

# REUNITED... AND PREGNANT

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Joss Wood



*Desire*<sup>™</sup>

# **Joss Wood**

## **Reunited...And Pregnant**

### **Аннотация**

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She's pregnant...and working with her ex!

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Reunited...and Pregnant is part of The Ballantyne Billionaires series.

Beckett stepped into her personal space.

Her heart bounced off her rib cage and her stomach felt like it was taking a roller-coaster ride, but she'd be damned if she'd let Beck see how much his hot, hard body affected her.

Beck smiled, lifted a hand and rested the tip of his index finger in the V of her throat. "Your pulse is trying to burst through your skin."

Dammit. Damned pulse. Heart, stop beating.

Beck's hot fingertip ran up the side of her throat until he reached her jaw. "God, your eyes. My memory didn't do them justice. Silver and green all contained in a ring of emerald."

Cady swallowed and shook her head. "Don't do this, Beckett."

“I think I have to,” Beckett replied, the heat of his hand scalding her jaw. His other hand grasped her hip and he pulled her into him.

Beck’s lips were pure magic as his mouth took possession of hers. Cady felt his hand cup her right butt cheek and he launched her up into his muscular body. She closed her eyes, not quite believing that he was holding her, that his mouth was on hers. It felt like it belonged there, as if she’d been created to be kissed by him. Beck kissed like he owned her, like she was—just for this moment in time—still his.

\* \* \*

**Reunited...and Pregnant** is part of The Ballantyne Billionaires series: A family who has it all...except love!

Reunited...and Pregnant

Joss Wood



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

JOSS WOOD loves books and traveling—especially to the wild places of southern Africa. She has the domestic skills of a potted plant and drinks far too much coffee.

Joss has written for Mills & Boon KISS, Mills & Boon Presents and, most recently, the Mills & Boon Desire line. After a career in business, she now writes full-time. Joss is a member

of the Romance Writers of America and Romance Writers of South Africa.

To the reader: thank you for spending your precious time with my characters.

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### Prologue

In Bangkok International Airport, Beckett Ballantyne, his booted feet resting on his backpack, looked across the row of seats to Cady and smiled. Her eyes were closed, her lips moving as she silently sang along to whatever she was listening to via the new pair of earbuds she'd bought in Pantip Plaza yesterday.

A light green bandeau held her long, deep brown hair off her face and turned her wintry eyes a light green. Sitting with her heels on the seat of her chair and wearing denim shorts, a white tank and beaded bracelets, she looked exactly like what she was: a sexy backpacker seeing the world.

With that half smile on her face, the flirt of a dimple in her cheek, she would make anyone looking at her envious of her freedom, jealous of her next adventure.

She was young, gorgeous and adventurous and, no one, Beck was certain, would suspect that she was utterly miserable.

Not with him. They were, as far as he knew, perfectly fine for a couple who'd met and run off to South East Asia together within a month of meeting at an off-campus party in New York. Technically, since his trip was planned, she'd run off, choosing to spend the long summer holidays after freshman year traveling with him.

Her staid, conservative, churchy parents had freaked.

Beck glanced at the phone in her hand and he wondered how many emails and voice messages they'd left, begging her to come

home. How many tears would she shed this time? How long would it take her to come out of the funk their recriminations tossed her into?

In Beckett's mind it was psychological torture, and her parents just kept up the pressure. She was wasting her life; she was a disrespectful daughter; she was living in sin with him...

Her father had an ulcer; her mother was depressed. How could she be enjoying her trip when they were so miserable? They missed her and worried constantly about her—what if she was kidnapped and sold into the sex trade? They'd heard there was a bomb blast in Thailand—what if she was caught up in an explosion?

He'd told her to ignore them, to only check in once a week, but Cady couldn't disconnect. Their mind games turned her into a conflicted mess. She wanted to be with him but her guilt over disappointing her parents was eating her from the inside out.

He knew that she felt stuck in the middle. He thought her parents were narrow-minded and they thought he was a spoiled rich kid, the spawn of Satan because he lured their innocent daughter overseas with the sole intention of corrupting her.

If one could call worshipping her body at every opportunity corruption...

Beck felt the action in his pants and tipped his head back to look at the ceiling, readily admitting that he couldn't get enough of Cady. At twenty-three, he'd had other lovers, so he couldn't understand why he was utterly addicted to making love with her,

being with her.

If he believed in the emotion, he might think that he was in love. But since he didn't, wouldn't allow himself to, he did what he always did and pushed those uncomfortable thoughts away.

Her parents' disapproval would've been easier for Cady to handle if she genuinely loved traveling, loved experiencing the hugely different cultures they stepped into. But having been protected and cocooned, she'd cried at the poverty and slums she saw in India, been shocked by the sex trade in Phuket. The crowds, the sounds and strange food threw her, and the lack of English disoriented her. He couldn't fault her for trying, and she didn't whine but she wasn't enjoying the experience. It didn't help that she'd had her wallet lifted, her butt touched and had to spend four days in a grungy bathroom, her arms wrapped around a cracked toilet bowl.

He'd thought she'd enjoy the clear sea and white-sand beaches of Phi Phi, the island they'd just returned from. But Cady was miserable. And because Cady was miserable, he was, too. He'd thought that their desperate need to be with each other could conquer anything.

He was so wrong.

With his ridiculously high IQ, being wrong was not a concept he was very familiar with.

God, these last two weeks together would be torture. Every time he thought of her leaving, his stomach knotted and his lungs seized. They had a plan, he reminded himself; they'd agreed to

three months together and then she'd head back to college and he'd continue his travels.

But after two and a half months together, he knew that he could no longer take her, and his feelings for her, lightly. And that realization made him feel like his life was spinning out of control. While his little brain was already mourning her departure, his big brain was insisting they could do with some distance, some time apart. He needed a lot of space and quite a bit of time apart because he was starting to suspect that she might be the beat of his heart, the breath on his lips, the reason the sun rose in the morning.

He had to let her go because, if he wasn't careful, he could love her with a fierce, crazy, forever type of love. Love like that meant taking a very real risk, a huge leap of faith. It made him feel lost, exposed and far too vulnerable—all the emotions he'd been trying to avoid since he was eight. Love meant pain, and he was too smart to put himself in harm's way.

Love meant losing control.

Love was also, it was said, supposed to make you feel happy and complete. He didn't deserve to feel happy and he'd never feel complete. How could he when he was the reason his parents' remains, and those of his unborn sibling, were scattered on a mountain in Vermont?

Beck felt his cell phone vibrate in his back pocket and pulled it out. He smiled at the name on the display. He had two older brothers, Linc through adoption and Jaeger through birth, and he

loved them equally.

They were also equally annoying in their belief that he needed looking after. The fact that he was taller and bigger than both of them didn't stop them fussing over him and his younger sister, Sage.

This time it was Jaeger calling.

"Jay, what's up?" he asked after answering the call.

"Just checking up on you. Any trouble?"

Beck rolled his eyes. He wasn't that stupid; he wasn't stupid at all. "Actually, I was just about to call you. We're sitting in a Thai jail. They found some coke on us."

There was long silence before Jaeger released a harsh curse. "That's not funny, Beck."

Beck grinned. "I thought it was."

"You are such an ass."

Beck tapped Cady on her knee and pointed to his backpack, silently telling her to keep an eye on his stuff. She nodded and Beck stood up to walk toward the window looking out onto the busy tarmac.

