



MAISEY YATES

The Highest Price to Pay



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«HarperCollins»

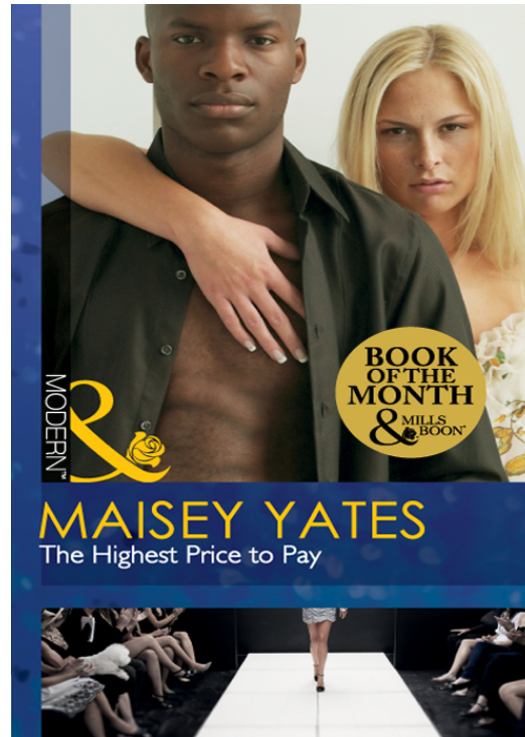
Yates M.

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‘While it has been reported that I may be missing my own soul, I have no interest in yours. This is about money.’ When Ella’s failing business comes wrapped up as part of Blaise Chevalier’s recent takeover, he plans to discard it – as is his usual way with surplus goods. Then he meets Ella! Cast from the same fiery mould as he is, she makes an intriguing adversary. Perhaps he could have a little fun with his new acquisition...As proud and strong as she is beautiful, Ella is determined to prove Blaise wrong about her business and her worth. As long as she hides her hint of vulnerability and denies the flicker of attraction between them when she catches her enemy’s eye...

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“I’m willing to work with you in whatever way I can to ensure our success.”

A wry smile curved his wicked mouth. He wasn’t fooled by her display of calm, and that made her angry. That he could see through her. That he was amused by her.

Ella extended her hand and he grasped it. Lightning shot through her, unexpected, instant, as if she’d touched a naked wire. It mingled with the anger, the adrenaline that was already pounding through her, and made her feel shaky, as if her knees might give out at any moment.

She looked up and met his eyes, and saw heat. Attraction. He looked down at where their hands were joined, his large and dark, hers small and pale. And marred. He ran his thumb over one of the scars that blazed a jagged path over the back of her hand.

The heat fled, leaving in its place an icy shiver that made her feel cold inside. She pulled her hand from his grasp.

His gaze lingered on her. “It will be a pleasure doing business with you.”

About the Author

MAISEY YATES was an avid Mills & Boon® Modern™ Romance reader before she began to write them. She still can't quite believe she's lucky enough to get to create her very own sexy alpha heroes and feisty heroines. Seeing her name on one of those lovely covers is a dream come true.

Maisey lives with her handsome, wonderful, diaper-changing husband and three small children across the street from her extremely supportive parents and the home she grew up in, in the wilds of Southern Oregon, USA. She enjoys the contrast of living in a place where you might wake up to find a bear on your back porch and then heading into the home office to write stories that take place in exotic urban locales.

The
Highest Price
to Pay
Maisey Yates



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Jenny, my editor.

Your confidence in me is always inspiring.

You've pushed me to become a better writer,
and you can't know how much that means to me.

And for my husband, Haven.

There's a little bit of you in all my heroes.

CHAPTER ONE

“THIS is it?” The man, tall dark and handsome as sin, who had just walked into Ella’s small boutique gave his surroundings a dismissive glance.

She forced a smile. “Yes. All of the clothing here in the boutique is a part of the Ella Stanton line, and at the moment everything is quite scaled back as we’re working on a...” *budget*. “Local level.”

The fashion industry wasn’t a cheap one to operate in, and Ella was most definitely still working her way up. But she was able to have her line produced, and sell it in her own boutique, and that certainly wasn’t a small feat.

“I was merely curious,” he said, taking a step toward her, “about my most recently acquired assets.”

Ella blinked. “And by that you mean?”

“The Ella Stanton label, and the boutique, such as it is.” His voice was smooth, husky as though he were issuing some kind of practiced pickup line, even though what he was really saying was far too ridiculous to be true. And yet, there was something else there, a hardness that lingered just beneath that suave accent. It was a hardness, an authority, that made all of the words that were swirling in her head get caught in her throat.

He took a step toward her and recognition punched her in the stomach with brutal force. Blaise Chevalier. Rogue investor, ruthless corporate raider and tabloid superstar. He was famous in Paris or, rather, infamous. Wealthier than Midas, beyond handsome with his deep mocha skin, and striking toffee-colored eyes, perfect bone structure, good enough to be a model, except he didn’t possess the androgynous quality many male models did. No, Blaise was utterly masculine, tall and broad shouldered with a physique that was meant to be wrapped in an expensive, custom-made suit.

She should have recognized him immediately. Her only excuse was that mere photographs simply didn’t do him justice. Three dimensional, in the flesh, he was something entirely different than he was in the paper. None of the carefree, playboy demeanor was present now. Just a dark intensity that made her insides tremble, a sensual energy that no photograph would ever be able to capture.

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a thin stack of folded papers. It wasn’t cheap, bright white printer paper like she used in her office. This was cream colored, thick and textured. Official looking. A tremor skated down her spine and she shook it off, straightening her shoulders and holding out her hand.

He gave her the documents and stood there looking at her, his expression impossible to read. Ella looked down at the papers in her hand, skimming them frantically. Her stomach sank to her toes and the words blurred slightly.

“Would you mind translating? I’m not fluent in legalese,” she said, hoping her voice didn’t sound as echoey and distant to him as it did to her.

“Bottom line? I am now the lien holder on your business loan. A sizable amount.”

She felt her face get hot, the way it always did when she thought of the screaming amount of debt she’d gotten in to get her business off of the ground.

“I’m aware of that. How did this...happen?” If it had been anyone else, she simply wouldn’t have believed them. But she knew this man, even if it was only by reputation. And it wasn’t a good thing that he was here with bank documents that possessed both the name of her business and the stark truth of just how little actually belonged to her.

“The bank that originally held your loan has been bought out by a larger financial institution. They auctioned off most of the small business loans, including yours. I bought your loan in a bundle with several others that are of much greater interest to me.”

“So you own my business...and I’m uninteresting?” Ella pushed her blond hair off her face and sat down in one of the chairs reserved for her boutique customers.

“That’s the summation.”

