, and being emotionally involved isn't a bad thing. You seem to have a problem getting to that point."

"I do not."

"Yes, you do. Name one man that got you right here, where you are emotionally with Tyler, before Tyler."

"It wasn't the right guy."

"Then that makes Tyler the right guy?"

"He's my boss with a contract that would ruin me. That we talked about dropping, but even so, I'm back to him being my boss. I'd look like I slept my way to the top."

"I have a few things to say about that, but I need more details. Aren't Tyler and Dash friends?" he asks. "What does Dash say?"

"What makes you think I've even told Dash?"

"You tell him everything. What did Dash say?"

"He thinks Tyler is different with me, that maybe he really cares."

"What do *you* think?" he asks.

"That he's a womanizer and I was doomed to cry over him."

"A man who plays the field just hasn't found the right woman," he counters.

"Oh, please. Not always, Dad. Some men are just players. I saw the list his attorney put together of possible fiancées for hire. I was on the list. I don't like how that feels."

"Hmm, yes. The list."

"And of course, he says that his attorney created the list and pushed

the list.” I press my hand to my face. “Mom would be ashamed of me right now.”

“Yes, about that. If your mom and I would have met at work, we would have fucked like rabbits and still ended up married. It was just meant to be.”

My brow crinkles. “Whoa. Too much information, Dad.”

“No, it’s not. If the sex isn’t good up front then it won’t be good in thirty years. Anyone who says differently is full of shit. Is the sex good?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Okay, check. It’s good. What about the communication?”

“Right up until the point he tried to bury me in a contract, it was fine, though that’s a whole thing. I think we’ve had some miscommunication.”

“At least you see that. That’s good.”

“Dad, this is not the conversation I expected to have with you. I told you, people will say I slept my way to the top.”

“Who are the people saying this?”

“Everyone,” I insist, but Becker’s promise it doesn’t matter plays in my mind. “Some people,” I amend.

“I find that hard to believe. I’ve heard all about a whole lot of deals you’ve closed. Here’s the thing, Bella. If he has declared loyalty to you and he fucks around, then fuck him. And I’ll be happy to come and beat his ass.”

“There was this situation with his secretary. But he says she came on to him and nothing happened.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I actually think I do. I guess I just had to say it out loud and see how it felt.”

“Good. Is the secretary pretty?”

I huff out a thick breath. “Gorgeous.”

“That says more than you think about what’s going on here.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“If she came on to him and he didn’t act on it, then it’s a compliment. You tell me he’s a player, and yet, he said no. It means he’s got tunnel vision and it’s all about you, just like it was for me with Mom. Hell, it still is. I see her everywhere. No one compares.”

I pause a moment, trying to digest what he’s saying. “Maybe. I don’t know. I have to think on this, Dad, but thank you. You helped. I’m looking forward to seeing you next weekend.”

“You bringing Tyler?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing right now.”

“Fair answer. Just remember, life is short. And, yes, love is scary. The entire act of loving requires a willingness to be vulnerable. But it’s worth it.”

“You don’t sound like the womanizer you are.”

“I sound like a man who had the best years of my life with the love of my life. What I am now is simply what’s left over. I’m here for you. Let me know what is happening. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

We disconnect and his “simply what’s left over” comment guts me.

I’m terrified that’s what I’ll become after Tyler.

My cellphone buzzes with a text message and I glance down to find a message from my dad, *Bella, you’re letting fear win. When have you*

ever let fear win? I'm not promising you won't get hurt, but you won't wonder what might have been, either. Night, honey.

I stand up and start to pace. He's right. I even told Tyler I'm afraid. I really need to see him. I really want him to be here right now. I made him feel he had to leave.

I dial his number. He answers on the first ring. "Hey, baby."

Baby.

The endearment does funny things to my belly that I want to feel again and again. "Where are you? Can you come here?"

"I'm already here. I'm at your door, telling myself to go home."

I toss my phone on the bed and run for the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

TYLER

I stand at Bella's door no longer wearing my jacket, my tie loose. I'd made it halfway home and turned around. I told myself I was being honorable and proving to Bella she means more than sex to me, but staying away from her is impossible. There are too many things I haven't said to her, too few times that I have touched her.

She throws the door open, and I never get tired of that first moment I lay eyes on her, and the charge in my body she creates just by being in the same space with me. My eyes travel over her. Her boots are gone. Her long, athletic legs are bare beneath her skirt. And her blouse is now a tank top with no bra. She is so damn beautiful and smart. I never had a chance with Bella. This is always where we were going to end up. Me so damn hard I can barely walk and forever at her mercy because it's so much more than a physical reaction with Bella.

I don't pretend not to be here to stay. I step into the foyer and to my relief, she steps into me, her hands already all over me. I kick the door shut and cup her head, "I tried to stay away. I've spent five years trying to stay away from you, Bella."

"Stop trying," she murmurs. "I don't want you to stay away." She pushes to her toes and presses her mouth to mine. The instant her tongue touches my tongue, I'm already over the edge. Hungry for her in a deep, primal way that is addictive as hell. If I could live in this feeling she gives me for the rest of my life, it would be a happy life. My tongue licks into her mouth, and the taste of her spreads through me like wildfire. And that wildfire is a contagion that consumes us both.

We're all over each other, touching each other, licking at each other,

as if we're starving animals and we're the only thing keeping each other alive. Her mission seems to be to get me undressed, which is counter to mine—to get her naked, and me inside her. But her soft hands slide under my shirt and shove it upward and I pull it over my head. By the time it hits the floor, she's kissing my chest, and caressing me all over. I catch her face and kiss her and, in the process, try like hell to think enough to toe off my shoes.

I'm back to my mission of getting her naked.

I stroke a puckered nipple through her tank top and then catch the hem, dragging it over her head and it's only appropriate that I worship her gorgeous breasts. My arm goes around her waist, anchoring her. My eyes rake over her puckered pink nipples even before I caress her breast and pinch her nipple. My hand slides up her back and when it covers her breast, she arches into the touch, her hand covering mine as if she doesn't want me to stop touching her.

Holy hell, it's been too long since I had her naked in my arms even if in truth, LA was only a week ago now. It feels like an eternity. I turn her around and unzip her skirt, dragging it down her hips and giving her backside a little smack, vowing to one day convince her to actually let me spank her. She yelps with the barely-there sting and gasps my name, "Tyler."

She tries to turn, but she's obviously forgotten her skirt when I have not. I lift her and kick it away from her bare feet. The minute I set her down, she rotates in my arms and presses herself against me. I tangle my fingers in her hair, a rough, erotic tug to my grip, that matches the rough pull of lust controlling me right now.

"One day I'm going to spank you, Bella, and you're going to like it." I

don't give her time to object. I kiss her, a brush of my lips over hers, the sweet floral scent of hers driving me wild. "It's been way too long since I had you like this."

"This moment would be so much better if you were naked, too," she says, and she reaches for my pants, stroking my cock.

I catch her hand. "This is going to be really fast if you keep doing that."

"We can do it again," she proclaims. "Like in LA."

I stroke her hair. "Yeah, baby. Like in LA."

I cup her sweet little backside, and kiss her, but I can feel the hum of need inside me, and there isn't going to be a whole lot of savoring until later tonight. When, as she said, we do this again. But I don't follow that by losing my pants. Not yet. Once I'm inside her, I'll be too aroused to do anything but fuck her hard and fast. I scoop her up in my arms, and she is so tiny and delicate when the truth is she is the toughest woman I've ever known. The kind of woman you fight for and hope like hell you get right where I am now, with her naked in your arms, begging me to fuck her.

It doesn't get any better than this.

I carry her to the living room and size up our options. There's an oversized chair in the corner with no table to deal with, which works for me.

Once we're in front of the chair, I have plans for her, but she has plans for me as well. She steps out of my reach. "Pants off, Tyler. You're not the boss here."

"Want to make a bet on that?"

She laughs. "Probably not, but take them off. I want to be naked

with you.”

It's hard to resist a request from Bella when she's standing there naked and my cock wants to say yes to anything she asks for. I reach for my pants and get rid of them. Saying that I'm hard is an understatement. My cock juts forward, thick and heavily veined, and Bella appears mesmerized by it. She bites her lip, because why not make me harder than is humanly possible, and, steps into me, her soft curves nuzzled up close and personal, her hand on my cock. I close my hand around hers and hold it there. Hell, I'd cement it there if I could.

I lean in and kiss her neck and pluck at her nipple. She shivers and curls her shoulders. My lips travel to her ear and I whisper, “You will never meet a man who doesn't want his woman's hand and mouth on his cock but right now, I'd rather be inside you.”