"Where are you? Bangkok?" Jaeger asked. "And are you still heading for Vietnam?"

"That's the plan, why?"

"I'm heading there day after next. I've had a tip about a new rustic mine in Yen Bai producing some very high quality rubies. Want to come with me and see what we can buy?"

Beck felt a spurt of excitement, the kick of adrenaline at the

thought of hunting gems with his brother to supply the demands of Ballantyne's rich and demanding clients. "Hell, yes."

Then he remembered that he wasn't traveling alone. "Can I bring Cady?"

"I'm not sure of the area, Beck. I wouldn't," Jaeger replied. "Can't she stay in Hanoi by herself for a couple of days?"

Beck ran his hand over the back of his neck. The backpackers they'd met on Phi Phi were heading to Hanoi, as well, and they were all staying at the same backpacker's hostel. Maybe they—and their new friend Amy especially—could keep an eye on Cady for a few days. He was fairly certain she'd be okay.

Then the disapproving faces of Cady's parents jumped onto the big screen of his mind and he instantly felt guilty. He was responsible for Cady, not Amy.

"Let me think about it," he told Jaeger. But he knew he couldn't leave Cady in Hanoi by herself.

"No worries," Jaeger replied. "I'm glad that you've reconciled yourself to traveling. Connor was worried that you wouldn't but I knew that our parents' adventurous spirit was still in you, albeit deeply buried."

"It's not like I have a choice, Jaeger. That was the ultimatum Connor and Linc gave me, supported by you, I might add."

Yeah, he enjoyed traveling but he was still pissed that his uncle and his brothers refused to allow him to join Ballantyne's until he'd taken a gap year or two.

"You know why, Beck," Jaeger said, his deep voice low and

concerned. “You’ve been operating at warp speed since you were a kid. You finished school early, partly because you’re brilliant, but mostly because you worked your tail off. You made the national swim championships because every moment you weren’t studying you were in the pool. When you gave up competitive swimming we thanked God because we thought you might finally get a life. Date some girls, have some fun, get into some trouble. Not you. You went off to college and got your master’s in business in record time. You’re twenty-three years old and you’ve spent the past ten years working your ass off. If you come back to Ballantyne’s, you’ll do exactly the same thing. So we don’t care if you sit on a beach for the next eight months or if you enter an ashram, but what you aren’t doing is going straight to work.”

Beck gripped the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He’d heard this lecture a hundred times before.

“Anyway, this is a stupid conversation because we all know that you love traveling.”

He did. He loved the freedom it gave him, loved the anonymity. While traveling, he was Beck, no surname attached. For the first time in fifteen years he felt marginally free, a little at peace, a lot chilled.

“Do you think that tying yourself to Cady while you travel is a good idea?” Jaeger asked.

“What are you talking about?”

Beck glanced at Cady, who met his eyes and gave him that quick, sunburst smile that always jump-started his heart.

“According to her social media posts, she’s ditching school and spending the next year traveling with you.”

What the hell...?

“She’s going back to school,” Beck said, forcing the words up his tight throat.

“Uh...not according to Sage, who follows both of you on social media. It was girl speak...something about her loving you enough to continue traveling with you.”

A large bead of sweat rolled down his temple and into his heavy stubble. A loud bell clanged in his ears, and his stomach felt like it had taken a ride on a death-defying roller coaster.

That wasn’t the plan. He needed them to stick to the plan.

“That’s not happening.” He managed, through his panic, to push the words out.

“Look,” Jaeger said, impatient, “I’ve got more important things to do than talk about your love life. Just let me know about ruby-hunting in Yen Bai.”

Using his phone, Beck pulled up her social media account and yep, Cady had posted something about not returning to college and extending her trip with him.

Beck pocketed his phone and gripped the railing separating him from the floor-to-ceiling windows. He dropped his head and stared at his grubby boots. Fear, hot and acidic, burned a ring of fire around his heart, up his throat and coated his mouth in a bitter film.

She was supposed to be a three-month fling. This wasn’t

supposed to get this intense, this quickly. He'd been banking on her going home, heading back to college. Her leaving had been his safety net, the way he stopped himself from falling all the way in love with her. If she stayed with him, he doubted he could resist her and then he'd be up crap creek in a sinking canoe.

He wasn't prepared to go there. If he loved her and lost her...

Hell, no. Not happening.

Why hadn't she spoken to him first before blabbing online? He knew that her choosing him over her parents was her way of making a statement but hell, hers wasn't the only seat on this train. He had a right to decide whether he wanted to keep traveling with her. He couldn't bear to see her go but he couldn't risk his heart by her staying.

Devil, meet the deep blue sea.

The only rational option, his instinctive reaction, was to stick to the plan they'd decided on back in New York. She needed to go home, go back to college and he'd see her at Christmas. The only deviation he was prepared to make to that plan was to send her home as quickly as possible. They were in an airport and that could be accomplished right now.

Because if he didn't walk away today, he knew that he never would.

His decision made, Beck walked over to her and picked up his backpack with one hand and grabbed hers with another.

Cady pulled out the earbuds and slung her smaller backpack over her shoulder as she stood up. "What's up?"

When Beck gestured to the familiar logo of an American carrier at the neighboring gate, her eyes flashed with joy. “Oh, my God, we’re going home?” she squealed, dancing on the spot.

He just looked at her, wanting her to understand without having to say the words. After a little confused silence, the light faded from her eyes and color leached from her face. “You’re not coming with me?”

Beck shook his head.

He dropped the backpacks at his feet and slapped his hands on his hips. It took him a while to find the words he needed. “Jaeger wants me to meet him in Vietnam to look for rubies with him, and you can’t come with, and I can’t leave you on your own.”

Cady’s bottom lip trembled and she rocked on her heels, looking like he’d sideswiped her with a stick, but he continued. “It’s only two weeks early, Cady, and it’s not like you were enjoying yourself.”

“I love spending time with you! In fact, I had just decided that I want to stay, to ignore my folks’ disapproval, to get into the hang of this. I want to be with—”

Beck jumped in before she could finish that sentence. “You’re going back to school, Cady. That was always the plan. I’m just sending you home two weeks early.”

Cady took a step back and her eyes filled with tears. “You’re sending me home?”

Oh, damn, bad choice of words. “I’ll be home for Christmas. We can reevaluate then.”

“You’re sending me home?” Cady repeated his words, emphasizing each one.

“Christmas is in three months—”

Cady’s lips firmed and she folded her arms across her torso. “Do you love me, Beck?” she demanded.

Ah, no. Not this question. He could love her, he silently admitted, and that was why she needed to go back to the States. Falling in love with Cady, with anyone, wasn’t something he was prepared to do.

When he didn’t answer, Cady grabbed his arm, her nails digging into his skin.

Beck jerked his arm away and forced himself to meet her eyes. Oh, damn, he wished he hadn’t because, as long as he lived, he’d remember the betrayal he saw within them, the pain he’d caused. Cady lifted her hand to grab the fabric of his shirt just above his heart, twisting it in her fist. “Don’t do this, Beck. Don’t throw us away, don’t toss me aside. We can fix this.”

“That’s the thing, Cades, I can’t be fixed.”

It was a special type of hell, Beck thought, to watch a heart break. It was even worse when you were responsible for it breaking.