It didn’t get worse. It couldn’t. And at that moment she just wanted to fall to her knees and scream at the sky. Because hadn’t she been through enough? How much was she expected to overcome in her lifetime?

Blaise Chevalier had a reputation as a man who was self-indulgent, reckless and ruthless enough to betray his own brother in the coldest way imaginable. He crushed companies, large or small, if they passed into his sphere of power and he deemed them to be unprofitable.

And he was now the owner of her boutique, her workshop, her apartment...everything down to her sewing machines. Everything in her life that meant anything.

“And what’s your conclusion?” she asked, standing again. She wasn’t going to crumble. Not now. Not when the stakes were so high. Her career, her line, it was her life. It was everything she’d worked so hard to achieve, a dream she wasn’t about to let go of now, not while she still had some hope.

“I’m in the business of making money, Ms. Stanton. And your boutique and clothing line are not making enough to cover the expense of running them and earn you a decent living.”

“They will. I need a couple of years. By then, with some extra advertising I’ll have built a larger client base and I can start doing the bigger runway shows, getting broader exposure.”

He raised one dark brow. “And then?”

“And then...” She took a deep breath. She knew this. She had everything planned down to what color her dress would be at Fashion Week. “Then Paris Fashion Week, New York, Milan. More boutiques picking up my collection. I hope to have a retail line. I have it all in a portfolio if you’d like to see it. It’s my five-year plan.”

He had the gall to look bored, disinterested. “I don’t have five years to wait for a venture to pay out. And as a result you don’t have five years, either.”

A hot shot of anger infused her with much-needed adrenaline. “What do you want me to do, march up and down the boulevard with a sandwich board strapped to my chest to drum up enough business to satisfy you? These things take time. Fashion is a very competitive industry.”

“I was thinking something a bit more high-end, something with more...class.” The slight curl of his lips suggested he didn’t think she possessed any class at all.

She scrunched her curls, curls she knew were a little bit disheveled. That was the idea. She didn’t do anything by accident, not even things that looked accidental. Everything, down to her spiky heeled, open-toed boots, was about her image and her business. Was about cultivating interest in her brand.

“Well, you weren’t talking class, you were talking urgency.”

“I thought you might be after a slightly more upscale clientele as opposed to tourists and backpackers,” he said, his rich, slightly accented voice sending a shiver through her. Stupid. She talked to a lot of French men who were looking for clothing for their wives or girl-friends...or themselves, she should be used to the smooth charm of the accent by now.

For some reason it sounded different coming from him, a harder edge to complement the rounded vowels. His English was tinged with French, but also with another flavor she couldn’t place, something that made his speech all the more exotic and fascinating.

It didn’t change the fact that he had walked into her boutique like he owned the place and then proceeded to tell her that, in effect, he did.

“What’s the point of advertising at all if you’re just going to demand that I pay you back with money I haven’t got?” she asked.

“I didn’t say I was going to do that. I said that I expect you to start turning major profits in much less than five years’ time.”

“Have a magic wand in that briefcase?” She knew how to handle people like him, people who exercised control over others. Never show fear. Never show weakness. A hard-learned lesson, one she carried with her, always.

“I don’t need magic,” he said, his full lips curving slightly.

No, she imagined he didn’t. He wasn’t only famous for being the bad boy of the business world, he was famous for making millions just a few years after leaving his father’s investing firm and stepping out on his own.

More than once, when she was struggling to make a loan payment, she’d seen an article about him in the business section of the paper and wondered how in the world he’d done it. Gone off on his own like that and made an almost instant success out of himself.

“Fairy dust?” she asked, crossing her arms beneath her breasts.

“Only the weak need luck and magic,” he said. “Success comes to those who act, to those who make things happen.”

Things like shutting down businesses and wrecking what *Style* magazine had called the wedding of the century. No secret that Blaise Chevalier made things happen, things that served him well. And that he did it with absolutely no conscience.

“And what exactly do you want to make happen with *my* company?” she asked, feeling her stomach tighten.

She was at a loss. She was going to lose control of her business, at best. At worst she would lose it entirely and if that happened, what was left?

No workshop. No boutiques. No industry parties. None of the friends she’d made thanks to the meager status that she’d achieved. It was like standing on the edge of an endless chasm staring down into nothing. The void was so dark, so empty. She’d crawled her way out of there once, and she couldn’t go back. She wouldn’t sink back down into oblivion, into nothing. She wouldn’t let them be right about her.

“I’ll admit, the fashion industry is of very little interest to me. But when I purchased the loan bundle from your financial institution, yours came wrapped up with what I actually wanted. A little research has shown me that it is time for me to pay more attention to the fashion industry, perhaps. It’s much more lucrative than I had thought.”

“If you play your cards right, yes, there’s a lot of money to be made,” she said. Although, massive amounts of money had never been what it was about for her. It was the success.

“Yes, if you play your cards right. But you’re not exactly a master of the game. I, however, am.” He moved closer to her, ran his hand along the carved wooden back of the chair she’d been sitting in earlier. She took a step back, strangely aware of the movements of his fingers over the intricate carving, almost like he was touching her, not the chair. Her heart pounded a little bit faster.

“I’m hardly a novice. I went to school for business and design. I have a business plan and a couple of investors.”

“Low-level investors that lack the proper connections or sufficient funding. You need more than that.”

“What do I need?”

“Publicity and cash and your five-year plan becomes a six-month plan.”

“That’s not even...”

“It is, Ella. I can have you at Paris Fashion Week next year, and in that time frame your work will have graced magazine covers, billboards. Selling your own work in your own boutique is one thing, but having worldwide distribution and recognition is another. I can give you that.”

She could feel the reins slipping out of her fingers, feel herself losing control. She gritted her teeth. “In return for what? My eternal soul?”

A short chuckle escaped his lips. “While it has been reported that I may be missing my own soul, I have no interest in yours. This is about money.”

It was about more than that for her. Money was money. She could make money doing a lot of different things. But this, this was about being something. Being someone. She didn’t want to have this man, anyone, so involved in her business, so involved in her achievements.

She didn't want it, but she wasn't stupid.

The amount of money she owed, money that was now owed to him, was staggering. More than she could hope to pay back with the way things stood. She was in debt to him up to her Petrova diamond earrings and if she ever hoped to get out of that debt, her business had to succeed. More than succeed, it had to reach the kinds of heights that, at the moment, were firmly in the realm of fantasy.

"You think you can just dictate to me?"

"I know I can. As the lien holder I have to be satisfied that you're doing everything in your power to ensure the success of your business. I'm not overly convinced at the moment," he said, his eyes sweeping the small boutique in a dismissive manner.