She eases back to look at me and her blue eyes glisten, and I wait for her to object to me calling her my woman again. On second thought, I refuse to hear that right now and I'm not quite as ready to fuck her just yet as I thought. I want to own her, even if it's for one night, even if she walks away tomorrow. I rotate her and sit her down on the chair, kneeling in front of her. I kiss her knees, watching her watch me, and then slowly, inch her legs apart.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

TYLER

Bella is my woman and I decide right then that it's time she understands that. That it's time she feels that in every part of her. Because I sense her holding back, denying me little pieces of herself she doesn't yet believe I deserve, as if she doesn't realize she's doing it. And to do that, to make her see the truth, I will demand everything she has to give me. I want her to feel exposed, vulnerable, and still so damn turned on that she's begging for more. And not because I want to own her, even if everything male says I do. Because I want to know her... *all* of her. And feeling vulnerable with someone, allowing yourself to test your limits with another human being, is about trust. And for all kinds of reasons, many out of our control, if there is one thing we are lacking, it's trust.

She sits there waiting on me, her blonde, silky hair around her shoulders, loose strands draped just above her above her breasts, her nipples puckered. Her teeth worrying her bottom lip. And it starts just like this, with her naked and opened wide for me.

I caress her legs, and kiss her inner thigh, my eyes finding her eyes. "Ask me what I'm going to do to you, Bella."

"What are you going to do to me, Tyler?"

"Lick your nipples." My lips trail up her leg, so very close to the place I know she wants me. "Lick your clit." She breathes out a shaky breath and I lick right where I promise I would. She pants and I retreat, hands on her knees again. "Lick every inch of you until you beg me to make you come."

Her lashes lower. “I really thought were in rush to be inside me.”

“I might even spank you,” I say.

Her eyes open. “Tyler,” she murmurs. “I—”

“You what? I ask, easing closer to her and feathering kisses up her leg.

She tilts her head back a moment, and then grabs my arms, as if she anticipates where my attention may lead next. “I don’t know,” she whispers.

“Let me help you figure it out.” I drag my mouth to just above her sex and allow my breath to trickle over her, and holy hell, my cock is so fucking hard it hurts.

She reaches for my hair, a sexy, desperate little sound sliding from her lips, her hips lifting ever so slightly in a plea for my mouth. I give her clit a lick. A small one, a tease. She pants out my name, “Tyler, *please*,” and I swear I feel my name on her lips like a stroke of her tongue on my cock. Practiced control is all that saves me and the promise of her satisfaction, but I don’t give her what she wants. Not yet.

My fingers slide along her sex, and I glance up at her. “You’re wet, baby. I like it.” I slip fingers inside her and she arches her back, her head tilting back. I slide up her body and kiss her nipples—I did promise—but my fingers are still inside her.

She’s holding my head, and I nip her lip.

My fingers pump into her and she buries her face in my neck, but just when I know she’s about to come, I kiss her, and she can’t even kiss me back for the quake of her body, and the squeeze of her sex around my fingers. When she’s done, when the trembling stops, I cup

her face and say, “We’re not even close to done.” I kiss her again, and pick her up, carrying her with me to the couch.

I sit down and she straddles me, my cock settled at her backside. She leans into me, her fingers pressing into my shoulders, her beautiful breasts between us. I fill my hands with them and roll her nipples with my fingers, lowering my head to suckle one nipple and then the next.

“Please tell me why you aren’t inside me right now,” she demands, a breathless quality to her voice. “I mean, what is wrong with just being inside me?”

My gaze rakes over her plump nipples and I pinch them again. “Because I want more, Bella. You know I do. And if you don’t, we’ll fix that. I’m going to spank you, Bella.”

She stiffens and I fold her close, our lips a breath apart. “Trust me, baby. You’ll like it. All that control you demand of yourself, all the perfect, doesn’t matter in that moment. It’s complete, utter release.”

“Says the person doing the spanking.”

“I would never hurt you. I will *never* hurt you. If you want to stop, we’ll stop. And if you really don’t want to do this, we won’t.”

She breathes out. “I’m—I’ve never done this.”

“Good. I’m glad it’s only me.”

She leans in and presses her forehead to mine, seconds passing before she says, “Okay, but I’m nervous.”

I run my hands up her back and kiss her. “I’ll take care of you. I’ll tell you when it’s coming and it won’t be right away. Now slide off of me and onto your knees beside me.”

She nods and does as I say, settling on her knees, and facing my lap.

“Lay across me and hold onto the edge of the couch.”

She hesitates and looks like she might run.

I catch her to me and kiss her. “You don’t have to do this.”

She pushes out of my grip and lays across my lap.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

BELLA

I am not a submissive person, but when Tyler ordered me to lay across his lap, I felt this burn in my body I cannot explain. Now laying across his legs, exposed in every way, I have never been so nervous or turned on in my life. But I'm not afraid. That's the most striking part of this to me. I was willing—I *am* willing—to allow myself to be this vulnerable with Tyler, and I'm not afraid. He pushes me in every way and it's addictive, but a little terrifying, like skydiving, and the adrenaline rush that gets you high on life. He's my adrenaline rush.

His hand settles on my backside. "Deep breath, baby. This is just me touching you. Okay?"

"Yes." I shift slightly on my elbows.

"Grip the edge of the couch, baby."

I do as he says, and wonder if this is supposed to be how I brace for the pain and why am I doing this if it's about pain. But he said he won't hurt me. He said I'd like this.

His hand caresses up my spine and settles between my shoulder blades. "Relax."

Only then do I realize I'm already bracing, all tense and prepared. I force my body to ease into his.

He runs his hand down my spine and over my backside. His touch is fire, and the anticipation of what is to come is more arousing than I expect it to be. "You're perfect, Bella," he murmurs, squeezing my backside, but at the same moment, he leans in and presses his lips where his hand was moments before, right between my shoulder blades. And then he's kissing a path down my spine, and his

ridiculously talented tongue randomly licks here and there.

If I thought this was all about his hand on my backside, it's turning out to be nothing like that at all. His hand caresses my backside over and over until his fingers slide along my seam and press between my thighs. He spreads me open and one hand is stroking my backside, while the other is teasing my clit, driving me wild. I'm so wet and in need, I think might actually come again. I lift my backside, trying to arch into his touch. That's when he starts patting my sex, which I've never had anyone do. At the same time, he gives my backside a small smack, not what I call a spanking, but I know it's there.

He repeats all of the above. It's one big overload of sensations. His hand tapping, his fingers exploring, and those little smacks, until suddenly he stops, his hands still, one resting firmly on my backside.

"Bella," he murmurs, his voice gravelly, aroused. "Now, okay?"

I want him to do it. I want everything right now. "Yes," I whisper and in case he doubts me I say, "Yes."

He starts patting me on my sex again, over and over, and I think maybe this is the spanking, and it feels good. It's driving me crazy. I want him inside me. Can he please just be inside me? "Tyler, can you please—"

The patting stops. His hand is back to its firm resting place. "Three times, Bella. One soft. One harder. One soft. Say it."

"One soft. One harder. One soft."

"And then we'll fuck like rabbits."

Impossibly, considering what is happening right now, I laugh at the reference to what my father said about my parents.

He squeezes my backside and says, "Count to three, Bella. Now."

Before I fully process what that means, his hand makes contact, and I grip the edge of the couch. *One soft*, I think, but now he's stroking my sex, and my body is so confused and aroused, and another sting comes and this one is harder. I arch my back and pant. *One harder*, I think, and his fingers are back, stroking my sex.

And then the final palm finds me. It still stings but it's nothing compared to the one before it. The minute it's over, he's caressing away the sting with his hand. I'm still processing it all when he pulls me around and on top of him, and there's this crazy emotional rush coming over me. He cups my head and folds me into him. "Are you okay?"

"I feel like I might cry and it's not..." I grip his shoulder. "It's not pain. It's not—I don't know what it is."

"It's the adrenaline, baby. It's a whole-body experience. It's why people get addicted to it. Like I'm addicted to you."

I'm addicted to you, too, I think, but I can't seem to find words, so I tangle my fingers in his hair and press my mouth to his.

He moans. God, I love when this man moans, and then he's kissing me and it feels different now, *we* feel different. Like a wall is torn down, and everything is more. More intimate, more wild. More hungry. I'm outside of myself and living in nothing but pure lust for this man. I'm kissing him, tasting him, touching all of him, my hands absorbing sinewy muscles. If I could crawl under his skin, I would. I am lost and found right here with him.

He groans again, and I'm so high on adrenaline and him that I'm already straddling him and I don't remember doing it. His thick erection is pressed to my belly, and I stroke it long and hard. He grits

his teeth. “Now, baby,” he says, stroking my hair from my face. “I feel like I’ve wanted to be inside you since the day I was born at this point.”

He wraps his arm around me and anchors me. I guide his cock to the seam of my sex and press him inside me. To say that he’s hard is an understatement, and I pant as I slide down him, as he stretches me and fills me.

And sigh when he’s finally where we both want him to be.

But instead of fucking like rabbits, we lock gazes and we’re just staring at each other. What passes between us is nothing I have ever known. I feel him everywhere. I know him in ways I have never known another human being.

That’s when emotion roars through me, when the intimacy between us overtakes me. I lean in and press my hand to his face. “I am, you know.”

