

*I'm So Sure*, sample chapters

## Chapter One

*That dirty rotten cheater.*

I lower my binoculars and swap them for a camera. A moment like this needs some megapixel proof. The lens zooms closer and closer on my target. I shove my way further into the bushes of the Truman City Park and aim toward the old tennis court, where the loser twines himself around a girl who is definitely *not* his girlfriend. Leaning over and balancing on one leg, I angle my body and get the perfect shot. One more close-up to seal the deal.

"Hello, Bella Kirkwood."

With a squeal and a jerk, I topple over and crash into the shrubs.

Spitting dried leaves, I glare at the boy standing over me. "Hey, Chief."

As the sun shines behind him, the editor of the Truman High *Tribune* smiles, and for a moment I forget that I'm sprawled in a small tree with limbs poking me in very uncomfortable places.

Luke Sullivan is *delish*. Except for his attitude. And his arrogance. And his broodiness. And his genius IQ that makes me feel like I have all the intellect of a gerbil.

"What are you doing?" With his hand on mine, he pulls me upright and I'm catapulted straight into his chest.

"Working." I take a step back. "Mindy Munson hired me to find out if her boyfriend was cheating." I jerk my head toward the couple making up their own game on the court. "I'd say we have a definite love violation here."

"So you're taking pictures of a guy without his permission. Don't you think that's a little creepy? A little unethical?"

I consider the idea. "Not so much."

“This has got to stop. Ever since we busted the football team, people think you’re Nancy Drew.”

It’s true. When you get kidnapped by the leader of a deadly football gang, and said leader tries to permanently erase you from the planet, people think you’re the stuff. And when you walk away from the attempted murder with your head still intact, folks start to think you’re some sort of sleuthy hero.

Oh, the many perks of almost dying. I’ve spent the last two months tracking down stolen iPods, cheating boyfriends, a drill team stalker, and one lost bullfrog by the name of Mr. Toady Pants.

Not only does it keep me busy, it keeps me in shoes. Hey, the Prada fairy doesn’t visit me like she used to. I do what I must.

“Did you finish the article I assigned?” Now Luke’s all business.

“I’m working here. According to my watch the school day has been over for an hour, and believe it or not, I do have a life outside of the paper. What are you doing here anyway? If you’re so hard up for female company that you have to follow me around, maybe you should give Mindy Munson a call.” I throw a look at her loser boyfriend. “My keen reporter’s instinct says she’ll be on the market by tonight.”

A corner of his mouth twitches, then he tilts his head and pierces me with those ocean blue eyes. “Who says I’m on the market?”

I blink. “Um . . . because I’ve never seen you with a girl. I realize I’m new to detective work and all, but unless your lady is invisible, she—”

“She’s at Harvard.” He picks a leaf from my jacket. “Freshman. And no, we don’t see much of each other, but she should be in for Christmas.”

Why do I suddenly feel like a deflated balloon? “You never mentioned her.”

He grins, revealing perfectly straight teeth. "You never asked."

A chilly wind blows, and my chestnut hair reassembles itself into a new formation. Luke reaches out and tucks a wayward strand back into place, his fingers sliding across my ear.

"Get that shot!"

I jump as a flash explodes in my face. As three men surround us, Luke pushes me behind his back.

A squat man sporting a Donald Trump comb-over steps forward. "Can we get another one of you and your boyfriend?"

I peek around Luke. "What? Who are you?" I saw Luke's protective hands away and plant a fist at my hip. "And this *isn't* my boyfriend." Why am I explaining here?

"Doesn't matter—just move in closer. These will be great promo shots."

"Drop the camera and leave her alone." Luke steps toward the guy. The boy may be tall and wiry, but he's a beast on the soccer field, so he's got some muscles on that frame.

"We just need a few more pics of the girl. Maybe you two could huddle up again?"

I gasp. "We were *not* 'huddled up.'" Though we have kissed once. But it was just to escape the deranged football players. I barely remember it. Just a dim, faded . . . totally hot memory. Donald Trump snaps another picture. "I don't know who you are, but how dare you spy on me and take my picture without my permission!"