As if it were nothing. As if she were nothing. Her stomach burned with emotion, anger, helplessness. Fear. She hated the fear most of all. In theory she'd gotten over being afraid of bullies a long time ago.

"What if I don't want you running *my* business for me?" she asked, despising the slight quiver in her voice. She wasn't some scared little mouse and she wouldn't behave like one. She'd endured worse than this, and she'd triumphed. She would do it now, too.

"Then I pull the plug. I don't have the time to waste on a venture that isn't going anywhere, and it's not in my nature to simply sit back."

"But you'll be collecting interest on your investment won't you?"

"Twenty-five percent," he said.

"Highway robbery," she responded, her voice finding some of its strength.

"Not in the least. I will be working for that money, and I will expect you to do the same."

"And you expect me to do as you say?"

He gripped the back of the chair, his large hands drawing her attention again. His appearance was so together, so perfectly polished that it would be easy to assume he was a civilized man. But beneath all of that, beneath the well-fitted suit and hand-crafted Italian shoes that were so gorgeous they gave her heart palpitations, was a hardness that betrayed him. A hardness that spoke of the ruthlessness that he was so famous for. That let her know he wouldn't hesitate to pull everything out from under her if it was in his best interest.

"Consider yourself lucky, Ella. Normally I would charge a hefty hourly fee to give out business advice. In this scenario, unless you make money, you don't give me any money. This is fair, more than fair."

She blinked rapidly. "Are you expecting me to thank you for this hostile takeover?"

"It's not hostile at all. It's business. I invest where it is advantageous to do so, I do not waste time when it's not. There is a place for charity, and this is not it."

Ella looked around her carefully organized boutique, at the racks of clothing, each one her own design. She'd painted the crisp black and white walls herself, had installed the glossy marble floor with the help of a couple of male models who'd done runway shows for her. It was personal to her, there was no way she could reduce all of her hard work to numbers and projections. But he'd done it.

And he would do more than that. Even without his reputation she wouldn't doubt him. The glint of fire in his golden eyes and the firm set of his angular jaw told her that he was not a man to be taken lightly.

"You're quite into the party scene, aren't you?"

Blaise watched as Ella stiffened, her bubblegum-pink lips tightening into a firm line. She didn't like his assessment of her. She didn't like his presence full stop, that much was clear.

But she could hardly deny that when her picture made it into the paper, it was because she was at some high profile soiree. It seemed she went to any and every event in Paris, at least those she could gain admittance to. And, from what he'd discovered, there were spare few she couldn't. A gorgeous American heiress with a sensational, tragic backstory was always in demand. And she took advantage of that.

“It’s called promo, weren’t we discussing that earlier?” she asked, arching one finely groomed brow.

Yes, she was beautiful, fine bone structure, bright blue eyes overly enhanced now by a thick line of blue pencil drawn all the way around them, making them look wider, more cat-shaped. It was obvious that she had no problem drawing attention to herself. She was wearing a short black dress that displayed her long, shapely legs to perfection, and ornate ankle boots with buckles and a cutout at the toe that showed off shockingly pink toenails.

A sharp shot of lust stabbed at his stomach. He dismissed it. This wasn’t about lust; this was about business.

He’d learned long ago to separate the two. Learned never to let desire lead him around like a dog on a leash.

“It’s ineffective,” he said sharply. “Yes, it gets your name in the paper to go to every night club opening in Paris, but it’s not elevating you to the level this boutique suggests you want to be at.”

“At this point, I just need to get my name in the paper. I do what I can to drum up interest in the Ella Stanton label.”

“You don’t do enough.”

“Thank you,” she said, her tone flat.

“It cheapens you.”

Her blue eyes widened. “It isn’t as though I’m out engaging in questionable activities, you make it sound like I’m dancing on tables while shouting the name of my label. I always behave in a professional manner.”

“You have to surround yourself with potential clients. Tell me, are any of those hard-partying patrons of the events you frequent going to come and spend money on your clothes?”

“Some of them...”

“Not enough of them. You need to build connections in the industry. You need to build real connections with the sort of clientele you want.”

“I’m working up to that point but it isn’t as though invitations to exclusive events land in my mailbox every day.” She shifted her weight and put her hand on one shapely hip.

He noticed them then. Patches of pink, shiny skin marring the creamy perfection of her fingers. This was what had made her instantly newsworthy when she’d come to Paris. The scarred, American heiress who wore her pain like a trophy and used her personal tragedy to her best advantage. Her sob story, the house fire that had left her burned, was half of her appeal to the media, and she made the most of it.

A quality he admired. Although, his first thought upon seeing that Ella Stanton’s business loan was rolled in with the others he’d wanted to purchase had been to unload it as quickly as possible. He didn’t have time to waste on a spoiled little rich girl playing at a career that suited her idea of over-the-top glamour.

After looking at her sales figures, he’d been forced to put that idea away, and talking to a couple of industry professionals and gaining insight on their opinion of Ella’s talent had further altered his first impression. She wasn’t playing; she was good at what she did.

She was working hard to advance her line, harder than he’d imagined she might be. But he knew he could take it further. Take her further.

The bottom line was profit; it was all that mattered. And he would wring every ounce of profit possible out of the Ella Stanton label.

“They do land in mine. And I know what to do when such opportunities for networking present themselves. I already have connections you can only dream of. I know you’ve read about my ability to crush companies if the need arises, but I can build them, too. In fact, I excel at it. The only question is which of my famed skills would you like to see employed here?”

There was a determined glint in her eyes, one that only served to add weight to the desire already settled in his gut.

“What exactly do you require of me?” she asked, speaking through her tightly gritted teeth.

“It’s simple. When it comes to matters of business, you do as I say. To the letter.”

“So all you want is total control then? Not too much to ask.” Her tone was even, her expression placid, but he could sense the barely controlled emotion that was all but radiating from her.

“What I want is to take your brand and make it a household name. To have every fashionista wanting the next big thing out of the Ella Stanton line. To have your clothing everywhere, from high-end boutiques to department stores. If I have to take control to see that happen, I will.”

“What if I can buy out the loan?”

“You would rather try to keep going on your own than take this opportunity?”

“This is my business, not your moneymaking venture,” she said, breathing hard, full breasts rising. He couldn’t help but let his eyes linger there, to go further and admire the small indent of her waist, the round curve of her hip. A shame he didn’t mix business with the pleasures of the flesh. It was too complicated, and when it came to women, he didn’t do complicated.

“Do you think anyone would loan you money at this point, Ella? Your debt to income ratio is not the sort of thing a bank would want to see.”

Color flooded her pale cheeks. “I know it’s not what it could be but my plan is good and...”

“There are a lot of variables in your plan, from what I hear. And while it may be good in a general sense, it is not going to be guarantee enough for most banks as things stand. You’ve accumulated a lot more debt in the time since you took out this loan.”