He covers my hand on his face and says, “You are what, Bella?”

“Your woman.”

He breathes out and says, “That’s what I wanted. That’s what I needed you to say.”

He claims my mouth, and everything between us erupts. Our bodies rock, grind, and move together in every which way. The room fills with the sounds of moans and sighs. We are fucking, and it’s raw and dirty, but it feels like more. For the first time, it feels like we’re making love and I don’t want it to end. But I also just can’t get enough of him. Our urgency grows and he’s pulling me down on him as he lifts into me and it ends me. My body stiffens with that moment right before release and I grab his arms, bury my face in his shoulder, and my body trembles.

Tyler murmurs my name and then lets out a guttural moan, holding

onto me with a fierce grip as he shudders beneath me.

Long moments later, Tyler rolls us to the lay on the couch, facing each other, his hand on my face. “You okay?”

I laugh at that. “Did I not seem okay?”

“I love that you did that with me. Did you like it?”

I can feel my cheeks heat. “Yes,” I whisper. “I liked it. I didn’t expect to, but I did.”

“And you’re my woman,” he says with a smile. “Right?”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I’m your woman.”

“I’m yours, too. You know that, right?”

“I think I do now.”

“Damn, woman. You *think*? I might have to spank you again.” He reaches around me and grabs my backside, pulling me flush against him. “I’m all yours, Bella. Now you’re going to have to decide what to do with me.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

BELLA

I leave Tyler on the couch, napping, to go to the bathroom and check on Molly. I find her knocked out and absolutely adorable with her little stuffed heartbeat puppy.

I really do love this dog.

Tiptoeing away, I use the bathroom, wrap myself in a robe, and don't even bother to look in the mirror. If I'm a mess, Tyler made me this way and I enjoyed every second of it. When I return to the living room, he's still naked, on his back on the couch, and sound asleep. Men. They always sleep after sex. We stay awake and analyze the sex. I grab ice water and rejoin him, sliding down onto the floor beside him. I'm with Tyler. I can't even believe this has happened.

"Why do you have clothes on? I told you I'm not done with you."

I twist around to look at him, and I cannot resist flattening my hand on the wall of muscle that is his abdominals. "I thought you were sleeping."

"Pretending. I was hoping you'd wake me up on top of me."

I laugh. "I already did that tonight."

He rolls in my direction, and before I know what's happening, I'm on top of him, my robe discarded. "Better," he says, and then rolls me to my back with his big body on top of me. "Better again." He kisses me and nuzzles my neck. "You smell like sunshine, but if Becker ever calls you that again, I'll punch him."

I'm not sure if I should laugh or get mad, mostly because he's hard again and the weight of him on top of me is fairly delicious. "I'll tell him only you can call me sunshine."

He eases back to stare down at me with those baby blues of his. “I’ll call you *mine*.”

That statement does all kinds of wild things to my belly. “That’s better than sunshine,” I murmur.

“And what do you call me?”

“My very own bastard?”

He laughs and it’s this low, sexy masculine rumble that I feel in the clench of my sex and the pucker of my nipples. It’s almost ridiculous how easily he turns me on, although he is hard and between my legs right now. He shifts then and slides off the couch, on his knees beside me. He grabs my glass of water and sips and then scoops out a piece of ice.

My brows dip. “What are you doing?”

“I told you. I’m not done with you yet.”

He leans in and kisses my puckered nipple, his other hand reaching for the opposite nipple, and his fingers just barely caress it. Heat rushes through me. I’m hot and that must be his plan because he slides that ice over my nipple. I gasp and arch my back. A chill runs down my spine and he suckles the chilled nipple, the contrast of warmth to the cold sends me into sensory overload. He leans in and kisses me and while I’m lost in his kiss, he slides that ice over my other nipple. This time the chill is too much and I all but beg for his mouth.

Next, the ice slides down my body to my belly, and his tongue once again follows. His finger slides between my legs, teasing my clit, and I’m breathing in puffy breaths I can’t control. I’m at his mercy as is the orgasm my body is screaming for. When his fingers slide inside me and his mouth closes on my nipple, I moan with the intensity of the

pleasure. I'm already on the edge, so close to coming I can barely hold back. I can't hold back. Oh my God, he's barely had his fingers inside me and I'm going to—I do. It happens. I tense and then my body spasms around his fingers. My whole body is rocked, and I think I'm trembling from head to toe.

The minute I'm on the other side of the orgasm, he's on top of me, pressing inside me and it's as if I'm just having one long orgasm, because my body needed him hard and inside me. He stares down at me and there is this magnetic pull between us. "God, woman, what are you doing to me?" he murmurs before his mouth crashes over mine. I moan with the feel of his tongue, the way his cock thrusts into me, the way his hips rock and grind. It's all so deliciously dirty and sexy and yet somehow, it's so very intimate in a way that isn't about sex at all.

A long time later, I wake to the puppy crying, only to realize I'm naked and lying half on top of Tyler and half on the couch. For just a moment, I remember waking up spooning him in LA and how freaked I was about doing such a thing. It feels like a long time ago. Tyler jolts and says, "The puppy is crying," as if he's just realized it. "I'll get her."

I intend to tell him I've got this, but he's already up, giving me a momentary perfect view of his magnificent ass as he pulls his pants on. "Where do you take her out?"

"Backyard," I say, reaching for my robe and eyeing the clock over the mantel. "We have to put her right back to bed to get her trained to a normal schedule."

"So no playing?"

"No playing," I say with a smile.

"Then I'll just keep playing with you."

A few minutes later, we're both out back when Molly potties and we praise her wildly. Much later, when she's worn out and back in bed, we claim the living room floor again, folders from the Allen case files in front of us. I give him a glance and tug on a strand of his hair. "I never thought I'd say it, but you're kind of a good dad."

He rubs the back of his neck and there's an awkwardness to him that in turn makes me awkward. And now I'm awkward. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No. No, not at all." He pushes himself up and sits on the table and helps me to the couch. "We should talk about this."

"We don't have to talk about this, Tyler. It's okay. You're good with Molly. Don't make it deeper."

"It is deeper. I've just never thought of having kids before now because I wasn't the guy who was going to be with one woman. Not with the example I had at home."

I touch his cheek. "I know. I wish you could have experienced what I did."

He scoops my hand into his. "Do you want kids?"

"I do," I admit. "I have such a great relationship with Dash and my parents had such a great relationship. I guess I want to recreate that, you know?" My brows furrow. "But you don't, do you?"

"I don't know. I've *really* never thought of it until this moment with you." He strokes my cheek again. "We'd make beautiful babies."

"We would," I say, my heart squeezing.

"But I think I'd make a shitty father."

"That's unfair. You're not your father. And how you are with Molly is an indication of how you'd be with kids. How you are with me is as

well. And I approve.”

“How are so sure? He *killed* Allison, Bella.”

“He did, but I don’t think he was a serial killer. I think it was an act of desperation.”

“That he had in him.”

“You don’t.”

“I’m a bastard, remember?”

“Allie was right. This thing with your father is messing with your head.”

“Less now that I’m with you, but yeah. I wouldn’t tell anyone else that but it’s fucked with me.” He eyes the clock and shuts down the conversation. “We should get some sleep. I need to deal with Gavin tomorrow.”

I hesitate, wanting to push him to talk, but he’s shared a lot already. I decide he needs to open up on his terms. “Do you know what you’re going to do about Gavin?”

“I need to sleep on it. I don’t want to go home, Bella.”

“I didn’t know that was an option.”

His eyes warm. “Do we dare go to the bedroom?”

“Yes, but the baby is sleeping so no rowdy stuff. Behave.”

He helps me to my feet. “I make no promise other than I’ll help with Molly if we wake her up.”

I laugh and he settles his arm around me, and we walk down the hallway to the bedroom.

Once we’ve slipped under the blankets, I snuggle next to him and I can feel his heart beating.

And just that easily, I fall asleep.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

BELLA

My cellphone rings and I jolt to a sitting position, only to realize it's already eight am. Molly went out at about six am and we didn't mean to go back to sleep, but apparently, we did. Tyler shoves to a sitting position, and his ruffled morning hair and shadowed jaw are everything.

His mood is not. "Who the hell is calling you this early?"

I laugh. "Someone needs more sleep." I grab my phone and find Becker's number on the caller ID. "Becker. I'm hoping he wants to sign with us today. I should have already been up and ready for him."

Tyler grunts. "Okay. Fucking Becker." Molly starts to whine, and he throws away the blanket. "I'll take her out and make coffee."

I let the call go to voicemail and ask, "Does the puppy stuff bother you?"

He scoops her out of her pen and she licks him good morning, kind of like I want to right now, too, considering he's naked. "Not at all. I love this pup. Call that bastard. I want to be there when you sign him."

Okay, that's not going to happen, I think, but I focus on the more immediate problem, which is his naked ass and my neighbors. "The neighbor can see over the fence. You better put clothes on!"