One

Almost a decade later

Sitting at one of the many high tables in Bonnets, a swish cocktail bar just off Fifth Avenue, Cady Collins had to physically stop herself from appropriating the massive salt-

rimmed margarita delivered to the table next to her. The taste buds on the back of her tongue tingled as she imagined the perfect combination of salt and the sugar-tinged tang of tequila.

It had been a tequila type of day and week. Year.

The waiter turned to her, lifted an eyebrow at her empty glass. “Another virgin Bloody Mary?”

God, Friday night and she was in the most reviewed cocktail bar in the city—the joke was that Bonnets had the license to serve cocktails to the angels—and she was drinking tomato juice.

How sad.

Cady saw the screen of her phone light up, saw the display say The Boss and sighed as she lifted the device to her ear. “Hi, Mom.”

“Cady, where are you?” Edna Collins asked in her best I’m-the-preacher’s-wife voice.

Cady resisted the urge to tell her that she was in a bar tucking dollar bills into the tiny thong of a muscled, oiled male stripper. You’re an adult. You don’t need to try to shock your parents anymore.

“What’s the matter, Mom?”

Edna called her at precisely 8:00 p.m. every second Sunday. A call outside that time meant that something had rattled The Force.

“You might have heard that the preacher at our sister church in Wilton is retiring and the church has been looking for a suitable replacement.”

Not really. She didn't keep up with what was happening in the exciting world of church politics in upstate New York.

Cady sent another look at the icy margarita and felt her mouth tingle. One little sip... How much damage could one sip do?

"Your father is being considered."

"Good for him," Cady replied because she was expected to say something.

"We need you to come home in two weeks," Edna stated, her voice suggesting that an argument would not be tolerated.

"Me? Why?"

"Your father is undergoing a process of rigorous interviews. I will be interviewed, as well. As you are our only child, they want to meet you, too."

Cady wanted to tell her mother that she wasn't an only child, that she'd had a brother, that his life mattered, but as always she refrained. Will wasn't someone they regularly discussed. Or at all.

"Mother, what possible bearing could I have on the proceedings? I live in New York City, and I rarely come home."

"You never come home," Edna corrected.

That might be because home was the place where she had no wiggle room, where there was no room for error. Home was a place of pressure, with a lot of interest shown but little love. After Will was sent away, she'd lived in constant fear that she would be, too.

Home was hymnal music and stockings, religious books and

piety.

Cady shuddered. “Well, sorry. That’s not going to happen.”

Cady heard her mother’s shocked gasp. “But you have to! Not meeting with the interview committee would reflect very badly on your father and his chance to secure this position. It’s a big church, Cady, with a lot of resources. Since you put that traveling nonsense behind you, you’ve been a model daughter, a credit to us. Highly educated, with your own business. I have no doubt you are an example to others in that sin-filled city.”

Yeah, Cady Collins, the beacon for clean living. Oh, God, her mother was going to die when she heard her latest news. As for that traveling nonsense, her time in Thailand with Beck was the only time she felt completely herself. Free.

Loved. For a brief moment in time, she’d felt so loved.

“It would be a huge step up for him,” her mother droned on. “And when they meet you, they’ll have the proof that we have raised a God-fearing, smart young woman who has her feet firmly on the ground.”

If the statement wasn’t so sad, she’d roll on the floor and wet herself laughing. “Mom, trust me, you really don’t want me there. Find an excuse and we’ll save a lot of trouble.”

“I have no idea what you’re rambling about and I don’t have the time to argue with you. We have guests for dinner. Do not disappoint us, Cady,” Edna snapped before she disconnected.

Cady gently tapped the corner of her phone against the tabletop. She’d left home more than a decade ago, but the urge

to please her parents was still strong. In their small rural town in upstate New York, she'd been the popular pastor's kid. Honor student, cheerleader, student council president, homecoming queen. Pretty, popular, nice. As perfect as she could possibly be.

She said "please" and "thank you" and "excuse me" and ran errands and never missed church. She didn't smoke or drink or party or date because she was an "example." She'd never had the chance to be a regular kid, to mess up, to fail.

The pressure to be perfect was immense and it was generally accepted that she became an overachiever because that was what her parents expected. Sure, that was part of the reason, but no one knew that she was terrified of messing up, of doing or saying the wrong thing.

Of being banished like Will, her older brother.

As a result, her desire to please her parents still lingered. They wouldn't be very impressed with her now, she thought, reflecting on the trouble she'd landed herself in. Then again, she was fairly sure that Edna and Bill Collins had been expecting her to mess up again since she'd run off to Southeast Asia with Beck Ballantyne nine years before. She'd wanted to be with Beck more than she'd wanted to please her mom and dad and...boom! Fireworks.

This latest bombshell would rock their world again. Cady pushed the tips of her fingers into her forehead and held back a whimper. And that was without telling them that her business was rocky and she was running out of options to keep it on the rails.

“Cady?”

Cady jerked her head up to see a small blonde and a tall brunette standing next to her table. The blonde looked familiar, but she instantly recognized the classic good looks of Julia Parker, a Fortune 500 business consultant who socialized with the great and good of New York society. Cady would never forget Julia, especially since the woman had recently convinced Trott’s Sports—a corporate sports store that was one of two clients that paid Cady a hefty monthly retainer—to not renew their contract with Collins Consulting.

Thank God she was still contracted to Natural Fuel, Tom’s company, a chain of health food outlets, to handle their media releases and promotions. Without that contract, she’d be sunk.

Losing Trott’s had left her with a sizable hole in her business bank account. And without her biggest client. Cady resisted the urge to toss her tomato juice over Julia’s pristine white dress and instead held out her hand to shake. God, sometimes being an adult sucked.

“Cady Collins, Collins Consulting.”

Julia immediately made the connection.

“Trott’s... They couldn’t afford to renew,” Julia murmured, and wrinkled her nose. “Sorry.”

Cady shrugged.

“Are you doing okay?”

Julia’s question surprised her; she didn’t expect her to ask or to sound like she cared. Cady lifted her hands up in a “what can

I do” gesture. “It’s tough.”

“For what it’s worth, I like your work,” Julia stated, and Cady heard and appreciated the sincerity in her statement.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” the blonde demanded, pulling their attention back to her, her smile bright and big.

Cady shook her head.

“I’m Amy Cook. We met on Phi Phi island when you were traveling with Beck years ago.”

Beck. Funny, she’d just been thinking about him. Like that’s a coincidence, Cady mocked herself. You’ve been thinking about the man, pretty much constantly, for the best part of the last decade.

Cady cocked her head and peered at the woman. The image of her with waist-length blond hair and a thong bikini popped into her head. “I remember you. You flirted shamelessly with Beck.”

“She flirts with everyone. Don’t take it personally,” Julia said, a rich chuckle following her words.

“Do you live in Manhattan?” Amy demanded. “What do you do? Are you married? Do you have children?”

Cady didn’t know which question to answer first. Work was easy, the other questions were a tad more complicated. “Um... I live in Brooklyn and I have my own PR company.”

Amy’s eyes widened. “Really? Seriously?”

Millions of women worked in PR and many owned their own companies. Why was this such a surprise? Speaking of business,

she desperately needed to drum up some, and it wasn't every day that she bumped into one of the best business consultants in the city, so Cady reached into her tote bag and pulled out a business card.