“Fashion shows are expensive. The last one I did cost me five figures, and I only earned a percentage back.” Her voice cracked.

Ella felt like she was watching everything slide through her fingers. All the years of working toward something no one had believed she could achieve. She’d pushed herself so hard to make it this far. She’d done it on her own, without support from her family. The boutiques, the fashion line, they were hers. They were everything.

But now they were his. And unless she wanted to lose them altogether, she had to play his game. She’d known it would come down to that, from the second he’d shown her the paperwork, she’d known. She just hadn’t wanted to accept it. But she had to now. There wasn’t another choice.

Giving up her control, inviting someone else into her life, her business, was as close to a living nightmare as she could imagine. But losing everything went so far beyond a nightmare that she couldn’t even think about it.

She sucked in a sharp breath and schooled her face into what she hoped was an expression of calm serenity. “I’m willing to work with you in whatever way I can to ensure our success.”

A wry smile curved his wicked mouth. He wasn’t fooled by her display of calm, and that made her angry. He could see through her, was amused by her. She curled her hands into fists and dug her fingernails into her palms.

“This isn’t personal, Ella. This is about the bottom line, and I intend to see a substantial profit. If at any point it becomes clear that isn’t going to happen, I will abandon the project.”

Ella extended her hand and he grasped it. Lightning shot through her, unexpected, instant, as if she’d touched a naked wire. It mingled with the anger, the adrenaline that was already pounding through her and made her feel shaky, like her knees might give out at any moment.

She looked up and met his eyes, and saw heat. Attraction. He looked down at where their hands were joined, his large and dark, hers small and pale and marred. He ran his thumb over one of the scars that blazed a jagged path over the back of her hand.

The heat fled her, leaving in its place an icy shiver that made her feel cold inside. She pulled her hand from his grasp.

His gaze lingered on her. “It will be a pleasure doing business with you.”

CHAPTER TWO

“HERE it is.” Ella pushed open the door to her workshop and led the way in and Blaise followed. It had been a couple of days since their meeting in her boutique.

It had given him time to assess some of the other companies he now held loans for, and it had also given him the chance to decide that Ella’s was the one he wanted to focus on. The more research he’d done, the more he’d become convinced that the moneymaking potential was there.

When he’d called this morning about seeing her studio she’d been irritated. Even now she was barely looking at him, blue eyes slanted the other way when she spoke to him. He found it highly amusing.

The workshop was spacious, with a flair that matched its owner. Each steel beam that ran the length of the ceiling was painted a different bright color, and the ceiling itself was done in black. It reminded him of how she dressed.

Today she was wearing black leggings and a long shirt that was belted at the waist. The top clung to her curves and he was hard-pressed to keep his eyes off her tight, rounded bottom as she walked ahead of him and to the back of the room.

“I keep all of my samples and patterns here.” She gestured to the back wall that was lined with rows of full racks, filled with brightly colored clothing.

“You have a large body of work.”

She put her hands on her waist and blew out a breath. “I do. It’s expensive work, though. I have a couple of investors, but the start-up alone was huge and shows are...well, they’re more than I have at my disposal.”

His eyes were drawn to her lips again, still painted that same bubblegum-pink. He couldn’t help but wonder if she tasted like bubblegum. Or if she just tasted like a woman, sweet and earthy at the same time.

His body responded to the idea of that and he had to grit his teeth hard to fight the rising tide of attraction that was building inside of him.

“I’d like to take a closer look at some of the sales records for your boutique,” he said, moving to stand in front of one of the racks, pretending to look at the clothing there.

He could hear her teeth click together. “All right.” She definitely wasn’t happy.

He turned to her and she looked away again. He cupped her chin gently and her blue eyes flew to his, wide and utterly shocked. It was the first time he’d seen her mask come down completely. It was fleeting.

“Did you need something?” she asked.

He ignored his body’s emphatic *hell yes*. “Just those sales records. It’s business, Ella. I need to know what I’m working with here.”

“Sorry,” she said curtly, stepping away from his touch. “I’m not accustomed to people rooting around in my things.” She pulled a laptop out of the oversize bag she was carrying with her and set it on one of the worktables. She hit the power button then leaned forward, idly twisting the large, flower-shaped ring on her finger.

“I promise, it will be quick and painless.”

She raised an eyebrow and gave him a sideways glance. “Is that what you say to your dates?”

The minute the words came out of her mouth, Ella knew she’d overdone it. There was a small, nearly imperceptible change in Blaise’s expression, a curve to his full lips, a golden glint in his eyes. He moved to where she was standing at the table and leaned in, his eyes never leaving hers.

“My dates never need the reassurance,” he said, his voice surprisingly soft, his face so close to hers that she could feel his breath fanning over the bare skin of her neck. She shivered slightly, hoped he didn’t notice. “They know what they want, and they know I will give it to them.”

Another biting retort clung to the tip of her tongue, but she held it back. Blaise had a well-established reputation, and he wasn't the only one.

She was known in the industry for being bold, even a little bit brash at times, but that was an act, a wall she put up to separate herself from the world. It was to keep the woman she was inside safe, protected by her facade. And in the context of small parties and backstage at shows, it worked well, helped her establish dominance.

But here and now, with Blaise, she was in over her head.

They were alone, and he was close enough that if she moved, just a little bit, her lips would touch his cheek. That thought made her throat go dry, made her stomach tighten almost painfully.

She turned her focus back to the computer and cleared her throat. She clicked on the folder that had all of her business stuff in it and turned the laptop so that it was facing Blaise.

He scrolled through a couple of spreadsheets, his expression never changing. He was like a solid piece of mahogany. Hard and unforgiving. Beautiful, too, but it didn't change the fact that a collision with him would be absolutely devastating.

"You do pretty well," he said, closing the laptop screen.

She let out a breath, one she didn't realize she'd been holding. But with Blaise, it always felt like she was waiting for the guillotine to drop. Waiting for him to decide none of this was worth it, to have him decide to call the loan in. Like it or not, their unwanted alliance was her best hope for a future for her clothing line, and that meant she needed to keep working with him, no matter how much it made her want to scream.

"Yes," she said. "I do. It's a small boutique, but it's in a prime location."

"And yet you have very little profit."

"I have almost no profit," she said dryly. "It's an expensive business. And now that the boutique has gotten busier, I've had to get employees."

No matter how successful she got in the industry, it required more of her. More time, more money, more manpower, and with every increase in income, there was an increase in cost. It made it nearly impossible for her to get ahead, and certainly impossible to make the kind of jump in status that Blaise seemed to want her to make.

"I like what I've seen here. I'd like to invest more." He named a sum that made her feel slightly ill.