My cell rings again, with Becker's caller ID, and I quickly sit up and answer. "Hey. Sorry. The new puppy was crying so I made an executive decision to save my carpet before I talked to you."

He laughs. "Oh, the puppy months. They feel like years, but then grow too fast and get too old too fast."

"Don't go there. I don't want to think about it. Did you want to

meet?”

“Yes, let’s do it. Can you do eleven? I have coffee with Lawrence Rhenn. You rep him, right?”

“I do. Ask him about me. Then I know you’ll sign.”

He laughs. “I will. You know, I thought you were a literary agent because of your brother.”

“Well, I am. I’m a weird hybrid agent. Most agents do one or the other. I just do what I feel passionate about.”

“Fair enough. How do I get into the building on a Saturday?”

“I’ll make sure security lets you up.”

We disconnect and a female scream rips through the house. Damn, that will be Livi. I grab my robe, pull it on and run into the living room to find her standing at the edge of the kitchen, her face pale. Tyler is also in the kitchen thankfully wearing pants but they’re unzipped and hanging low.

Livi points at him. “Do you know this half-naked man?”

“He’s my boss,” I say. “He randomly shows up at employees’ houses and sleeps over.”

Tyler eyes me with an arched brow, at which point I realize he’s holding a steaming cup of coffee and another is on the sink.

Livi gapes and I laugh. “I’m joking. This is Tyler. He does not randomly show up at employees’ houses. It was a bad joke. I should have warned you both about each other or he would have his pants zipped.”

Tyler looks down and curses before setting the cup down and facing the sink to fix his pants. Once he’s back in order, he rotates to face Livi again. “Sorry. I took the pup out in a rush.”

Molly runs to Livi's feet and she kneels to greet her. "I'm sorry for reacting so stupidly," she says, scooping up Molly and loving on her. "I was just not expecting company and you didn't mention a man."

Tyler grabs the cups and motions to the pot with his chin. "Coffee's ready if you want some, Livi." Like it's his house and I kind of like it. He steps to me and says, "I got yours," and then he disappears down the hallway.

"Sorry again," I say.

"He's hot," she says. "God, he's so hot. Why can't I find men like that?"

Ah, okay, I think. I have mixed feelings about this reaction. I mean, he's my man. It's not really appropriate to talk about him like that, is it? I leave it alone. For now. "Can you watch Molly while I shower?"

"Of course. Go have fun." She wiggles her eyebrows.

I frown and turn away from her. That whole exchange was weird.

When I arrive in the bedroom, Tyler steps out of the bathroom, brushing his teeth. He pulls the toothbrush from his mouth. "I found your extra brush and opened it."

I nod and join him, grabbing my own toothbrush. It's kind of surreal—a lot of things have been lately—to stand next to him at the double sinks, doing something as domestic as brushing our teeth. He finishes before me, just as his cell buzzes with a call. He shows me the caller ID, which reads *Gavin*, and then walks to the bedroom. I notice that he showed me the call like he wanted me to know it was important, or he wouldn't take it. Or maybe the Travis thing made him think he has to be extra careful with me, which is not a good thought.

I finish up and wash my face, walking into my closet and picking

out my clothes for the day before I shower—a pair of dark blue jeans and a navy sweater. Jeans are like the Nashville uniform. They aren't casual. They're life. When my selections are made, I walk into the bedroom to find Tyler sitting on my lounge chair in deep thought, the phone next to him. His mood has gone from coffee and laughter to dark and broody. There is a twist in my belly at potential bad news or threats from Gavin.

I close the space between us and go down on my knees in front of him. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to say something to you, Bella.”

The twist becomes a throb. Is this where he tells me we're moving too fast? Why did I let this happen? What was I thinking? “Okay. I'm listening.”

“The baby talk.”

I blanch. “We don't have to talk about that at all, Tyler.”

“We do. If we're together, we do. And you told me about Travis.”

“Which does not mean I need to know who you are talking to on the phone.”

“I know. I showed you because he was dodging my calls.” His hands come down on my shoulders. “I need to say this or I won't.”

I nod, not sure what to expect now.

“When I was in college,” he says, “I did have a steady girlfriend. I thought I loved her. Then she got pregnant and my father thought she was just after our money, like she lied about being on the pill to set me up.”

My heart thunders in my chest. Does he have a kid? “Did she?”

“He wanted her to have an abortion. I said no. I told her no. It was

my baby. I was not going to let go of my baby.”

“And?”

“And he went to her, offered her a shit ton of money to have the abortion and disappear. He provided me with proof of the abortion and then told me I told you so. I never heard from her again.”

“Oh my God. No wonder you don’t think about kids.”

“I never got serious with anyone after that. He wasn’t wrong. She clearly was after a payday, and I was stupid enough to not see the truth.”

“You were young.”

“Not after that.” He pauses and adds, “I’ve known my share of women with their own money, but I was shut down, unbreakable, and untouchable. I was not gentle about it, either. I was the bastard you call me. I’m telling you this because the list, the Debbie thing, it’s something Gavin thought I’d be okay with. And until LA, I might have been. Gavin doesn’t understand the shift in me, which will be dealt with.”

He doesn’t seem to want to go into feelings and his father at all, which has me questioning why he did this now. “I’m so glad you told me that you trusted me, but what about the call with Gavin made you need to say all of this?”

“The Debbie stunt was devious, and he seems to truly believe he was looking out for me. I’m making sure you know everything there is to know about me, from me.”

“Why is he still with you?”

“One reason. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. He acts as if he’s bulletproof. He never acted that way before. I’m not sure

which he is at this point, but I'm going to find out." He stands up and takes me with him. "Come shower with me."

He seems to have told me this story fairly easily, but I notice the tic in his jaw and the curl of his fingers into his palm. This was not an easy confession to make, and beneath the surface, there's a battle raging, one that reads like a man used to living in the past trying to live in the present and future because of me, and that affects me on every level.

A few minutes later we're standing under the water together, and he's still on edge, still living inside the story he told me, so far from all right that I know why Dash worries about him now. He drags me to him and kisses me, and I can taste that dark, turbulent emotion. It's bottled up and controlled because he is always about control. He never lets go. I tear my mouth from his and push him against the wall.

"Let me help." I start to lower myself to my knees.

He catches my arms. "If you start, I won't be able to stop."

"I don't want you to stop." I look him in the eyes. "I've never been one to start what I can't finish, Tyler. You know that."

He studies me for a few beats, his eyes dark, his body all but quaking. His grip eases and I go down on my knees. I wrap my hand around his cock and lick the tip. When he groans, I'm empowered. I tease him, lick him, and then take him into my mouth. He holds my head, pumps into my mouth, and murmurs, "More."

His arousal arouses me and I give him more, or rather I take more. I suckle him deep, and when he shudders into release, I don't pull back. When his body stills, he drags me to my feet and folds me into him. And we just stand there like that, the water flowing over us, and we say

nothing.

And yet, he has said so much.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

TYLER

My meeting with Gavin is set for noon, and Bella has to be at the office by ten to prep for her meeting. After a lot of pushback from me, I finally agree to let her meet Becker alone. I have to go home and change and grab a bag if I'm going to stay with Bella tonight, which is just an assumed thing. I'm staying. A decision cemented when I walk into my place and it feels like a hollow shell. Bella has changed my perspective on life, it seems.

I throw on jeans and a thin, navy polo sweater and pack my bag with my mind processing this meeting with Gavin. He's going to pressure me. The problem is the board would do the same and more if they knew I had a weak spot with the will. The chance of a hostile takeover is a real thing. I know there's another will. I just have to hope like fuck my mother didn't throw it away. I'm not leaving the office until I know if it's in the files, which feels right. But if it's wrong, I need a plan B. And it's not Bella. I'm vulnerable until this is resolved. Six months is too long, but I have to start the timer because there may not be any other way out of this.

I intend to drive to the office, but as I drive by a nearby jewelry store that I've passed a number of times, I remember the necklace in the window that reminds me of Bella. Five minutes later, the necklace is at the cash register but somehow, I end up at the engagement rings. I stand in front of the case, and I expect to resist the idea of a ring and marriage. But I don't resist. It's not like this thing between me and Bella is new. This is not sudden. We're five years in the making. We've just finally stopped pretending otherwise. I want to marry her, and

there is no “have to” about it. I *want* to marry her.

And I will not have her feel like a fake fiancée.

I’m doing this and I’m all-in.

I flag the attendant and point out a specific ring. “Excellent choice,” she says, removing it from the case. “It’s a 1.3-carat oval halo diamond with incredible clarity. Any woman would be thrilled to have this ring. Would you like to see the price?”

In other words, it’s expensive. She shoves a spec sheet in front of me, and, yes, it’s a hefty price tag, but I don’t care. “I’ll take it.”

The woman lights up and I hand her my black American Express.

While the transaction takes place, I have to remind myself that Bella hasn’t even said she’d marry me, but then I haven’t really asked her properly, either.