She handed Julia the card with a small shrug. "I'd be grateful if you kept me in mind if any of your clients need PR or any marketing help. I'm good, efficient and reasonable."

Julia took the card from her and nodded. "I'll do that."

Amy cocked her head, and her dark brown eyes connected with Cady's. "You didn't tell me if you're married or if you have children."

Yeah, right. She was not discussing any of those thorny subjects with a woman she'd exchanged ten words with nearly ten years ago.

Cady looked at the entrance of Bonnets and faked a smile. "Ah, the person I'm waiting for has arrived. It was interesting running into you again, Amy. Nice to meet you, Julia."

"But—" Amy protested.

"Come on." Julia placed a hand on Amy's back and pushed her away. "Let's find someone else you can practice your CIA interrogation skills on."

Cady rolled her eyes. Of all the people in the world she'd thought she'd never see again, and whom she never wanted to see again, Amy was at the top of her list. Nearly a decade ago, Beck had tired of Cady and he'd sent her home so that he could sow his wild oats all over the Asian subcontinent. Once Cady left, she

was sure Amy had stepped right on into the space, in bed and out, that Cady had occupied in Beck's life.

Beck had been and still was the honey that female bees flocked to. She watched his subtle flirting, heard him laughing with Amy, and she'd felt like she couldn't compete with the blonde bombshell.

Cady was long, lanky and not overly blessed, as her boyfriend, Tom, told her often enough, in the "boobage" department. But it was more than that. Beck, Amy and the other backpackers they'd met had been just so together, so effortlessly confident. Of course, there were the stoners and weirdos and the lost, but many of the travelers had their lives sorted. They were street-smart and confident and knew where they were going and what to do when they got there.

Thanks to her protected, insulated childhood, she would've been utterly lost without Beck making the decisions for her. Was that why he'd ditched her, because she'd been lacking in self-confidence and because she'd become more of a responsibility than a girlfriend?

Who knew? He'd been long on termination and short on explanations. He'd just handed her a ticket and stood in line with her at Passport Control. When she'd cleared that, she'd turned back to look at him through the glass walls and saw him walking away, taking a fair share of her shattered heart with him.

"Cady."

Cady looked up and accepted Tom's quick brush of his lips

against her cheek. He sat down opposite her and immediately glanced at his watch. "I have about a half hour before I need to be back in the office. Can we make this quick?"

Wow, nice to see you, too, Tom. "I thought we were having dinner together?"

"Can't. I have some problems at work, so I need to get back to my desk."

She was sleeping with her client, and the fact that she was still embarrassed her. Tom dismissed her concerns of their lack of professionalism, saying they were both single and it wasn't a hanging offense. She'd tried to be okay with it but she'd finally made the decision to call it quits. Fate, however, had other ideas.

"You look like hell, Cady. What's up with that?"

Tom's jerk quotient always went up when he was stressed, Cady thought. It wasn't personal, she reminded herself.

But it sure felt pretty personal. Beck had hurt her when he tossed her away, but he'd never talked to her like this. Then again, Tom Steel wasn't Beck Ballantyne. Nobody could be.

Gorgeous, super-smart and highly successful, he'd set the bar pretty high and no man could reach it.

Let's get some perspective here, Collins. Beck kicked you out of his life; he sent you away. You expected it from your parents, but not from the man you loved to distraction. Who you thought might love you.

That had been a very erroneous assumption.

Tom's flat hand hitting the table jolted her back into the

present. “Cady! Just say what you have to say, will you?”

Sure.

“I’m pregnant.”

Tom’s low, vicious curse hung in the air between them. “Get rid of it.”

She’d somehow expected him to say that. “Not an option.”

Her parents had rid themselves of Will by sending him to live at a residential home when he was thirteen, and Beck had sent her away, too, but she was not prepared to do the same to her child. Sure, a pregnancy wasn’t convenient, but neither had Will’s autism or her falling in love with Beck been convenient.

You didn’t just erase the problem because you didn’t like the outcome.

Tom’s face turned paper-white. “I need a drink.”

Cady watched Tom walk to the bar and hoped that her baby didn’t inherit his knock-kneed walk. Or his lack of height. Or the cowlick just above his right ear.

He isn’t Beck...

Damn him for being the entire package, both smart and sexy. A blue-eyed wavy haired blond, Beck looked like he belonged on the cover of a surfing magazine. Long-limbed and muscular, he looked as good in a tuxedo as he did in a pair of swimming shorts. Unlike Beckett, Tom didn’t make her head swim or her heart race and she liked it that way. It was an adult relationship with no teenage hormones and irrationality to cloud her thinking. She certainly never felt short of breath or felt the need to rip

Tom's clothes off.

She'd been careful with Tom; she hadn't given him any of her heart. She'd given Beckett everything—including her virginity—only to be dismissed when he'd had enough of her.

So, yeah, Tom never set her panties, or her heart, on fire and walking away from him was going to be easy. She'd just prefer not to be pregnant while she did it.

Single and pregnant. Her parents were going to be so proud.

Cady rested her hand on her stomach. There was only one fact of which she was certain: she was keeping her baby.

Tom banged his tumbler of whiskey onto the table and sat down again. He lifted his glass to his lips and sent her a long, cold look.

“Is it mine?”

Cady lifted her hands in the air. “Are you crazy? Of course it's yours. I haven't slept with anyone else but you since we started dating.”

Tom shrugged. He turned his head toward the bar, leered at a new female arrival and turned back to her, looking supremely disinterested.

“The baby is yours, Tom,” Cady repeated, enunciating the words.

He pouted. “So you say.”

“Tom, we've been seeing each other for the best part of a year.”

“I didn't think we were dating only each other.”

Cady blinked, utterly astounded. What the hell?

Wait, hold on a second... If Tom thought that they weren't exclusive then that meant that he had colored outside the lines, so to speak. "Have you cheated on me?"

"Since I didn't think we were exclusive I don't consider it cheating."

"You bastard!" Cady stopped herself from banging the table. "Who?"

"Does it matter?" Tom asked, his voice cool. He motioned to her stomach, and his next words catapulted this exchange from a bad dream into a nightmare. "Get rid of it or you're fired."

"You can't fire me. I have a contract with you!" Cady stated, not recognizing the cold, heartless man sitting opposite her. God, if she lost Tom's business, as well...

"So sue me." Tom shrugged, unconcerned. "I'll win. Cady, I'm not interested in having a baby. If you want child support you're going to have to sue me for that, as well," Tom stated after draining his glass of whiskey. "But I should warn you that I'll sic both sets of lawyers on you—mine and my wife's."

What? His wife's lawyers? He was divorced; he'd been divorced for a little over a year. He'd divorced her because she'd refused to date him until he was free.

Oh, dear God...

"You called Gretchen your wife." Cady forced the question through her now-numb lips. "Have you been cheating on me with your wife?"

Tom's cold look pushed ice into her bones. "Cady, I never divorced her. I've been cheating on her...with you."

\* \* \*

After sending a text message to the group name "family" on his phone—telling them he was fine and enjoying his trip—Beck sat down at the desk in his luxury hotel room to Skype Amy.

His computer did its thing and then Amy's pixie face filled his screen. She scowled at him. "It's about time you called."