He said it so casually, as though it meant nothing. Although, to a man with a billion dollars, or whatever it was he had these days, it likely was nothing. To a woman who ate instant noodle soup for dinner most nights, it definitely wasn't nothing.

She dealt in large amounts of money, but almost the moment they hit her bank account they were gone again, going to the next big thing. And this was more money than she'd ever thought to see in a lifetime.

"That's...a lot of money," she said.

"Yes, it is. But I don't believe in going halfway. I want this to be a success, and that means putting in the necessary investment to ensure that it is."

It was a slippery slope. It wasn't a loan: it was an investment, but this put her over her head in debt as far as she was concerned. It gave him more power. It pushed her out further.

But what choice was there? If she didn't take it she would keep on with her tortoise pace and Blaise would grow impatient. And that would be the end of everything.

None of this had mattered three days ago when Blaise Chevalier was just a name in the tabloids. But now he was the driving force behind the Ella Stanton label. Ironical that he even owned her name. It felt like he owned her. Allowing him to invest that much money would only tighten the chains that she felt closing around her wrists.

But it was all she could do, accept the fact she was indebted to him until she could buy her freedom. At least at some point she would have the hope of paying him back, of buying him out. If she didn't go along with him she wouldn't have anything.

The bottom line, the amount earned, had never mattered as much to her as the level of success. She'd happily keep eating instant soup for the next ten years if it meant making herself a success at what she loved. But that wasn't an option anymore, and what had only ever been a concern for her out of practicality had now become the primary focus.

"Then we both want the same thing," she said, even though it was a lie. He wanted money, and while she did want to make money, it was about more than that to her. It was about being something, accomplishing her goals. Becoming more than anyone around her had ever believed she would be.

A slow smile spread over his face and her heart thundered in response. She didn't know why. Except that when he smiled, it didn't look like an expression of happiness. It was more like watching a predator, satisfied in the knowledge that he was closing in on his prey.

She had a feeling that, in this scenario, she was very much the gazelle to his panther. She also knew that he was more than comfortable going in for the kill. A little blood on his hands wouldn't cause him to lose a moment of sleep. He was a man who accomplished his goals no matter who got in his way. Not a comforting thought.

"More or less," he said, slowly, his accent pronounced as he drew out the syllables, his voice enticing, despite the underlying danger. He didn't need to pounce on his prey, he could talk his prey into coming to him, and that made him even more deadly.

"Somehow I think as far as the method goes we might be more on the 'less' side than the 'more' side."

"Certainly possible." The deep, husky quality to his voice was shiver inducing. It made her stomach clench tight, made her entire body feel jittery, like she'd overindulged in espresso at one of the local cafés.

"Where are you from originally?" she asked, feeling stupid the minute the words left her mouth. Because it was his accent, and the strange curling sensation created in her stomach, that had prompted her to ask. And she really didn't want him to know that.

Didn't want him to think that anything about him interested her at all. Who knows what he might do with that bit of information.

"France, originally. My father is a very wealthy businessman, a native of France. But I spent a portion of my childhood in Malawi, with my mother."

"Why wasn't she in Paris?"

He shrugged. "My parents divorced. She wished to return to her homeland." He said it with as little interest, as little emotion, as he said everything. She couldn't help but wonder if it had really been so casual as he made it sound. To go from Paris to Malawi as a child couldn't possibly be a nonevent; neither could being separated from his father.

Although, she knew as well as anyone that sometimes cutting ties with family wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Still, it made her wonder about him. Made her feel a small sliver of sympathy for the boy he'd been. Why? He clearly didn't feel anything for her, and she wasn't asking for it.

They might have a tentative truce, but it was tenuous. She had his word, and his word alone that they would work on her business, rather than him simply wiping it out of existence by demanding money she didn't have.

Not a comforting thought considering his reputation. And that meant her mind had to stay on matters of business, and not the exotic flavor of his accent. Not on the boy he'd been, but the man he'd become.

“So, being that you’re the mastermind,” she said, breaking the silence, hoping to do something about the odd, thick tension that had settled between them, to get rid of that strange, tight feeling in her chest, “what are your plans?”

“I was thinking a Times Square billboard and a cover for *Look* magazine.”

She coughed. “What?”

“I know the editor for the magazine. She said if I could get a look from you that would go well with a spring editorial that she would use it for an ad and the cover.”

“But that’s...that’s huge exposure.”

“*Oui*. I told you I was good.”

“Very good.” She felt like she’d been hit in the head, dazed and a little bit woozy. “It doesn’t seem possible. She would do that, just because she knows you?”

“I had her look up your work online. She was impressed by you. It’s hardly charity.”

“But it’s...”

“I told you I could turn your five-year plan into a six-month plan,” he said, his tone laced with arrogance. “She might like to interview you, too. Do a designer profile.”

It was the kind of exposure she both dreamed of and dreaded. The kind that would give her the success she knew she was capable of. The kind that would give her a lot of exposure, both personal and private.

She’d already dealt with it on a small scale. It was easy to just put up the wall, smile and laugh, turn for the picture to expose the scar on her neck. Give the people what they wanted. She didn’t bother to hide the past, the marks it had left on her skin.

She also kept some of it to herself. She didn’t want to flaunt the worst of it. She gave just enough, just enough that no one pressed for more. Not that there was anything left to be said that could hurt her. She’d heard every insult, every cutting remark. Some of it from the mouth of her own mother. She’d survived. She hadn’t crumbled then, she wouldn’t crumble now.

She was going to grasp the opportunity with both hands. Make the most of her unasked for association with Blaise. If the man could get her a billboard ad, a cover and an interview, she might grow to resent him less.

“That would be great, more than that, it would be amazing.”

“I know you love publicity,” he said, one side of his mouth curved up.

“I like the sales that come with it,” she said, her voice flat.

Publicity, in a certain sense, she could take or leave.

“What would you pick for the shoot?”

Ella crossed the room, grateful for the distance between them. She didn’t know what it was about him that made her feel tight and jittery inside.

His looks, his reputation, it all combined to make him a pretty potent mix. One she was afraid she didn’t know how to handle. She worked with male models all the time, and their boyish quality didn’t bother her at all. Sure, sometimes when she measured their finely toned physiques she got a mild thrill, but she was a woman after all, and they were men.

But it was nothing like the intense jumble of feeling she got when she just looked at Blaise. One part attraction mingled with a lot of nerves and anger.

And he was no boyish model. He was a man, a man who, if the tabloids were to be believed, knew exactly how to handle a woman in the bedroom.

She felt her cheeks getting hot and she turned her face away from him, pretending to study some clothes on another rack. She bit her cheek again, harder this time. She had to focus, and not on how good Blaise’s physique looked in his suit.