I arrive at the office fifteen minutes before Gavin is due to arrive, and I spend the time answering emails. I’m behind my desk when Gavin appears in my doorway. “Any luck?” he asks.

Like myself, he’s dressed for Saturday in jeans and a sweater, but there is nothing casual about his demeanor. His spine is stiff, his eyes sharp.

“Shut the door,” I say, not even bothering to answer his worthless question meant to fill dead space.

He does as I ask and walks toward me. “What’s up?” he asks, his hand on his hips, seemingly uninterested in sitting down. He’s going to sit. I motion to the chair.

He sits. “This is about Debbie, right?”

“Yes. This is about Debbie. Why don’t you tell me what the hell you thought you were doing?”

“I joked that a wife would be a good addition to your reputation, just feeling her out. She clearly took it to another level. She called me crying, and I told her she’s an idiot.”

My fingers thrum on the desk. He notices and I know he knows this is something I do when I’m angry. “She can no longer work for me, and you could have easily gotten me into a sexual harassment dispute, which you should know. You’re a damn lawyer. Let me make this clear to you, Gavin. You counsel. That’s where your role stops. Don’t nose around in my personal life.”

“This isn’t personal though, now, is it?” he dares challenge. “This is about you securing your place at the head of the company, which in turn secures my future, and everyone else’s that works in this building.”

My eyes narrow on him. “We’re trying to speed up this process. Me claiming my rightful role and my inheritance is not in question. You’d be good to remember that. There are lines, Gavin. You crossed one. You fucked up. You won’t get two fuck-ups.” He opens his mouth to speak, and I hold up a hand. “If you think for a minute that I’m afraid of what you know and might tell the stockholders, think again. You have confidentiality agreements, but even setting those aside, one thing I learned from my father is how to deal with an enemy. I believe you know that for a fact. In other words, don’t become one. You want to secure everyone’s future, find the second will. There is one.”

“You’re remarkably confident in that fact at this point. Why?”

I ignore the question. “I’ve given you freedoms I do not offer anyone else. The way you work, the knowledge you own, and the way you talk to me. Don’t take it for granted. In other words, don’t become an

enemy, Gavin.”

His lashes lower, a sign there is something in his gaze he fears I’ll read. When he looks at me again, he says, “I’m as loyal as a dog, man. You know that. Which is why I want you to stay around. I know what you’re capable of. Hawk needs you. It won’t survive without you. Everyone knows who really runs this place, and it hasn’t been your father in years.”

He’s not wrong. My father spent his time chasing women or testing me. He checked out of the actual business years ago.

Gavin leans forward, the edge to him softening. “At one point are you going to consider that list?”

“Not now.”

He sits back again, a sharp movement. His lips flatten, his expression indiscernible, before he says, “Then I guess we better find that extra will.” He gets up and claims a spot at the conference table. I sit there and watch him remove a folder and start looking through it, processing what I’m reading off him. I don’t believe Gavin is lying to me. I also don’t believe he’s telling me the entire truth about his motives, which sets off alarms about alliances with the board, or yes, a hostile takeover.

I text Dierk a message: *Find out what Gavin’s up to because I think it’s not good.* After which, I grab a box and start digging. Bella’s right. I can’t wait to claim the company or my inheritance. Every day is a day the tide could turn, and the sharks come to shore.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

BELLA

Becker arrives exactly on time. I do like a punctual client. It indicates respect, and you have to give respect to get respect. “How was the show last night?” I ask, motioning him to my conference table, a small four-seater that gets the job done.

“It would have been better had my future agent been there,” he says, claiming a seat as I do the same across from him.

“You wouldn’t have been better because you’re amazing every time you sing,” I say, “and that’s sincere. You’re gifted. But I would have liked to have been there. And I will be in the future.”

“But you weren’t there.” He doesn’t give me time to reply. “I’ll be honest, Bella, I’m all-in with you, but I don’t like the idea of Tyler not being all-in with me.”

“He’s all-in. I promise. I wouldn’t take you on if he wasn’t.” I slide the contract in front of him. “You should have your attorney review this. But it’s fair, I promise. I emailed you a copy as well.” I pause. “Unless you want to talk to Tyler first, which speaking of, he met with Duke. What’s the story with him wanting to work with you and nothing coming of it?”

He looks utterly baffled. “Never heard anything about Duke wanting to work with me. The man’s a legend.”

“Hmmm well, he told Tyler he’s been trying to get you on board. I’ll handle it. I mean, if you sign with me.”

He hesitates a moment, a serious look on his face before he busts out a smile. “You know I’m going to sign with you. You’re already a good decision. My business manager will get you all of my contracts to

review once I send over the agency agreement, which I'll do quickly."

I glow with this good news, I know I do. "I'm happy. We're going to do great things together."

"We are, sunshine. We are. And I mean that because I'm sure are you going be the sunshine my career needs."

I laugh. "Yes. I will be."

A few minutes later, he sees himself out and just as he promised, it was a totally appropriate meeting. I'm about to go help Tyler go through the case files when my father calls. "Hello, beautiful daughter," he greets. "I have news."

"What news is that?"

"My race next week is cancelled. There are electricity problems at the track, whatever that means. But in light of this change of plans, I made an executive decision."

When I was a kid that meant he was the boss of me. "Meaning what?" I ask.

"I'm flying in to see you. I can be there for dinner. I want to meet Tyler."

"You've met Tyler, Dad."

"A handshake in passing is not meeting Tyler. I already called Dash. He and Allie can join us."

"Why did you call Dash before me?"

"Sibling peer pressure is the best pressure. Dash thinks you should bring Tyler, too."

When we end our chat, I dial Dash. "Hello, little sis."

"Did you really tell Dad we should all have dinner with Tyler?" I demand.

“Yes, and I like the idea.” He quickly shifts the topic. “Are we still on for waffles tomorrow morning? You can bring Tyler to that, too.”

“No, we are not. I’ll be recovering from a dinner with you and Dad drilling Tyler.”

He laughs. “It won’t be bad. We’ll go easy on him.”

“In other words, you’ll gang up on him.”

“Of course, but Tyler can handle it. I’ll text you the reservation info. Gotta run. I have a chat with my editor.”

“Right. Go. I prefer funneling anger at you in person when I can hit you, anyway.”

He laughs again and disconnects.

Now I have to tell Tyler he’s set-up to be a victim in a family slaughter. I’m not sure he’ll even feel comfortable meeting my father. Meeting the parents is when things get serious.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

BELLA

I text Tyler before I head to his office: *I just signed Becker. Can I come help?*

He replies right away with: *The door is shut. Just come in.*

When I arrive a few minutes later, as expected, Tyler's door is shut, and I go on in. Tyler is as I expect him to be, on the couch again, with boxes all around him, but I'm a little surprised to find Gavin at the conference table. He glances up at me and back down at his file, not a greeting in sight. Okay, then. This is awkward. I actually can't believe I didn't ask Tyler in our text exchange what is going on with him.

I join Tyler in the sitting area, claiming the chair next to the couch. "Any luck?"

"None," he says. "But there are plenty of boxes left."

"The boxes don't matter if he's engaged," Gavin calls out. "Just do it and put this behind him."

Tyler grimaces, the look on his face pure agitation, but when he catches my gaze there's an apology there. I realize then that he doesn't understand that I plan to do this with him. I guess I never actually said the words. It just felt assumed, considering where we are together. But he's now watching me with a crazy intensity and I don't know what he thinks he reads in me, but he calls out to Gavin, "We need a minute."

Gavin doesn't argue, not that I expect he would.

He leaves and shuts the door behind him.

"Ignore him, Bella," Tyler states. "What's between us is between us."

"But it's not, and that's okay. Tyler, I'm going to do this with you."

He turns to stone as if he's afraid that even the slightest movement will change my mind. "Do what with me, Bella?"

"There's zero chance I'm letting you get engaged and ultimately marry someone else. Now it's my turn to say, it has to be me."

He searches my face with the scrutiny of a judge and jury, though I do not believe Tyler is judging me at all. He's trying to understand my drastic shift on this topic. "What of your work reputation?"

"My father made me see that I was acting on fear when I never act on fear."

His brows shoot up. "Your father? What exactly did you tell your father?"

"Everything," I say.

"You told him *everything*?" His tone is pure disbelief.

"We're close, Tyler, and when I need advice, he doesn't tell me what I want to hear. He tells me what I *need* to hear. He sided with you."

His attention grows sharper. "What did you *want* to hear, Bella?"

"I didn't know what I needed to hear when I called him. I just needed to talk to him, but part of me expected him to scold me for my careless behavior. Instead, he literally told me that if he and my mom would have met at work, they still would have gone at each like rabbits."

"All right then. I guess I owe your father a thank you."

"Actually, you can thank him tonight. He called. His race is off for next weekend, so he decided to show up. He wants us to have dinner with him, Dash, and Allie. And, yes, they are going to team up on you. You don't have to go, but I'd love it if you did. And I know this is a little fast and awkward, but—"

“I’ve met your dad. I like him, but before we go in front of the council of your father, we need to talk about us. I want you to do this, Bella. But I don’t want you to hate me for it.”