"Hello to you, too," Beck said with a faint smile. Beck wondered, not for the first time, who was the boss in the relationship. He might be a Ballantyne director, but Amy, the PA he shared with Linc and the person he and his siblings entrusted with the most confidential information, was the power behind the throne. "What's up?"

"So much," Amy answered and held up her index finger. "Don't go away. I'm just going to get my wine."

Beck laughed when Julia hung her face, upside down, over the screen to blow him a kiss. Amy's long-term partner and soon-to-be wife was a goofball, and around her loved ones, she rarely acted like the cool professional the financial world knew her to be.

Beck picked up his laptop, walked toward the bed and placed the device on the bedside table. He tucked pillows between his head and the headboard of the massive bed and stretched out his legs. He liked beds to be big enough to accommodate his six-foot frame.

Beck placed his laptop on his knees and reached for his beer. He sipped it as he watched Amy's cat, Lazy Joe, jump with great effort onto her chair and curl up into a gray-and-white ball. Amy returned, picked up the cat and resettled the feline on her lap.

"God, look at you with your messy hair and your stubble, wearing only a pair of track pants. So hot." Amy tossed a quick look over her shoulder. "Julia, I'm thinking of going straight."

"Stop lusting over Beckett, you pervert. He's your boss." Julia's voice drifted over from the kitchen, sounding perfectly relaxed.

"And you're not my type. Even if you were straight we'd have no chemistry," Beck said mildly.

"True. So, I'm now going to ignore that fabulous chest and six-pack abs."

"So kind," Beck murmured.

"You look like you're having a miserable time on your forced break," Amy commented.

After his first year of working for Ballantyne International, Connor had insisted that, because he was a driven, relentless workaholic with a habit of working sixteen or more hours a day, he take a week off every four months. Initially, he'd felt like Connor was punishing him for working too hard, but he eventually realized that it was his uncle's way of looking after his health. Connor knew that he couldn't force Beck to stop working but he could at least manage him.

No one did that now. Connor's death had leveled the playing

fields between him and his brothers and he no longer took orders that he not work so hard. His siblings didn't understand, and he'd never explain, that he liked to work insane hours, that his devotion to Ballantyne International was his way of showing them that he was an asset to the company, his way to earn and keep his place in his family.

"It was the kid's fault. He asked them to come home. He'd broken his wrist and he needed to have it pinned and made a big deal about them coming home to be with him."

"Which one is he?"

"Can't see him right now. But he's the middle child, the one who had a panic attack in church."

"Two lives and a baby on the way—a hell of a price to pay for a broken arm. I wonder if he'll ever know the damage his whining caused."

Because Beck was under the table, hidden by the long tablecloth, and listening to the whispered conversations of the mourners invited back to the family home after the funeral, he heard the comments and understood perfectly. His parents' deaths were his fault.

It was a conclusion he'd already come to. Hearing it spoken aloud just confirmed what he already thought. From that day on, he'd always felt like the outsider looking in and he'd made himself as independent as he possibly could be. He'd emotionally distanced himself from his siblings and, really, it was better that way. Distance allowed a buffer against the hurt that

emotional connections always created. Distance allowed him to keep control.

He'd come close to losing control once and he'd paid the price for it. Over two months and on a continent across the world, Cady had snuck under his skin and into his heart and he'd lost himself in her.

She was just a young man's stupidity, Beck told himself for the millionth time. Every guy had that one woman he idolized in his head. It didn't mean anything.

He'd been trying for nearly a decade to believe his own BS. At the time she'd meant everything.

"Where are you this time?" Amy demanded, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Please, please tell me you're lying on a beach somewhere reading a book."

Not his style. Admittedly, all his breaks were action based and full of physical activity, but at least his brain slowed down from constantly operating at warp speed.

"Saariselkä, Finland."

"Of course you are. Heli-skiing?"

Beck smiled at her concern. Amy hated it when he indulged in his love for high-risk adventure sports. "Not this time. Cross-country skiing."

"Dangerous?"

"Not at all," Beck lied. There had been a couple of hairy traverses this morning, but he was here in one piece, wasn't he? What was the point of upsetting her?

“Liar.”

Beck smiled and took a sip of his beer. Since meeting Amy in Thailand, she'd been his closest friend. He was reasonably sociable but the reserve he cultivated meant that he didn't have many close friends. Amy had ignored his “keep out” signs and had barged her way into his life. He'd flown to Hanoi after saying goodbye to Cady in Bangkok and Amy had immediately sensed that he was hurting. She'd plastered herself to his side and traveled with him as he hauled his dented heart over the soil of various Southeast Asian countries.

You couldn't BS a person who'd witnessed your heart bleed.

Amy had been a kind and consistent presence, a true friend. And because of her sexual orientation, they'd never complicated their friendship with sex. He and Amy had quit traveling at the same time and he'd joined Ballantyne International, knowing that it was time to put his MBA to work. Amy had needed a job and he'd arranged for her to do some temporary secretarial work at Ballantyne International. Within three months, she'd made herself indispensable, not only to him, but also to his ex-guardian and uncle, Connor Ballantyne. Amy, irreverent and hip but brutally efficient, became Connor's eyes, ears and right hand and she'd been devastated when Connor was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

It was Amy who'd made all the arrangements to transport Jaeger back home when he was involved in that car accident in Italy, and Amy who'd held Beckett's hand at his brother's hospital

bed and at his uncle's funeral.

“So, what’s happening at work?” Beckett asked her, tapping his finger against the neck of his cold beer bottle.

“The usual. I sent out the briefs to various PR firms today to bid for the rebranding strategy.”

A small frown appeared between Beck’s eyes. “Which firms did you send the brief to?”

Amy named a few firms Beck was familiar with and he nodded his approval. “Linc instructed me to send them to smaller firms, too, ones that think outside the box,” Amy added.

“Hard to find.”

“Jules had a suggestion or two.”

“Who?”

Amy shrugged. “You wouldn’t know them.”

Beck couldn’t identify the emotion flashing in Amy’s eyes and he frowned at her uncharacteristic reticence.

“Well, let’s see what they come up with. Email me their bid documents and I can go through them.”

Amy shook her head. “Linc told me that that he’ll run through them and pick the top four to do detailed presentations. You’ll be back for their presentations, so you can weigh in then.”

Amy had her stubborn face on and he knew he’d lost this round. To be honest, he really didn’t want to plow through the bid documents. It was tedious work and if Linc wanted to do it, he’d let him.

“Listen, Beck...”

Amy bit the inside of her lip and Beck knew she was about to say something he didn't want to hear. Worse, she had the same look on her face when every year or so she suggested that he track down Cady, that he see where she was and what she was doing. That he find a real connection, like the one she and Julia had.

And every year he told her he wasn't interested, that he was perfectly happy as he was. Well, not happy, but content.

"Guess who I saw today?" Amy asked before he could tell her not to go there.

Beck tensed. He didn't need her to say the name; he heard it in her voice. "Where?"

"At Bonnets, a cocktail bar off—"

"I know it." Beck felt hot then cold. He stared down at the patterned comforter, the blue-and-white pattern rising and falling.

He forced his tongue to move. "New York is in so many ways a small town. Listen, I have to go."

"No, you don't. You're just trying to avoid talking about Cady. I need to tell you—"

"Bye, Ames, I'll talk to you soon." Beck slapped his laptop shut on her annoyed squeal.