Luke quirks a dark brow my way then returns his stare to Mr. Comb-over. "Who are you?"

The short man shoves his card in Luke's hand. "Marv Noblitz. I work for WWT."

"Who?" No clue what that is.

Luke studies the card. "World Wrestling Television."

Though it's a vague fog swirling in my mind, I feel trouble being to take shape. "I think you might be looking for my stepdad." He's known as Captain Iron Jack on the amateur wrestling circuit. But I just call him Stepdaddy Spandex.

"We're looking for the entire family."

A horror movie soundtrack begins to play at full volume in my head. The kind of tune that pounds out right before things get ugly and the fake blood spews. "Look, Mr. Noblitz, Jake's the wrestler. Whatever you're working on, I didn't sign up for it."

"It's a reality show—*Pile Driver of Dreams*." He chuckles. "And you didn't have to sign up—your stepdad did that for you."

"Huh?" My brain tingles with dread.

"Get ready, kid." He pulls out a cigar and sticks it in his mouth. "Hope you're prepared to live your life in front of millions, because we're going to follow you and your family for months. You'll barely take a tinkle that we won't be there with a camera."

I stand there mute. Frozen.

Luke pats me on the back, his face grim. "Looks like Hollywood's knocking on your door."

I sigh and close my eyes. "Yeah, well somebody needs to tell Hollywood Bella Kirkwood is *not* at home."

## Chapter Two

With a camera crew on my tail, I speed through downtown, blaze through some dirt roads, and lose them with a few detours near Old Man Peterson's farm. It will buy me at least a few minutes.

I barely put my lime green Bug in park before I leap out, oblivious to the biting December chill.

"Mo-ther!" Ever since my mom moved us from Manhattan to marry her factory-working, wrestler wannabe, life has been nuts—at best. But *this* is going too far!

"Mom!" Touring the house, I find her, Jake, and my little stepbrother Robbie in our newly remodeled kitchen. Laughing. Like life is fine.

Mom cuts into a roll of cookie dough. "Hey, sweetie. We were—" Her knife freezes. "What's wrong?"

Oh, the list. It's too long.

I try to break it down. "Um . . . Jake. Wrestler. Reality show. Surprise. Cameras. Me." Then I just wail.

Mom runs to me and pulls me into a seat. "Calm down, Bella. How do you know about that?"

My mouth drops. "The question is *why* didn't I know sooner? Like *before* I got all Britney Spearsed with the camera crew?" Let the record show, I totally had underwear on.

"A few months ago I saw on TV where they were scouting for ten wrestlers for a reality show. So I sent in Jake's application."

Jake's arm slinks around my mom. "We had a one-in-a-million shot of making it."

My laugh is bitter. "With your luck with the odds, I wish you'd bought a Lotto ticket instead. Your camera crew should be here any minute."

Jake lets out a shout then grabs my mom and twirls her around the kitchen. My six-year-old stepbrother takes the opportunity to run circles around them, his Superman cape flying behind. Their whooping happiness makes me want to hurl.

Okay, so maybe most girls would think it would be nifty-cool to have a camera crew in your house and be on TV once a week. But not me. Not when it is centered around your stepfather's attempts at wrestling. The head of our household will be seen shirtless. In spandex. And a pirate costume. He says *aargh*, for crying out loud! I will never be able to hold my head up. And my own dad is going to flip. Though he's been a guest commentator on *E! News* a lot as a plastic surgeon to the stars, he's never been able to get his own show. And now my stepdad gets on TV—just for doing a really good body slam.

The doorbell rings, and Jake and Mom rush to open it.

Budge, my other stepbrother, takes that moment to come down the steps. In his Weiner Palace sultan uniform, no less. "What's going on?" The feathers on his turban droop.

Budge and I were sworn enemies from day one. But ever since I lifted the lid on the craziness that killed his best friend last fall, Budge has been extremely nice to me. We talk all the time. Like last week he said, "Hey, moron, can you pass the milk?" That's some good progress.