“We talked this out last night. I won’t hate you. I made this decision, and we both know I didn’t do it rashly. And so does my father.”

He goes down on a knee in front of me. “I really hate that he knows all this contract stuff and fake fiancée bullshit, Bella. It doesn’t define us.”

My fingers curl on his cheek. “I know. And so does he. That’s why he was Team Tyler.”

“Yeah, well some part of him won’t be sure about me, and I’m fairly certain that’s the purpose of the impromptu visit.”

“You don’t have to go with me.”

“I’m going, Bella. You know I’m going. I got you something today.”

“You did? When did you have time?”

“On my way here.” He stands up and takes me with him, leading me behind his desk. “I’ve seen this in the store window for a long time and it reminds me of you.”

“Really?” I ask, leaning on his desk, my hands on the wooden surface behind me. “Now I’m intrigued.”

He pulls a velvet box from his drawer and opens the lid, and nestled on the black velvet is a stunning diamond butterfly necklace. I’m stunned and touched, not just by the gift, but by the idea that he has seen this necklace over and over and thought of me.

I push off the desk and face him. “It’s gorgeous, Tyler. I love it. Thank you.” I remove it from the velvet and he takes it from me and

helps me with the clasp at my neck.

When I turn to face him, I touch it where it rests on my skin. “I can’t wait to see it in the mirror.”

He folds me into him, his body warm against mine. “Do you want to know why it reminds me of you?” he asks.

“Very much,” I say, eager for him to explain how I inspired such an intimate gift.

He strokes my hair. “I think of you like a beautiful butterfly who spreads her wings and the world celebrates. I used to tell myself I’d crush your wings and destroy you if I ever touched you.”

My heart squeezes and I’m reminded of what he said earlier about his father and the torment of being his son. I touch his face. “That will never happen, Tyler. It didn’t happen.”

He captures my hand. “You know what else a butterfly represents?”

“Tell me,” I urge, feeling as if this is him leading me some place I don’t yet understand. “To many, a butterfly is a beacon of growth and new beginnings,” he says. “That’s what you are to your clients. But it’s also one of the many things you’ve become for me, Bella. A new beginning.”

He reaches into the desk again and retrieves a velvet ring box, and my heart is now running a marathon while I stand still. “What is this, Tyler?”

He opens the lid and shows me the stunning ring inside, the jewel sparkling in the overhead light. My eyes jerk to his. “What is this? What are you doing?”

“New beginnings, Bella. You say you’re going to do this with me, then really do it. Marry me.” He goes down on his knee. “Be my wife,

Bella.”

My eyes go wide and adrenaline surges through me, and not in a good way. I shut the lid in full rejection. “No. No, I haven’t thought this through after all. I can’t do the ring thing. I can’t.”

I try to move away from him, but he’s on his feet already, and catching me to him, his hand on my lower back. “What just happened?”

I swallow hard and then just tell him exactly what I feel. “I just—I have the little girl fairy tale dream, Tyler. That one day a man falls in love with me and me him, and then he goes down on one knee, and asks me to marry him.”

His eyes soften and he cups my head. “God, woman. How do you not know that I love you?”

My heart stops. “What?”

“*I love you*. I can’t believe I didn’t say it before I even got the ring out. This is the one and only time I ever plan to propose. I’m not practiced at this, baby. I’m a little nervous here.”

“*You’re...nervous?*” I ask incredulously.

“Hell, yes. Of course, I’m nervous. I’m asking you to spend the rest of your life with me, Bella. *I love you*. You have taken my life by storm for the better. I’m no longer okay without you and you are not saying yes.”

I resist the words, afraid again, and I hate that, but it’s too real an emotion to ignore. He could feel pressured into doing this after all my resistance. “We just started seeing each other, Tyler.”

“I know. And standing there at the ring case, I told myself it was too soon, but we’ve known each other for five years and it feels right. It’s

not going to feel less right six months from now.”

“But you wouldn’t do this now, if not for the contract.”

“That’s not true. I could have carried the ring around for six months and secretly hoped I’d find a way out of this. I didn’t *want* to wait and when you just told me you’d do this fake thing with me, that’s not what I want us to be. You’re killing me. If you don’t want this—”

Emotions blast through me and I wrap my arms around him. “You know you’re the reason I had so many crappy dates, right? You’re always there between me and them. I just needed to know this was real and you weren’t backed into a corner. I love the necklace, I love the ring. *I love you so very much.*”

“Bella, put me out of my misery and just say yes.”

“Yes. Yes, I will marry you.”

“Finally,” he murmurs, and his mouth crashes down on mine.

And just like that, my fairy tale is real and my bastard boss is about to become my husband.

CHAPTER FIFTY

BELLA

Tyler and I do a whole lot of kissing after my “yes” to his proposal, and, of course, I have to put the ring on and admire it on my finger. “It’s gorgeous,” I say, sitting next to him on the couch. “Everyone will notice it. We have to say something soon or I have to leave it at home.”

“Technically, we have to announce it in the social pages to start the clock ticking on the six months. Unless you have a problem with it, let’s just tell the world.”

“Six months is good,” I say. “I need six months to find out if I can live with your snoring.”

“I don’t snore.” He looks playfully indignant.

“People who live alone always say that.”

He laughs and kisses me. “We can talk about *your* snoring at home.”

“Home?” I ask, turning serious for a moment. Is he wanting us to move in together?

“I want home to be with you, Bella. And if you don’t live with me, how do you get used to my snoring?”

“True,” I say, giving a little laugh. “But...you have your place and I have mine. What does home look like for us?”

“Wherever you are. Where do you want to live?”

It’s a thoughtful reply, and I wish more people saw this side of him, though I understand the leader persona, too. People like Gavin make it necessary. “I took a lot of time and care remodeling my place. I really love it, but do you?”

“A hell of a lot better than mine for all kinds of reasons. I’ll move in

with you, unless you object.”

“I’ll have to have Molly approve this decision, but you have scored points with belly rubs,” I tease but add, “When?”

“I’ll hire a moving company and get the ball rolling, but I suggest you warn the pet nanny to knock first.”

“Yes, I do believe I need to warn Livi. She enjoyed you being half naked a little too much, and you just stood there with your zipper down.”

“I didn’t know. That portion of my body was in a happy place this morning.” He catches my hand and studies the ring. “It looks good on you.” His eyes lift to mine. “And you look good on me.” He leans in and kisses me. “We’re really doing this.”

“Yeah. I guess we are.”

His cellphone rings and he grabs it from the table and shows me *Gavin* on caller ID. He sighs. “I need to deal with him. He’s absolutely going to shout our engagement through the office with a megaphone. Why don’t you give me a few? Then we can just take boxes home and go through them there.”

“Do those boxes even matter anymore?”

“You know I believe my father left one more piece of the puzzle. I can’t dismiss another will that’s worse than the first one.”

“Okay, yes. I see your point, but did his puzzles end with another puzzle or a bad ending?”

“Another puzzle, yes, and often that was the bad ending.”

He catches my hand again, his fingers tangled with mine, the intimacy between us combustible. His lips curve. My lips curve. And when our fingers part, I crave another touch. I’ve never felt that with a

man before, and I'm reminded of something my father said after I walked in on Travis. *Sometimes what feels like punishment in one moment is a blessing in another. Be glad you found out now, honey, before you married him.*

In that moment I decide no one should marry anyone who doesn't make them crazy for another touch.

For now, I leave Tyler to deal with Gavin, in no rush to see that man again, but there's no escaping him.

When I step into the hallway, I find Gavin leaning on the wall just outside, a scowl on his face. He straightens, his shoulders bunched, his jaw a sharp line. "You're fucking with him, which means you're fucking with me. Do what he needs you to do or I'll make sure he does it elsewhere." He steps around me and enters the office.

I rotate and watch him walk inside Tyler's office and shut the door. I'm not rattled by outrageous behavior that hardly touches that of a few of my problem clients, but something about Gavin sets me on edge, which really is illogical. He might go about it in a loud and proud manner, but logically he does so because he's on Tyler's side. Unless he's being overly loud and proud to mask the truth—that he's not on Tyler's side at all.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

TYLER

When we arrive back at Bella's place, which is technically my place now, too, it's kind of this crazy feeling, like this can't be real. We live here together. We're engaged. And we have a puppy prancing around the house. The nanny, whose name I can't remember, which does not please Bella, acts all shy with me, as if she's the one who was naked in front of me. My zipper was down. It wasn't a strip show.

Thank fuck Bella sends the nanny home for a few hours without me having to suggest it myself. When we're finally alone, Bella stares at the door where the nanny has departed and then glances at me. "She's weird with you, right?"

"Very. Maybe she's weird with all men."

She wraps her arms around me. "Maybe it's just because you're so hot."

