

## Chapter One

You wouldn't think the smell of bourbon could derail a business dinner. Yet as Aaron Hough was served another drink, Mia wondered if holding her breath was a viable option. Time had a clumsy clutch on her arm, the thick aroma of distilled grain grabbing like an embrace—or maybe just a noose around her neck. *Focus, focus, focus...You've worked twelve years for these two hours.* Sipping wine, she tried to fill her nose with the benign bouquet of house chardonnay. It really didn't help. It really wasn't the bourbon. The smell was a trigger to banished thoughts and discarded dreams, things that had no place in her life. But as the millionaire investor turned to his PDA, Mia seized the opportunity and slid the glass of bourbon toward him.

He caught her.

"Is there a problem, Mia?"

"Problem?" she blinked, doe-eyed, fingernails tapping against his glass. "No... no problem." Tipping it, she examined the tea-colored liquid. The contents of the glass—or her head—caused Mia's toes to curl up tight inside her pumps. "Ice," she insisted, clearing her throat. "It didn't look like there was enough ice."

"I drink it neat," he said, gliding a toast toward her before drawing a long sip.

*"Bourbon's kinda meant to be sipped not slung. Like this..."*

The words in her head were old, though the voice crystal clear. And it invaded like always, like a vagrant crashing a country club. Pursing her lips, Mia focused on the silver-haired businessman seated across from her. It was a stark contrast. While Aaron Hough could be described as dashing, he hardly matched the untamed image that bourbon conjured up. Mia cleared her throat, dismissing the inappropriate thought.

"Yes, of course, Aaron. Sorry. As I was saying, I think you'll be impressed with the final presentation for the mock office. Eco-friendly interiors have made terrific progress. But holistic design, not everybody appreciates the difference. The success of this project could lead to revolutionary change in the common office, like Xerox machines or computers. The concept is real. And I have to say, your interest has been... exceptional."

"Well, I didn't make millions, okay, billions," he corrected, raising a brow, "not without taking a few risks. And I know you've had a difficult time securing a backer. Holistic design, it's an atypical investment for me, I won't kid you. But damn it," he said, smacking a fist onto the table hard enough to make her jump. "I thought it was time to take action, set an example for my peers. You know how it is. Bullheaded, filthy rich moguls, we're skiing in the Italian Alps one week, on a mission to save the planet the next."

He rolled into a hearty laugh and Mia followed his cue. It was their third meeting and she never could pin down his eccentric humor. She supposed it was part of the whole millionaire—billionaire—mogul motif: longwinded jags on the life and times of Aaron Hough, laced with unfunny bits of self-deprecating humor. He finished the drink and Mia settled into her seat, prepared to be engaged as he filled in his post Yale years, which was where he'd left off at their last meeting. With a breath of surrender Mia reminded herself how hard she'd worked for the potential contract, even passing on conventional projects that were a sure thing. Eventually he'd concede the conversation, allowing Mia the chance to talk about the future of her designs. Then she could get into the details, the innovative plans she had for Hough's portfolio of commercial properties. It was only a matter of keeping her focus, the telltale aroma of bourbon notwithstanding. Rallying appropriate interest, Hough caught her off guard with an unexpected twist of topic.

"It's a shame your husband couldn't join us. I feel as if I already know Michael, or

should I say the man behind the creative force of Montgomery Interiors. Out of town, is he?"

The laborious breath halted and Mia teetered on the edge of a white lie. "Well..." she began, deciding to err in favor of the truth. "To be honest Aaron, Michael had tickets to a rock concert, the one downtown." She laughed, hoping he'd follow her cue. "It was a once in a lifetime, backstage pass kind of thing. An old college buddy invited him. But he was sorry to miss—"

"No need to explain," he said, waving her off. "Imagine the fantastic trouble he'll get into! I believe I'm damn jealous, nothing like a night of youthful insanity."

"I don't know if I'd categorize anything Michael does as insane. It's more..." she said, scrunching her brow, "more like a calculated departure from the world of finance and a corner office. As for trou—"

"You know," he said, and her mouth clamped shut. "I once arranged an entire business junket around a leg of Madonna's European tour. Front row seat at every venue." Mia smiled, praying there wouldn't be an explicit recollection involving Aaron Hough and the Material Girl's leg. "I don't want to brag, but by my third trip backstage... Well, let's just say I was intimate with the inner circle."