She had noticed of course. Everyone had a thing that attracted their attention and hers happened to be a well dressed man. But he wasn’t her type; his suit was her type. That was the beginning and end of it.

She didn't have the time or the inclination to encourage some weird attraction to the man who had just performed a hostile takeover of her life. She didn't have the time or inclination to indulge in an attraction to anyone, but him most of all.

She could just imagine the look of abject horror on his face if she were to make a move on him. If he were to see the parts of her body that she kept carefully concealed. A man who dated a different, gorgeous woman every week wouldn't want to handle any damaged merchandise.

And she was that and then some.

"Blue, I think," she said, turning her focus back to the clothes. Back to her job. "This one." She pulled out a short blue dress with long ruched sleeves. "With the right boots this will be stunning."

She looked at him, waited for a flicker of...something. His expression remained neutral. "If you think it will work."

"Don't you want to weigh in?" she asked, both perturbed and relieved that he didn't seem to have an opinion on the matter.

"Why?"

"Because. Aren't we...isn't that why you're here?"

He came over to stand beside her, his eyes on the dress. When he reached out and took the thin fabric between his thumb and forefinger, rubbing it idly, it was like he was touching her hand again, running his finger over her scar. No one did that. Ever. Another reason she had no problem showing off the more superficial scars: it kept people from getting too close.

Not Blaise, apparently.

She touched the back of her hand, rubbed at it, trying to make the tingling sensation ease.

"I am not overly concerned with fashion. I leave these sorts of decisions to you."

"I have decision-making power?"

He turned to face her, the impact of his golden eyes hitting her like a physical force. "If I sat down at one of these sewing machines you would get nothing. I leave you to your expertise, you leave me to mine."

That was more than she'd expected from him. Far more. And yet, it didn't exactly inspire warm fuzzy feelings. He was right. If she walked, he had nothing. Nothing but sewing machines he didn't know how to use. An interesting realization. She'd underestimated her own power in the situation. And she would use it. She had to.

"So you're not expecting to dress my models for me?" she asked, keeping her voice stilted, cool.

"I never said I was."

"Your reputation goes before you," she said archly. "I thought I was dealing with a pirate. Someone who makes his living by preying on the bounty of others."

He chuckled, a rusty sound, as though he were unaccustomed to it. "All those stories you've read about me."

"They aren't true?" she asked, hoping, for some reason, that they might be lies. That he wasn't the callous, unfeeling man the media made him out to be.

"Every last one of them is true," he said, his eyes never leaving hers. "All of them. My decisions are made for my own benefit. It is not charity that I allow you this measure of control, it is what's best for the company, and what's best for my wallet. That's the beginning and end of it."

It wasn't spoken like a threat. His voice was smooth, even as ever. Controlled. He was simply stating what was. But just like that, the glimmer of hope was replaced with a heavy weight that settled in her stomach, made her feel slightly sick.

"Right, well, I guess I'll take what I can." She hated that he made her feel so nervous, so unsure. She usually did better than this. She was accustomed to taking command of whatever room she was in, accustomed to having the control over conversation and interaction.

She didn't seem to have it in his presence. She couldn't even control her body's response to him. She wasn't even sure what to call the response. He scared her, which made her angry. He was

attractive and when he looked at her the appraisal of his compelling gaze made her stomach twist. It was confusing. A mass of jumbled feelings she just didn't have time to sort through.

She breathed in deep, hoping to find the numbness that helped her get through life. That helped her get through uncomfortable moments. That helped her deal with people who wanted to hurt her.

She couldn't find it, couldn't shield herself from the things he was making her feel. He looked at her, looked at her as though he could see right through all the walls she'd spent the past eleven years building to partition herself off from the world. And she felt naked. Like he could see the worst of her scars, into her, past the damage on her skin.

"Do you have pictures of this dress?" he asked, pulling her out of her thoughts, his focus on the business at hand helping rebuild some of her crumbling defenses.

"I take pictures of every piece. I have them in my portfolio."

"Excellent. Email it to me and I'll send it to Karen at *Look*."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

He turned to go then. Without even saying goodbye. It was like his mere move to exit should be sufficient. Standing in her own studio, he managed to make her feel like she was the one who had been dismissed.

She gritted her teeth against rising annoyance. Annoyance and something else that made her feel hot all over, made her face prickle.

She opened her laptop again and got ready to send the email to Blaise, using the address he'd so helpfully provided on the loan paperwork, those documents that gave him so much power.

So much power over her. She hated that. Hated him a little bit, too. This was meant to be her success, not his. The evidence of how far she'd come. Of all that she was capable of.

She attached the picture and left the body of the email blank. She didn't have anything to say to the man. She would work with him, do what she had to do to hold on to her business. And as soon as she could, she was paying him back and getting things back on track. Back on her terms.

She looked at the clock on her computer's task bar and swore mildly. She'd been invited to a Parisian socialite's birthday party and she needed to make an appearance. Blaise might not think it was effective marketing, but she thought differently.

He might own her business, but despite what she'd thought in her most dramatic moments, he didn't own her.

And she had a party to go to.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE was a pro at working a room, that was certain. Blaise tipped his drink to his lips but didn't take in any of the bubbly liquid. Alcohol and the buzz that came with it held little appeal to him. Losing control wasn't his idea of fun.

He watched as Ella talked to the small group of women that stood around her. She laughed, lifting up her foot slightly so they could get a better look at the electric-pink stilettos she was wearing.

The dress was sleeveless, showing off rough discolored patches of skin, the flesh on the upper portion of her left arm obscured completely by the marks. She seemed unconcerned, making grand, sweeping gestures as she talked.

He noticed that while no one looked at her with disdain, they did stand at a distance. He wondered if the scars were to blame. Ella didn't seem to care either way.

She was bubbly, confident. She was smiling, something he didn't know if he'd ever seen her do, not in a genuine way. But then, she didn't like him very much. Something he should be used to by now.

He set his drink on the bar and wove through the crowded club. Ella looked up from her friends and he saw her blue eyes widen, watched as her smile became forced.

"Mr. Chevalier, I wasn't expecting to see you here," she said, her manner smooth, but he could feel the strain it was taking for her to remain composed.

"I was invited, but wasn't sure if I could make it." This wasn't his usual scene. If he wanted to find quick and easy female company then he might bother with party attendance, otherwise, he had no reason to go to events like this.

Lately he hadn't even felt compelled to find a temporary lover. He found the games tiresome. Sex had been a catharsis after Marie had left, a way to try to wash away the memory, but now the endless stream of one-night stands had become boring. More than that, it filled him with a vague sense of disgust. Not anything new, but he found no reason to add to his sins.