If she thinks I'm going to laugh, I'm not laughing. It's been a hell of a day already. I'm looking for an outlet and she's it. "Show me in the bedroom. We can pick my side of the bed." I drape my arm around her and lead her that direction. When we've picked our sides, and we have clothes on again, we divide closets and drawers, and I walk the house while Bella explains all of her upgrades.

At present I'm sitting on the floor in front of the couch, boxes all around us and a folder in front of me on the table. Bella is laying on the floor while Molly licks her all over. "Hey there, Molly," I chide. "That's my job."

Bella shakes her head at me.

I laugh. I'm not sure when in my life I sat in my own home and

laughed, but then I'm not sure I ever had a home until Bella. My eyes catch on the sparkle on her finger. She said yes and then she'd fretted about the ring being too big. She'd taped the inside to ensure she could wear it and not have it fall off.

Bella's cellphone buzzes with a text and she rolls to the table and sits up, eyeing the caller ID and then scanning a message. She eyes me, her eyes bubbling with excitement. "I got Becker's contract back." Her phone rings. "It's him."

She answers the call, and I listen to the conversation with more than a little irritation. I didn't want her to sign Becker, but my father treated my mother like property and then still fucked around on her. I will not be that guy. And Bella wouldn't be with me if I was.

Now my cellphone rings and I snap it up to find Dash on caller ID. I'm not sure what Bella has said to Dash at this point, and I prepare myself for a bust-my-balls conversation. "Dash," I greet.

"Are you going to be a wuss and skip out on dinner tonight?"

Not a bust-my-balls conversation. "Because I'm afraid of you?" I ask.

"Because you're afraid of her father. He's protective."

"So are you," I remind him.

"Fathers are a whole other ballgame, man."

"Yeah, well I appreciate the warning, but I got this."

"But do you 'got this' with my sister?"

Okay, maybe this could turn into that bust-my-balls conversation after all.

I walk to the patio door and step outside into an unseasonal spring-like day which means our wedding will likely be a winter wedding,

dictated by my father and his damn will. “I do,” I assure Dash. “And because I don’t know what she’s told you, I’ll leave it at that. It’s not fair to Bella for me to tell you what she might not have.”

“Not fair to Bella,” he repeats. “Interesting. Man, you really got it bad for my little sis, don’t you?”

I lean on the wall and soak in the cute little backyard that is now mine as much as Bella’s. She really went all out on this place. Firepits, planters, and a built-in grill. “You have no idea just how bad.”

“She told me about the will.” His voice is tighter now, a distinct note of disapproval in his tone. I get it. He doesn’t like the situation, but then neither do I.

“Yes, well, what can I say? My father was a bastard in life and death.”

“What are you going to do if she doesn’t say yes to the whole fake fiancée thing?”

She hasn’t told him. Thank fuck I kept my mouth shut. “Again,” I repeat, “that’s between you two, but I need you to know I love her. Like you love Allie. I think I probably have for a very long time.”

Dash is silent a moment before he says, “I think you have, too. Be good to her, man. And make sure she knows she’s worth more to you than the fortune you stand to inherit with this contract bullshit.”

“I already have,” I assure him.

“Pretend you haven’t and do it again.”

“I think that’s probably good advice,” I concede.

“All right then. I’ll see you at dinner.” He disconnects.

“Everything okay?”

At Bella’s voice, I rotate to find her standing there looking as

beautiful in a fuzzy sweater and leggings as she does all done up for work. “That was your brother.”

“Oh, God. I haven’t told him about us. I haven’t had time. Did you tell him? What did he say?”

I close the space between us and brush away a wayward strand of her silky blonde hair. “I told him I love you and that you would fill him in on the rest.”

Her phone rings in her hand and she eyes the screen “That’s him.” She pushes to her toes and kisses me. “I’m going to tell him. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes, tell him.”

She smiles, as if this pleases her and answers the line before disappearing inside.

I follow her inside and Molly is nowhere in sight so I assume she’s with Bella. I sit down on the couch, and the entire idea of another will drives me to reach for a file. My father disliked it when I didn’t figure out his puzzles. Actually, he also disliked it when I *did* figure out his puzzles. And there was always a price to pay. I have Bella with me now. I can’t risk not knowing that price.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

BELLA

Dinner is at a steak place nowhere near downtown my father has to go to when he's in town. He hates crowds during his off time because he lives in them at the tracks. We arrive on time and valet the car. Tyler meets me on my side of the car. We're casual tonight, in jeans and sweaters, which I think is a good thing. Tyler is far more approachable, far more my father's kind of person, as he is now.

He tips the valet and I stare down at my ring as it glistens in the overhead lights. It's not a ring you buy for a fake fiancée. It's a ring you buy for your future wife, not that the ring has to be expensive to be proper. For me, it's about him picking it out, and not being able to resist buying it. It's a plus that he has good taste.

"Something wrong?" he asks, catching my hand in his hand and inspecting the ring with me.

"Not one little thing," I assure him, and when he slides his arm around me, I lean into him and let him guide me toward the door.

He doesn't believe me and halts us just before we enter the restaurant. "Why were you staring at it like it's an alien?"

I laugh. "I was just thinking of the story you told me about picking it out, and how special that makes it."

His shoulders actually slump, as if he'd been bracing himself for me to back out of everything. I push to my toes and kiss his cheek. "I'm happy, Tyler. I don't care about the will. I don't care about the six-month thing. And I'm glad you're meeting my father. He means the world to me."

He kisses me and says, "Me, too, baby."

A few minutes later, we join Dash and Allie at a round table in a private room. Allie notices my ring immediately. “Oh my God.” She eyes Tyler. “It’s stunning. And here I thought you were going to bastard your way to loneliness.”

Tyler grunts and Dash laughs. “Let me see, sis.”

I hold it out and he nods. “He did it right.” His eyes meet Tyler’s. “Keep on doing it right.”

My father steps into the room with the hostess fawning all over him. He’s a chick magnet times a thousand and it’s easy to see why. He’s a good-looking man, tall and blond, and always fit. He’s aged like a movie star, mostly because he’s not a smoker and not even much of a drinker. And, of course, he’s a star in his own right, and women like famous men.

Tyler stands and steps away from the table to shake his hand. They speak softly and despite my father’s support, I’m nervous about what is exchanged. My father tends to like most people, but when it comes to your future son-in-law, I’ve always believed he’d be critical.

Dash and I exchange a look and he mouths, “He can handle this.”

Sure enough, the two men laugh and then I’m on my feet hugging my father. “Good-looking guy,” he murmurs. “Says he loves you.”

I show him the ring. He eyes it and then me. “You did it then?”

“For real, though. We had a long talk and we’re really in love, Dad.”

“Okay, but does the puppy like him?”

“Yes, the puppy likes him.”

“That says a lot about character. Animals know. Let’s sit, baby girl. I want to hear all about your new life.”

I’m pretty sure he’s accepted Tyler, but sitting next to him

apparently means in between me and Tyler, so clearly, he's not done drilling my soon-to-be-husband. But the conversation is light and easy, filled with jokes, anecdotes, and more laughter. Near the end of the evening, my dad motions to Tyler. "Let's go outside and you can school me on fine whiskey. You look like you know."

Tyler eyes Dash, and the implication that Tyler drinks too much is in the air, but I don't think that's true at all. Tyler stands, "I know a thing or two about what makes for a good pour."

They disappear and I eye my brother. "He doesn't drink too much."

"Maybe that's because you're his drug of choice now. Just be careful. Give him something to do that doesn't include drinking. I'm sure you can figure something out."

Allie smacks him. "You're her brother."

Dash just laughs, and I change the topic to Becker, excited about my new signing.

When my dad and Tyler return, Tyler sits next to me, but it's clear the two men are in good spirits and I sense an easy friendship between them. "When do you leave, Dad?" I ask as the cheesecake arrives.

"Unfortunately, early tomorrow. I have a commercial shoot." He motions to Tyler with his fork "But your future husband here promised to bring you out to see me when my race reschedules."

At the future husband reference, Tyler squeezes my leg and I don't even have to look at him to know we're both feeling that same surreal feeling. This is real. We're really doing this.

When the time for goodbye arrives, Dash points at Tyler and promises my father, "I'll keep him in line."

"Do you know your sister?" Tyler asks. "I can assure you, she

doesn't need any help keeping me in line."

My father chuckles. "True story," he concludes, apparently quite pleased with Tyler's observation. He motions to me. "Come give me a hug."

I'm happy to oblige, but always sad when we leave each other. "I miss you," I say, holding onto him extra long.

He pulls back to look at me. "I miss you, too," he says, lowering his voice to add, "He loves you. Of that, I have no doubt. I'm here if you need me."

"I know, and that means everything."

Later, Tyler and I lie in the bed with the puppy at our feet, and he says, "What's your fairy tale wedding?"

"Italy," I say easily. "It's just so beautiful."