He ran his hand through his wavy hair and flipped the laptop open again. He quickly accessed a file, opening the one photo he'd kept of her. She was lying on the sand at Maya Bay on Phi Phi island, her bright pink bikini a blaze of triangles against her tanned skin. She'd turned her head to look at him and her long

and silky hair dropped into the sand. Her startling eyes brimmed with laughter. And love.

They'd been apart for nearly ten years and would be apart for a lifetime more. He knew that, accepted that. That was why he never thought about her, said her name, discussed those first few months of his trip. They were completely, solidly over. So why was he looking at a photo of her, wishing that things had turned out differently?

Because he wasn't busy and he had time to think. And to remember.

But mostly because he was, despite his high IQ, a moron.

## Two

Beck exited the private elevator that only he, his siblings and Amy had access to and stepped into the corridor of Ballantyne International. The corporate offices were situated above their flagship, and oldest, jewelry store on Fifth Avenue. Unlike the classic decor of the store below, the Ballantyne offices were light, airy and modern. Beck, as director of finance and the group's troubleshooter, saw an intern walking down the hall to the copy room and struggled to remember his name.

"Cole, Cody..."

The kid turned and offered a tentative smile. "Charles, sir."

He had the C right and he was only in his early thirties, far too young to be called sir. Beck shrugged out of his leather jacket and laid it across the top of his suitcase and pushed the bag in the intern's direction. "Put this in Amy's office and bring me a very

large cup of coffee. I'll be in Linc's office until further notice."

"Mr. Ballantyne—Linc—is in the boardroom with the other Mr. Ballantyne and Ms. Ballantyne."

Beck nodded, holding back his smile at the mouthful of Bs. "Thanks." He turned and headed in the opposite direction, greeting the odd person he encountered on his way. Monday morning and thanks to his flight being diverted to Newark because of an anticipated emergency landing at La Guardia, he was late. He'd picked the least aggressive cab driver in the city and his trip from New Jersey had taken forever. He hated being late.

Beck opened the door to the conference room and pushed his shirtsleeves up his elbows. As Charles said, his siblings were all in the room, but Amy wasn't.

"Driven is back," Jaeger stated, leaning back in his chair.

Jaeger had given him the nickname shortly after his thirteenth birthday when he graduated at the top of his class and made both the state swimming and track teams. They thought that he was an outlier, one of those kids who was gifted in both sports and academics. They never suspected that he'd always felt the need to prove himself worthy of being born a Ballantyne.

"How was Finland?" Linc asked, standing up to give him a one-arm hug. Linc was almost as big as he was and a couple of years older. Beck stepped away and bent down to drop a kiss in Sage's black hair. Like him, his brothers were big and brawny but Sage had the body of a ballerina.

“Good,” Beck replied, slapping his palm against Jaeger’s. “How’s Ty? Flu gone?”

Jaeger nodded. “He’s fine. When are you going to find a woman and bake yourself a kid, Beck? They are a blast.”

Oh, no, not this again. Beck noticed the glint of mischief that appeared in Jaeger’s eyes and did an internal eye roll. Since reconnecting and falling in love with Piper, Jaeger was determined to pull his siblings into his sparkly, loved-up world. Beckett had no objection to being loved up; he just didn’t need the emotional connection. He had no intention of flirting with that hell again. After Cady, it had taken him six months to feel halfway human and another six before he’d felt relatively whole again.

He refused to think of her, not now, not ever. He hadn’t been able to discuss her with Amy; couldn’t bear to even hear her name.

“I’ve had a nightmare morning so don’t start,” Beck said as a hesitant tap came from the half open door. He pulled the door open, took his cup of coffee from Charles, said thanks and took a reviving sip. “So, this looks like a meeting. What’s on the agenda?”

“Only one thing,” Linc told him.

“And that is?”

“Deciding who we are going to appoint to oversee our new PR and rebranding campaign.”

Linc dropped into the chair at the head of the conference table

and Beck sat to his right. “A lot has happened lately. At the beginning of last week, I met with eight PR companies, including Jenkins and Pale, who’s always done our PR and advertising.”

As the Ballantyne finance director and all round troubleshooter, this item for discussion was in Beck’s wheelhouse. Jaeger sourced magnificent gems and Sage was their head designer, but Beck and Linc ran the business side of Ballantyne International.

“We decided that we needed to rebrand a while back, but I moved it higher up our priority list,” Linc said. “As we know, Connor was the face of Ballantyne. He had the personal connections and brought charisma to the brand. Without him the Ballantyne brand is...staid, stuffy.”

Linc leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table and looking at Beck. “The day you left town Sheik Abdul Ameen went to Moreau’s and bought a diamond bracelet for his mother instead of coming to us. I did a sales audit and I noticed that other long-term, super-rich clients have also moved on.”

Their clients’ loyalty was to Connor, not to them, Beck realized.

“But we have the same quality of gems we always have had,” Sage protested.

“Yeah, but we don’t have Connor selling them,” Linc pointed out. “Connor knew his clients inside out. They liked dealing with him and only with him.”

“And our younger, rich clients want sexy and they want

hip.” Beck sipped his coffee, agreeing with his brother. Linc was brilliant at managing their staff and dealing with their shareholders. He was a hands-on manager, but Beckett was their strategist, able to see the big picture. He and Linc worked really well together with each of them playing to their strengths.

He looked back to Linc. “So you met with these PR firms and...?”

“And I isolated four who, I think, have some idea of what we want. They aren’t perfect by any means, but their ideas have potential. One of them is better than the others.”

“Who?” Sage asked Linc.

Linc shook his head. “Listen to their pitches and make up your own mind.”

Beck glanced at his watch. “When are we due to start?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Jaeger replied.

“Good, I have time to change. Where’s Amy?” Beck asked, standing up, his coffee cup in his hand.

“She should be out in the reception area meeting and greeting the company representatives,” Linc replied.

Beck nodded. “I just need to say hi to her and I’ll see you back here in fifteen.”

“Beckett,” Linc said as he reached the conference door. Beck heard the note of concern in Linc’s voice and turned around to look at his brother.

“Yeah?”

“Remember that we’re making the right choice for the

company. That might not be the right choice for you.”

Beck looked from Linc to Jaeger and to Sage’s worried eyes. “What the hell do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“You’ll see.”

Beck heard Linc’s ominous words and felt a shiver run up his spine. He looked down the hall to the bank of elevators and wondered why he had the instinctive urge to run.

\* \* \*

What in the name of all that was holy was she doing here?

Saving her business, Cady reminded herself. No more, no less. Sitting on one of the low, tangerine-colored ottomans in the reception area of Ballantyne and Company, she placed her hands under her thighs and ordered her knees to stop knocking. God, there was Gayle from Jenkins and Pale, Ballantyne’s long-term PR partner. And was she talking to Matthew from Anchor and Chain Consulting? They were at the top of the PR food chain. She was plankton. Or the stuff plankton ate.

Cady fixed her eyes on the large, abstract painting on the wall behind the receptionist’s head and begged her queasy stomach to settle down. Yes, baby, it’s been a hell of a week, but I had no choice. If we want to eat and have a roof over our heads, I have to work and not sleep, as I so want to do.