Even now, one of the women in Ella's group was giving him a look that let him know all he had to do was ask and she would be his for the night. Knowing that a few months ago he wouldn't have hesitated to take her up on it made him feel a tinge of discomfort.

It shocked him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cared whether or not his actions were moral. That ship had sailed a long time ago. Every last shred of honor he'd possessed had been stripped from him and he had simply embraced the man the world thought him to be. Because it was easier to be that man, easier to simply follow the path he'd started down than to retrace his steps back to the point where he'd gone wrong.

"But you did make it. Yay." She said it with about as much enthusiasm as a woman who'd just discovered she needed a root canal.

"Somehow, I knew you'd be happy to see me."

Her lip curled slightly, her smile morphing into a near sneer. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, thrusting them into greater prominence, and a stab of lust assaulted him. It was unexpected in its intensity, especially after the clear invitation of the other woman had failed to arouse anything in him other than distaste.

"Well, I thought you felt these sorts of events were beneath you?"

"Not at all." The small group of women was quiet now, watching their interplay with avid curiosity. "Come with me."

"I'm fine here, thanks," she said archly.

"We need to talk."

The women looked from him to her, their eyes round with interest. One of them actually pulled out her cell phone and fired off a quick text, either to spread information or to try to garner some.

"Talk then," Ella said.

“Privately.” He leaned in and took her hand in his. The action drew the attention of several more people in the crowded room, including guests that he guessed to be reporters.

He had noticed the last time he’d touched her hand, how shockingly smooth it had been, and the scar was even smoother, robbed of its texture by flames.

Her full pink lips parted slightly, her eyes round. She looked frozen, shocked by the touch. Didn’t her lovers touch her like that? Or did they avoid the parts of her body that were less than perfect?

The women he’d been with had always been examples of universal beauty, the occasional botched plastic surgery aside. It was impossible to know what he would do if presented with her naked body. His liaisons didn’t require that much thought. That was the plus side to one-night stands.

Of course, at the moment, the thought of Ella naked ruined his thought process anyway. It erased logic, left only that strong, elemental desire, desire that roared through his body with the force of a fire.

He tightened his hold on her and led her away from the group. Ella made sure he knew she was allowing it grudgingly, her body stiff as she walked behind him.

He drew her into an alcove away from the dance floor, the bass still throbbed, loud enough to make the walls vibrate. He leaned in, bracing his arm on the wall and Ella took a step away from him, her eyes widening a bit when her back came into contact with the wall.

She made him feel like an evil villain about to lure her onto the tracks. But then her mask came back down, her face serene, bright blue eyes glittering in challenge.

“So, what was it you needed?”

“A chance to talk. And we were drawing attention so I thought we might make the most of it.”

“Okay, talk then.”

“I must admit, I did not give you enough credit when we first met,” he said.

Her expression registered surprise that she wasn’t able to conceal. “What?”

“I didn’t realize how much money there was to be made in fashion if everything is executed properly.”

“Not an industry insider, huh?” she asked, dryly.

“Only if dating models counts.”

She huffed out a laugh. “Unless your pillow talk consists of discussing the going rate for hand spun wool, no, it doesn’t count.”

“Then no, I’m not an industry insider.”

She pressed her shoulders back against the wall, as if she were trying to melt into the surface, her eyes focused somewhere past his shoulder. She tilted her head slightly and he could see that the pink scarring extended to the curve of her neck. It looked painful. Unhealed. And yet, from what he knew, it had to be.

It wasn’t beautiful. It drew attention away from the creamy beauty of the skin around it. Uneven and discolored, it drew him, drew his focus. All of her did. He raised his hand and brushed his index finger lightly over the damaged skin. Surprisingly soft. Like the rest of her.

She pulled away from him, stepping back from the wall, mouth tight, the confidence she had displayed earlier, gone.

“Don’t,” she said, her voice sharp. She started to walk away.

“Don’t?” He caught her hand and drew her back to him. She complied, but he imagined she only did so because every eye in the room was trained on them. His sex life was a constant fascination to the public, and any woman he was seen with was assumed to be a lover. He couldn’t remember the last time it hadn’t been true.

His muscles tightened at the thought of a night with Ella, his blood flowing hotter, faster. He responded to her on an elemental level, one that didn’t seem concerned with the scars that marred her otherwise perfect flesh.

She leaned in so that he could hear her over the pulse of the music. “Don’t touch me like you have the right to. You bought my business loan, you didn’t buy me,” she said finally, her voice low, trembling.

“I had not forgotten.”

“So what was it then, morbid curiosity? It’s called a burn scar, I got in a house fire. I would have thought you’d have read that somewhere by now. The *Courier* did a particularly nice article on the subject, if you’re interested.”

Ella’s heart thundered heavily, her stomach churning. She hated that. Hated that the simple touch had done that to her. Every insecurity, every shortcoming felt like it had been thrown in her face, had been brought to glaring light.

She hated that the scars still made her feel that way. No matter how much she pretended to be fine with them, she still hated what she saw when she looked in the mirror. Hated the feel of them beneath her fingertips when she scrubbed herself in the shower.

No one ever...no one had ever touched them like that. The way he moved his thumb over the marks on her hand, the way he’d stroked her neck.

Only one man had ever put his hands on her scars, and that had only been with the intent of humiliating her, which he very thoroughly had.

Her mother and father had stopped touching her altogether after the fire. No loving embraces, no casual brushes of their hands. Nothing but cold distance as they wrapped themselves in their guilt. Even her pain became about them.

The soft, hot graze of Blaise’s fingers had hit her with the force of an electric shock, shaken her out of her thoughts, tiny sparks of sensation continuing along her veins well after the initial contact. And then she had looked at him. At the smooth, mahogany perfection of his skin. She had been reminded then, of why she shouldn’t let him touch her.

The stark realization had made her feel like she was drowning in shame and she didn’t want him to see it. She didn’t even want to acknowledge it to herself. Even now she wanted to break free of his arms and run out of the club. But she felt paralyzed, trapped. They were the focus of every guest in attendance and she knew there were reporters. She didn’t want a reputation as the woman who ran out of a party like Cinderella fleeing the ball.

She was strong. She wasn’t running.

“I suppose since you’re in the habit of taking what doesn’t belong to you, it didn’t occur to you I might not be willing,” she said, compelled to make him feel as exposed as she was. “Businesses. Women.”

The change in his face wasn’t drastic, but his eyes turned to golden ice, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “I only take what is not well guarded. Your business for example—if you weren’t in so much debt, my power would be minimal.”

“I see. So you’re blaming me for this. Does that mean your brother is to blame for you stealing his fiancée? It was right before the wedding, right? You slept with her in their bed and then went public with her, touching and kissing her at every hot spot in town.” The ice in his eyes melted, leaving a blazing fire, and every part of her body burned. She tilted her chin up. “You said every story written about you in the tabloids was true. Unarguably, that is what you’re best known for.”