"I love Italy," he murmurs. "And my mother is there. I could task her with the legwork. She'll drive us crazy, but a wedding is a status thing to her. She'll do it right."

"I was thinking very small. My brother, father, Allie, your mom. I mean I know we could have this huge wedding with all kinds of famous people there, but that's the life we live every day. And our wedding isn't for them, it's for us."

His eyes soften. "I fall more in love with you every minute, Bella. I like that." He grabs his phone. "I'm looking at the calendar." He scrolls. "I was thinking the six months gave us a winter wedding, but it's right at the end of the summer. If we announce tomorrow, late August. Translation: hot. Fall would have been a better season, but thanks to my father, we're stuck with August."

"We'll have it indoors," I say. "It'll be perfect."

His hands stroke my hair. “Yeah, baby, it will.

I snuggle into his side, my head on his chest, with every intention of dreaming of my perfect wedding but unbidden I’m thinking about the day my mother died. My parents lived in Texas at the time and Dash hadn’t moved here just yet.

I was new to Hawk Legal and still nervous with Tyler and in general. I was in my office when Tyler called me over the intercom. “Bella, come to my office. It’s urgent.”

I’d imagined some major client issue I’d created, but when I arrived at Tyler’s office, he wasn’t even behind his desk. He was waiting on me when I walked in and he’d shut the door. I’d whirled around, a bad feeling destroying me.

“What’s going on?”

His hands had come down on my shoulders I didn’t even process the intimate touch. I’d frozen when he’d said, “Bella.” His voice had trembled and I have never heard his voice tremble since. “I have bad news.”

“What? What news?” I’d grabbed his jacket. I remember that now, but I didn’t then.

“Your mom. She’s gone.”

I’d been hysterical and he’d held me through it all. When I’d calmed down, I’d been on his sofa next to him. “Dash wanted to tell you. He’s on his way here, but it’s all over the news. He was afraid you’d find out the wrong way.”

“I don’t know what to do right now,” I’d said.

He’d gotten me whiskey and sat down next to me. “Stay with me. Or I can take you home and stay with you. I’m not going to leave you

alone.”

“I don’t know if I can walk out of here without making a scene.”

And so, we’d stayed, and he’d talked to me, all about her, for hours. I don’t know how I didn’t remember that until now. It’s like a mental block. It was the worst day of my life. I ease up and turn to him. “You were there for me when my mom died.”

“Not a day to remember, but yes, I was. Why are you even in that headspace?”

“I don’t know, but, Tyler, I blocked that day out. I shut down and shut it out. If I thought of you being there for me, I had to think of her dying. But that day, it changed us. It was always there, even when we weren’t thinking about it. When I think back now, I think it’s why we had those no-barrier debates. I know you don’t do that with anyone else.”

“No,” he says. “I absolutely do not.” He lifts up on his elbow. “How did you go from our wedding to this? Because that doesn’t seem like a positive thing.”

“No, it’s not about us. Or it is. We’re good. I feel happy. When my mother died, my life was good. Almost too good to be true. I loved my job and my new city and I was close to talking Dash into moving here. I felt guilty after she died for going out on my own, and not working for the company.”

“You were chasing your dreams like she did. I remember very clearly you telling me that’s what your mother wanted for you.”

“Yes,” I say. “She knew I had the Nashville bug, but the thing is, about a week before it happened, I had this clawing feeling something was wrong. I called everyone to check-in. I took NyQuil to sleep, I was

so uptight. I'm there again. That's what that memory is about. Just like then, I have a clawing feeling something is wrong. I don't feel like everything is okay, Tyler."

He sits up. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. Gavin gives me weird vibes. The uncertainty with the will is concerning. I just think something is off."

He sighs and shakes his head before he lays back down and pulls me down with him again, folding me close. "I do, too, baby. I do, too."

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

BELLA

It's strange to feel as if everything is wonderful, but something is wrong.

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 gossips 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 are a lot of comments about how much we as a couple make sense, about how different Tyler is with me by his side.

Apparently, he only scowls half the time, not all the time now.

Unfortunately, we have made very little progress when it comes to the will. Tyler worries about the board, he worries about another will surfacing that is not in our favor, as we've hoped. 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 case files though and found nothing, and now Tyler is going through each case, one by one, for a total of five. It's an incredible number of files. Tyler is relentless in his search for another will to the point it's disrupting him in other areas of his work.

By week two of our engagement, Tyler has a new secretary. Debbie actually never came back to work, and the talk over our engagement has calmed down. Tyler is also all moved into my place, and he's put

his up for a lease so that it remains a real estate holding. We've settled in together at the house, and Molly is growing like a weed. By week three, I've convinced Tyler to take a break from the Allen files.

"Just take a week off."

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

"You originally thought the will would grant you your rights now, not later, and that's why you wanted it. 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? They're dangerous people."

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

That morning I call Hawk Senior's old secretary. "Tyler's mother threw out almost everything of his father's. There's a document that is missing we really need for a litigation. Do you know where he might have kept personal items that I might recover?"

"That his wife wouldn't get to? Probably the Brook Club, but the police probably already went there. I told them about it, too."

We disconnect and 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. 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, your dad’s attorney, has to know the truth. Why not force him to tell you?”

“How?”

“You’re resourceful. I’ll be back soon.”

He walks me to the elevator, but he’s distracted by this problem. I’m glad we’re headed to my father’s rescheduled race this weekend. He needs a break. I step onto the sidewalk, rushing to my meeting, 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 to 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 barely stepped into my office when one of the board members appears in my doorway. “We’d like to talk to you, Tyler.”

“Who is we?”

“The board. We’re in the conference room.”

This is not good, and despite Gavin’s recent good behavior, I can’t help but think he’s somehow involved. I’m not following him like a puppy. “I’ll be right there.”

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.

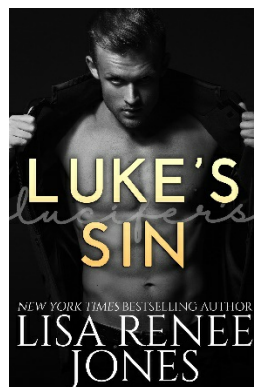
The end...for now

Readers, I know cliffhangers are never easy, but I promise the payoff of answers in book three, *Dirty Little Vow*, will be well worth the journey it took to get Tyler and Bella to get to their happily ever after!

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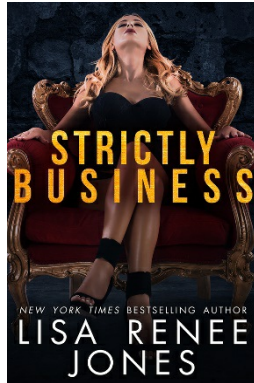
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UPCOMING RELEASE: STRICTLY BUSINESS



Damion West was the boy who stole my young heart and then broke it. That was a long time ago though and I'm not a girl susceptible to hot boys with big egos who just happen to kiss well anymore. Nor have I kept up with Damion West. Okay, I have. Everyone has. He's the CEO of West Enterprises, the one responsible for the landmark shift in the company after his father stepped down a few years back. But I only know this because he's notoriously loud on social media.

Everyone knows Damion West.

Just not like I do.

But that's another story better left untold.

It's hard sometimes to remember that I'm no slouch myself. Confidence isn't exactly my forte but I fake it well. I've worked with my parents' real estate firm catering to the rich and famous for years and I'm now one of the top agents in the country. I'm proud of this achievement, because I do work for my highly successful parents, and I could have just ridden the name. Instead, I earned respect. Respect matters to me for reasons I don't really discuss. Blue Enterprises is the company, which is also my name. Blue. Alana Blue. My mother, now retired, is Ellen Blue. My father is Richard Blue. It's a cool name. Kind of like West.

Everything was going well in my life, even if there was this sense of

predictability many might think my job doesn't allow. But it does. Everyone around me but my parents put on a show. It's all fake. Nothing is real.

Then one day I get a call from a female claiming to be the assistant to a powerful man who wants to work with me, and only me. It's all so mysterious and considering the people I work with, and my reputation for discretion, a little odd. Until I arrive at the luxurious villa and come face to face with you know who.

That's right.

Damion West.

And Lord help me he's now sexier, and more arrogant than ever.

Also it turns out that what Damion wants from me isn't as simple as a real estate contract.

TURN THE PAGE FOR AN EXCERPT FROM THE NECKLACE TRILOGY!

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THE NECKLACE TRILOGY



A necklace delivered to the wrong Allison: me. I'm the wrong Allison.

That misplaced gift places a man in my path. A man who instantly consumes me and leads me down a path of dark secrets and intense passion.

Dash Black is a famous, bestselling author, but also a man born into wealth and power. He owns everything around him, every room he enters. He owns me the moment I meet him. He seduces me oh so easily and reveals another side of myself I dared not expose. Until him. Until this intense, wonderful, tormented man shows me another way to live and love. I melt when he kisses me. I shiver when he touches me. And I like when he's in control, especially when I thought I'd never allow anyone that much power over me ever again.

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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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.