Ten days ago, after her disastrous meeting with Tom, she’d doubted she could pull herself out of this hole. Accepting that her baby’s father was a cyanide pill, she’d headed back to the office that night, knowing that she had plans to make. When

dawn broke that Saturday morning, she realized that she had three months to turn her business around. If she didn't she would be single, pregnant and broke.

Not knowing how to do that, she'd fallen asleep on the sofa in her office and was jerked awake later that morning by the ping of her computer, informing her of a new email. Congenitally unable to ignore a communication, whether it was an email, a text message or a smoke signal, Cady opened the email from pr@ballantynes.com.

Ballantyne International is seeking to appoint a specialist PR agency to work with us to reinvent our century-old brand. We require a passionate and creative firm/individual to develop and install a range of external communications and media activities.

The brief attached sets out our objectives and requirements, together with a range of background information on Ballantyne International. Interested agencies are asked to respond in full by 9:00 a.m. Monday January 3 at the latest.

Somehow, somewhere, the PR person at Ballantyne's had heard of her and she was invited to the party. Late, but still invited.

Given the choice, she would've avoided doing work for Beck's company but she didn't have that luxury. Winning this project would keep Collins Consulting afloat. Sure, she was a minnow competing with the sharks and she didn't have that much of a chance, but if she didn't submit a proposal she didn't have a chance at all.

Basically, it was a choice between telling her parents she was pregnant, single and could support herself and her child or that she was pregnant, single and could they help her out until she found a job?

Yeah, when she broke it down like that, it was no contest.

But first, she needed to face Beck.

At the thought of him, she resisted the urge to grab her laptop and run. She had no other option. She had a business to save, a baby to raise, money to earn. Unlike Beck, she didn't have endless family money and hefty trusts as a backup plan.

Not fair, she chided herself. Beck never used his position as a Ballantyne heir as an excuse not to achieve. If anything, it spurred him on to prove to the world that he would be successful whether he was a Ballantyne or not. Even though the Ballantynes were practically American royalty, Ivy League schools didn't hand out MBAs just because you were rich.

But she didn't want to be fair. Beck's actions in Thailand, his playing loose and fast with her feelings and her love, had devastated her. And she wished more than anything there was something she could do to never lay eyes on him again.

"Cady?"

At the sound of her name Cady looked up and saw Amy standing over her. Amy? Beck's Amy?

"Hi. I'm glad you made it through the selection process." Amy smiled at her, effortlessly confident.

Cady quickly realized Amy must have sent her the pitch

documents and the brief; the timing made sense since she'd given her card to Julia Parker on Friday night and she received the email on Saturday morning. Well, the how made sense but not the why.

"You emailed me," Cady said as she stood up. "Why?"

"Take a walk with me," Amy suggested and Cady fell into step with her as she proceeded down the hallway that led to the glass-walled offices of Ballantyne International.

Amy stopped under another large, expensive art piece. "Linc asked me to contact a range of PR firms, both big and small, to bid for this job. Julia said that you did good work for Trott's, so I gave you a chance to pitch, just like I gave seven other companies the same chance. Linc liked your ideas and you're one of the final four."

"So this has nothing to do with you feeling guilty about taking my place with Beck?"

Cady felt like a twit the second her words left her mouth, and Amy's laughter deepened her embarrassment. God, she sounded like a sulky teenager.

When she stopped laughing at her, Amy said, "That's the funniest thing I've heard for a long, long time."

"Hey, Ames."

Oh, damn. She recognized that voice; she heard it in her dreams often enough. Dark as sin, rich as butter, warm as hot chocolate after playing in the snow.

Cady looked over Amy's shoulder and watched him walk

down the hall toward them, dressed in battered jeans, boots and a navy, long-sleeved T-shirt the exact color of his eyes. The shirt was tight across his chest, skimming his muscled stomach. Blond stubble covered his cheeks, and his wavy hair brushed his collar. He looked rough and hot and fifty times better-looking than the Greek god she'd traveled with so many years ago.

His hair was a lot shorter than she remembered; the man bun was gone and so was the heavy beard. His eyes, a brilliant dark blue, seemed harder and his face thinner. His mouth, that clever mouth that had once dropped hot kisses all over her body, was a slash in his face. He looked hard and tough and every inch the smart, determined, sometimes ruthless businessman he was reputed to be. He looked like he could handle any and all trouble that came his way.

Her knees buckled and air rushed out of her lungs as she remembered those brawny arms around her, the way he used to easily lift her off her feet to kiss him. Cady tasted him on her tongue, could feel his heat, and smell his citrus and cedar scent. She was back in Thailand, the air was muggy, the sky was blue and she was turned on.

Breath short, mouth dry, panties damp...so turned on.

Oh, dammit!

Beck didn't pay her any attention as he scooped Amy off her feet and dropped a kiss on her lips. He hugged her again before he allowed her feet to hit the ground, his hands on her hips.

"Before you ask, no, I didn't bring you a present," he told

Amy, that open smile flipping Cady's stomach up and over. She shivered, remembering the sexy phrases he'd muttered in that same baritone as he'd taught her how to give and receive physical pleasure.

Amy mock pouted before half turning away from him. Cady saw her suck in a deep breath before she placed her hand on Cady's bicep. "Obviously you remember Cady, Beck."

Color drained from Beck's face as he looked from Cady to Amy and back again. The warmth in his eyes faded and she watched, fascinated, as his eyes raked her from head to toe. She saw his eyes deepen with... God, could that be desire? But when they met hers again, they were the dark, cold blue of a winter's ocean.

"Cady. What are you doing here?" His voice held no emotion as his words whipped across her.

Before she could answer, Amy flashed him a bright smile. "Cady is in PR. Julia knows Cady's work and she suggested that Cady take a stab at developing a proposal to rebrand Ballantyne's. Since Julia is one of the most respected consultants in the city and since she rarely makes recommendations, I thought her advice was worth taking."

Beck didn't drop his eyes from hers as he leaned one big shoulder into the wall. God, he was still so sexy—no, scrap that. He was even hotter than he used to be. And so remote, disinterested.

His eyes finally moved to Amy and as he narrowed them on

her, Cady realized that he was pissed.

So Beck wasn't happy to see her.

She couldn't do this; she absolutely could not be around him. He'd sent her home, tossed her away. She couldn't stay here and be constantly reminded that she wasn't enough.

Cady started to turn to walk away and then she remembered what was at stake. Her business was her only source of income and she needed that income. If she wasn't pregnant, she would leave but she was now responsible for another life, and walking away wasn't that simple anymore.

She needed this damned job.

Cady planted her feet and turned her attention back to her ex-lover and potential client and to Amy, who obviously had an important position in his company.

"Linc asked me to source proposals from new, hungry firms as well as the established companies we've worked with before. Cady made it through the first round and she's about to do her presentation," Amy explained, still sounding cool and composed.

Cady could see the tension in his body, see his fist clench. "You've gone too far, Amy."

"I have not. This is a business arrangement, a job. She's creative, hungry and needs work, and Ballantyne's needs someone creative, something different. You're making this personal, not me," Amy retorted.

How could it not be? What they had had been very personal indeed. She allowed this man to do things to her that still made

her blush. And she'd returned the favor...

As she remembered hot mouths, desperate hands, labored breathing and mind-shattering orgasms, she had to place her hand on the wall to keep her balance. Beck's eyes slammed into hers and she caught a flash of awareness, a lick of fiery heat, and she knew that he knew exactly what she was thinking. For an instant he was there with her, holding himself above her, about to slide into her.