He didn’t flinch, the barb glancing off his granite defenses.

“Clearly you’ve done your research, but none of this is new information to me.”

She had. She’d looked him up on the internet. And she’d allowed all manner of righteous indignation flood over her as she’d read about the betrayal of his brother because it allowed her to be angry at him. And being angry at him was so much safer than feeling anything else.

“I know my part in that incident very well,” he said, his voice toneless. “I was very much involved, after all.”

“A pirate in all manner of things,” she said.

"I had never thought of it that way. But it's a nice way to romanticize it," he said, his voice a near whisper, his face so near hers now that it made her lips tingle.

"I'm not romanticizing. I find nothing appealing about a man with no honor."

He released his hold on her, strong, square hands curling into fists, the tendons becoming more prominent, showing the weight of the gesture and the intensity of the emotion behind it, even though his face remained smooth, unreadable.

"Honor. An interesting concept, one I've yet to bear witness to."

Join the club. She wasn't sure how much honor she'd ever seen in her life. As a teenager, stuck in a hospital room, it had made a nice fantasy. A knight in shining armor riding in on his steed. But she'd given up on that by the time she'd reached the end of high school.

And instead of a knight on his steed she got a buccaneer on his galleon intent on plundering twenty-five percent of her gold. Brilliant.

She looked up and his eyes locked with hers, she felt the heat again, inside this time, making her blood feel like warm honey in her veins, the ensuing languor making her reserve, her anger, begin to evaporate.

How did he do that? How did he make her melt inside with just a look?

Her lips suddenly felt dry and she darted her tongue out quickly, dampening them. She watched as his eyes followed the motion and she felt a yawning, aching sensation open up inside of her. She knew what it was. It was arousal, and she wasn't a stranger to it. She'd just never been in a man's arms while experiencing it. Had never had the object of her desire so close that she could place her hand on the hard wall of his chest if she chose to.

This wasn't a safe fantasy in the privacy of her bedroom. Not a dim, gauzy dream that sent vague sensations of pleasure rolling through her. This was a real, live, man. And he was looking at her lips with much more than just a passing interest.

No wonder his brother's fiancée hadn't said no. No wonder she had broken her commitment to be with him. He was temptation incarnate. His eyes, his chiseled physique, promised a woman pleasure beyond fantasy.

Oh, yes, what a fantasy. She flashed back to his finger skimming her scar. It wouldn't be a fantasy for him; it would be a waking nightmare. And she couldn't even fathom the thought of him seeing her, all of her. The idea was too horrifying to even contemplate.

And why was she thinking of it at all? It was like there was a war going on in her. Common sense versus basic instincts. It was a good thing she'd gained control over that basic part of herself a long time ago.

It suddenly felt unbearably hot, even though she was certain the temperature couldn't have actually changed. Or maybe it had. Maybe more people had filed into the small club and that was it. It couldn't really be him, his gaze, making her feel dizzy with heat.

He leaned in slightly and she didn't move, she stayed, rooted to the spot, keeping her eyes on his as he drew nearer to her. Her eyes tried to flutter closed and she caught them, wouldn't allow it.

She still didn't move away.

He stopped suddenly, his lips so near hers she could feel the heat of them. "Don't worry. I don't need to possess honor to help make you a very rich woman. In fact, it helps that I don't."

The gauzy curtain of arousal that had been shrouding them lifted suddenly and broke her trance as effectively as a gust of icy wind.

"I'm ready to leave," she said, stepping away from him, finally.

"I'll stay," he said, golden gaze already wandering. He would probably stay and find some slim, sexy socialite to hook up with.

It made her feel ill, and it shouldn't make her feel anything at all.

"Good. Great. Have fun."

She turned and walked out of the club, embracing the chill of the night air as it hit her face. She needed it, needed a good dose of reality. What had happened in there wasn't real. It wasn't possible for a woman like her. And even if it were, she couldn't think of a single man she should want less.

It didn't change the fact that her heart was still pounding wildly and her body felt empty and unsatisfied. Didn't change the fact that when she closed her eyes it was his face that she saw.

CHAPTER FOUR

“IT’S headline news in the society pages,” she said, still feeling numb with the shock of her discovery.

“The press has an unhealthy fascination with my sex life,” Blaise responded, his voice still rich and enticing, even over the phone.

Ella stared down at the picture of the two of them, shrouded in near darkness in a secluded corner of the club, their lips nearly touching. Her stomach contracted and heat flooded her face. His body, so near to hers, so hot and dangerously tempting.

She shook her head and tried to banish the rogue thoughts. “I thought you said the press always printed the truth about you.”

“Usually, if I’m with a woman, she’s my lover. Or she will be by the time the night has ended.”

That thought made her scalp prickle, made her breasts feel heavy. “Well, I’m not.”

“No, but we were together. And they know I recently purchased your loan, a move that they presume was a bailout, a way for me to help out the current woman in my life.”

“Shoddy reporting,” she said tightly. “Someone needs to write a letter to the editor.”

She sat down in front of her laptop and pulled up the statistics for her website. It was something she did out of habit every day. She liked to know what brought people to her website, to get a window into the kind of people that viewed her work and to help get an idea of where she needed to buy advertising.

Her eyes widened when she saw the number of visitors she’d had, and they widened even more when she saw the keywords that had brought them to the site. Blaise Chevalier and Ella Stanton lovers. Blaise Chevalier Ella Stanton girlfriend. Blaise Chevalier Ella Stanton engaged. The last one made her inhale the sip of tea she’d been taking. She coughed into the phone.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I...I have about four times the normal amount of traffic to my website and...almost everyone was searching for information about the two of us.” She looked back down at the article in the paper. “I...wow.”

“That is the kind of press you need.”

“And I got it at the kind of event you said was beneath me,” she said, feeling the need to point it out because his superior tone grated.

“It helped that you were keeping the proper company.”

That rendered her speechless for a full three seconds. “Your ego really is staggering,” she managed to say.

“I fail to see how acknowledging my appeal to the media is evidence of my ego.”

“Hmm.”

“You disagree?”

She couldn’t deny that she never would have gotten such a prominent feature in the society pages if it weren’t for him. She couldn’t deny that Blaise’s aristocratic heritage, his reputation for being completely ruthless and his status as a first rate womanizer, and the fact that she was with him, were probably the key elements to the fact that there was any interest in her attendance at the party. But she didn’t have to like it. And she could still think he had a big ego. Because he did. Any man who could callously walk off with his brother’s intended bride and then, after the damage had been done, abandon her as well, was hardly a man of humility.

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