"You'd better call the Weiner Palace and tell them you'll be late." I jerk my thumb toward the three men standing in the entryway. "You're not even going to believe this. Your dad's been selected to be on a wrestling reality show. And we're part of the deal. Basically our lives will be on TV for millions to see. No privacy. No control over their manipulative editing. The entire world watching our every move."

Budge shakes his head. "Dude, that is—"

"Humiliating, embarrassing, and intrusive?"

“Coooool.” He scratches his red ‘fro. “I’m gonna be on TV. Chicks *love* stars. This is gonna be awesome.”

Awesomely horrible.

An hour later we’re all stuffed into our outdated, 1970s living room. I sit on one end of the orange couch beside a beaming Mom and Jake.

“So I think we’ve got everything settled. Just have your management look over the contract and give me a call.” Mr. Noblitz shakes Jake’s giant hand.

“I need to talk to my family first,” my stepdad says. “I’ll let you know what we decide.”

When the door shuts on Mr. Noblitz, Jake gets down to business. “Why don’t we pray about this.” He reaches for my mom’s hand. She reaches for Robbie’s.

Budge and I stare at each other. *Fine*. I clasp his wrist with two of my fingers and bow my head.

At Jake’s amen, Mom begins. “This is an amazing opportunity.”

My stepdad beams. “Jillian’s right. This could take me straight to the top in professional wrestling. But it’s going to be an invasion for all of us.”

“Who cares?” Budge says. “I’m in.”

“Me too!” Robbie squirts invisible Spider-Man webs across the room. Though he leans toward Superman, my stepbrother likes to incorporate all superheroes in his daily routine.

“Bella?” Mom asks.

What else can I say? “I am not totally thrilled about this . . . but okay.”

While my mother throws an impromptu party downstairs, I steal away to my room and shut the door on all the madness.

*God, I know this is great for Jake's career, but what about me? What could possibly be the purpose in all this? Oh, sure, our family could be a witness to the wrestling community. But couldn't we just send them some tracts?*

I fall back onto my bed and stare at the ceiling. My cat Moxie bounds onto my stomach and butts my chin with her face.

My phone rings and I answer without even looking at it. "My life just got flushed down the toilet, Bella speaking."

Familiar laughter fills my ear. "Bel?"

I sit up. *No. Couldn't be.*

He wouldn't dare.

"Bella, you there?"

He did. My rat-fink-cheater ex-boyfriend called me.

"What do you want, Hunter?"

"Don't hang up. I just want to talk."

"So talk, dirtbag."

"Wow. I've missed that sweet voice."

"Hunter, did you need something?"

Seconds of silence. "I miss you." He laughs. "I'm totally blowing this. I . . . just wanted to talk to you again. I miss, um, you know, hanging out. I miss us."

"Really? Every time I miss us, I think about you all kissy-faced with my best friend."

"That was just a moment of insanity. I was lonely when you left New York. Mia and I—we're over. We were never anything to begin with."

"Oh, okay. That makes it all better. Well, thanks for calling and telling me that. Gotta go—"

“Wait!” He sighs into the phone. I picture him in his room, running his hands through his thick hair. “I know I said too much. Look, Bel, I just want to be friends again. You have every right to hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.” *I wish rabid pigs would carry you away, but there’s no hate.*

“I have something else to tell you.”

Oh, boy.

“I have, um, a disease.”

“Ew! Well, that’s what you get for being such a male ho.”

“Not *that* kind of disease. This is . . . more serious. It’s not good.”

“What?” Okay, cancel the pigs. “Are you going to be okay?”

“It’s treatable. But it’s going to be a long haul and nothing is certain. Bel, I just . . . it’s really important that I make everything right in my life.”

“Hunter, I forgive you. We’ve gone over this.”

“It’s not enough.”

I close my eyes and breathe. *Fine.* “Whatever you need, Hunter. I’m here.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Bella, I’m in Oklahoma.”