His eyes always turned that particular shade of cobalt-blue when he was turned on. Cady licked her lips and dropped her eyes to his crotch...

Nope, nothing. No action at all. Mortified, she lifted her hot face to see the ice in his eyes. So, she was alone in that little fantasy, and Beck was definitely not taking a walk down memory lane.

But Beck was giving her another once-over, his gaze starting at her nude heels, moving slowly up her skinny black trousers to her blush-pink silk blouse. She'd pulled her long hair into a severe braid, which she twisted into a low knot at the back of her head, and her makeup, while minimalist, was flawless. With black, heavy-framed glasses, she looked every inch the New York businesswoman and nothing like the free-spirited girl he used to know.

While he inspected her like she was a car he was considering buying, she thought that Beck was now bigger and broader, harder, and he exuded power from every sexy pore. Even dressed

casually, he emitted a don't-mess-with-me vibe that dried up the moisture in her mouth and sent it straight to that special spot between her legs.

Damn.

Amy broke the tension by poking Beck with her red-tipped finger. “You need to change. You can’t listen to presentations looking like you’ve just walked off a trail.”

Beck grabbed her finger and held it, just enough for Amy’s eyes to widen and for her to realize that Beck was still pissed off. “Do try to remember who the boss is.”

Amy, utterly indefatigable, just grinned. “I do. It’s me. Let’s get back to work, people.”

Cady spun around and walked back to the reception area and ignored the curious looks she received from her fellow competitors. Beck, she presumed, went to clean up.

Neither of them saw the gleeful expression on Amy’s face or heard her whispered words. “Watching them is going to be so much fun.”

### Three

Keyed up and tense after her ninety-minute-long presentation, Cady left the conference room feeling like a washed-out rag. Needing a comfort break, she headed down the hall to the ladies’ room, thinking that she’d wash her hands and face, reapply some war paint and try to catch her breath. The Ballantyne siblings—with the exception of Beck, who had just sat there, as immovable and silent as a rock—had bombarded her with questions, most

of which she'd deftly answered.

She'd done her best in the limited time she'd had, putting together a mammoth strategy for a global company, but she had no illusions. She was up against the best in the business. If she got the contract then she'd earn herself a get-out-of-bankruptcy card. If she didn't, in a month or two she'd be packing her bags and throwing herself on the mercy of her parents.

They'd take her in; there was no doubt about it. But she'd have to learn to live with disapproving looks and the what-were-you-thinking lectures. And the image of the perfect family, the one her mother tried so hard to project, would be shattered. The pastor's daughter, single and pregnant, the one who had so much potential, would be hot, hot gossip.

Her mother was going to kill her.

Cady felt a big hand wrap around her upper bicep and she spun around to look into Beckett's deep blue eyes, the exact color of the navy-and-white polka-dot tie he now wore over a finely striped light-blue-and-white shirt. Walking into the conference room earlier, the last company to present, she'd immediately noticed that he'd changed and couldn't help thinking he should always wear blue. The cuffs of his shirt were folded over the sleeves of his trendy cardigan, and both sleeves were pushed up to his elbows, showing his thick, muscled forearms.

Beckett was a snappy dresser.

"Beckett, I need to use the facilities," she protested as he walked her past the ladies' room.

“I have a private bathroom adjoining my office,” he growled and Cady had to half jog to keep up with his long-legged stride. He ignored Amy’s startled face as he walked past her desk and into the office on the right. Through the glass walls, a feature of the Ballantyne offices, she could see that Linc’s office was empty. Cady wondered if they ever felt like they were working in a fish tank.

Beck pushed her through the glass door into his messy office.

“The bathroom is through there.” He nodded to a door at the other end of the large space. “When you’re done, we’re going to talk.”

That didn’t sound good. Cady kept her face blank, not wanting Beck to see her flinch. Nodding once, she placed her laptop bag on one of the two bucket chairs facing his ridiculously large desk and headed for the bathroom.

After using the facilities, she took her time washing her hands and touching up her makeup. Beckett could wait until she got her galloping heart under control.

Cady gripped the counter of the vanity and stared at herself in the mirror. Severe hair, white face, bands of blue under her unusual eyes. Two stripes of color on each cheekbone, saving her from the need to apply blush.

She looked like what she was: a stressed-out woman trying to hustle a job. She didn’t look pregnant but she did look flustered, and a little unhinged. She was older and more experienced, so why did she feel like she was nineteen again? Her palms were

damp, her panties, too. He just needed to touch her and she'd go up in flames.

She might be older, but she wasn't any wiser, Cady thought, washing her hands for the second time.

"You're stalling, Cady. Get out here. I don't have all day."

"Yes, Your Lordship," Cady muttered, yanking the door open and stepping back into his office.

Beck stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows, his hands jammed into his pockets, every square inch of his long body taut with tension. Cady walked over to the window and stopped next to him, her arms folded across her chest. She felt equally uptight herself.

Cady looked down to the iconic Manhattan street below and watched the pedestrians navigate the busy intersection, their chins and noses tucked into scarves or coat collars, their faces ruddy from the icy winter wind.

"Why are you doing this, Cady?"

She turned to look at him. This was, at least, a question she could answer.

"It's my job, Beckett. Like you, but on a far smaller scale, I am running a business, a business that I'd prefer not to see go under. I need new, bigger clients. Ballantyne International is a new, big client." Cady shrugged, knowing that her edgy attitude wasn't conducive to good client-service provider relationships.

Beckett rolled his head on his shoulders and rubbed the back of his neck. "I would've liked some damn warning that you were

going to drop back into my life.”

Why? She didn't mean anything to him. He'd broken up with her by sending her home. He'd gone on to Vietnam, hooked up with Amy there and then God knew where. She was the one who had the right to feel caught off guard. Then again, she had had days to prepare herself to see him again. He'd only had a few minutes.

But since she meant nothing to him, why should it matter?

“This is just business, Beckett. I was a teenager and that was a lifetime ago. I have real problems to worry about—” like pregnancy and poverty “—and I really don't have the time or the energy to spend thinking about something that lasted a millisecond a million years ago.”

She needed this contract and that meant putting her and Beckett on a very firm this-is-business footing. A cynical smile touched the corner of his mouth as his eyes dropped from hers to her mouth and back again.

“Are you really trying to tell me that the chemistry between us has disappeared? That you weren't remembering Thailand, hot nights and sweaty bodies? The way I'd kiss you?” His eyes dropped to her crotch, and Cady thought her panties might burst into flames. “How it felt when I sank into you?”

So he had been with her earlier, thinking of the way they'd made love to each other. She had seen the desire in his eyes and it wasn't her imagination.

Right now if she took one step she'd be up against his hard

chest. If she pushed herself onto her toes, she could touch her lips to his.

God, she wanted to kiss him, touch the hard muscles she'd once known so well.

Job. Money. Contract. Baby. Glass walls.

The words cut through her haze of lust and she remembered why she was here and what was at stake. Cady sucked in a breath, tossed her head back, lifted her chin and borrowed her mother's you're-on-the-path-to-hell look. "We're going to go there, really?"

"Yeah, really."

Beckett slapped his hand on a switch panel and the glass walls turned opaque and Amy, and her curious face, disappeared.

Cady had to smile. "Now that's a cool trick."

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