Mia kept a poised expression, hiding a merciful sigh when her phone rang. The words Good Samaritan Hospital popped up. This time she caved to the white lie. She knew it was Roxanne. A doctor at Good Sam, and friends since college, the culinarily challenged physician was probably looking for a hot meal. But Aaron Hough didn't know that. "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I need to get this, it's the hospital."

The regalement stopped cold. "Of course, I hope it's not serious." He rose from his seat as Mia excused herself, hurrying toward the restaurant's vestibule.

Answering the phone she laughed, thinking what little patience Roxanne would have for Hough's self-indulgent humor—direct, no nonsense and opinionated, she surely would have interrupted to ask how he'd managed to squeeze his head through the restaurant's door. "What's up, Rox? If you're hungry, something tells me I'm going to have a doggie—"

The Southern drawl was expected but the voice eerily tense. "Mia, be quiet and listen to

me. I only have a minute. Then I have to get back to him, back to the emergency room... "

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Rushing to the table moments later, Mia barely gathered enough composure to make her excuses. "I have to go. It's, um... it's an emergency," she eked out. "There was an accident. Roxanne—she's a doctor, a good friend of mine. She said there was a horrible wreck, an intersection near the downtown arena. Roxanne said he—" She couldn't finish the thought, it was too unbelievable.

"How terrible. Let me drive you, I insist."

Mia hardly heard him. On a mad shuffle through her purse, she tossed a lipstick and a pack of gum onto the floor, finally coming up with her keys. They dropped from her hand and Aaron retrieved them. "Drive me?" Mia said, a glassy gaze meeting his. "No—you can't.

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mean that's very kind of you, but it's not necessary. I know a lot of back roads to the hospital. It'll be quicker if I drive. I'll be fine." Moving fast toward the exit Mia spoke over her shoulder, "I'm sorry about dinner."

"Nonsense, it's not important. I hope... I do hope Michael is all right," he called after her.

Pivoting on high heels, Mia almost lost her balance. With her mouth agape, her arms slapped aimlessly through the air. "Thank you." It was all she could manage, running for the parking lot.

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Every time the emergency room doors swung open, Mia's heart leapt from her chest. A nurse had showed her to the waiting room—hours ago. She had grabbed Mia by the arm and told her to sit, calm down. Hyperventilating like that could lead to serious consequences. In tum, Mia wanted to grab her by the throat and demand to see him right then and there. After a dozen inquiries to the charge nurse she managed to stay in the chair, connecting with the part of her brain that knew how to cope with catastrophe.

The conversation with Roxanne had been brief. Life altering discussions should take

longer, or so Mia thought. There was shouting in the background. A nurse, maybe an intern calling out, "His sats are dropping again, Dr. Burke. Do you want to intubate?" Roxanne answered in some warrior doctor dialect, like a translator at the U.N. Mia could have sworn she was speaking in tongues. The only part she understood was a demand for four units 0-Neg and that someone open all his IVs-stat.

Mia forced her eyes off the emergency room doors, scrubbing a hand over her face. "Damn, I should have told her, B Positive. He's B Positive." But it all happened so fast. It was one of those everyday things, misplaced-like your winter gloves. As she waited, Mia tried stitching together the scattered information. There wasn't much to go on. Roxanne spoke in short jerky phrases, saying that she didn't think he'd make it. That if Mia wanted to see him... see him before he... *died*, she'd have to hurry. There was something about owing her as much before she hung up. Mia drove like a madwoman through Sliver Spring rush hour traffic. She would have driven straight through hell if it meant getting there in time. But they were already in surgery when she arrived.

For the past two hours and forty-seven—eight minutes, everyday things had kept Mia company. They surfaced at random, like friends at a reunion. It had been some time since she thought about coffee so strong the smell could spark a case of the jitters. As the first hour came and went, it was soft cotton T-shirts, worn so hard Mia could see the shape of his body as it fell to the floor. And crossword puzzles. She still has no patience for the one in the back of the TV Guide. He once did the New York Times Best of Collection—in ink. Mia bent forward, hands pressed to her head. It was a lame attempt to silence his voice, a penetrating timbre that played best in bed on dark rainy nights. At the moment she couldn't take it. Mia closed her eyes thinking that when she opened them it would be a dream. He was always in her dreams—maybe this was just a bad one. After she married Michael, when he was there every night, Mia guessed that would put an end to them. It wasn't the case. The doors opened again and rainbow patterned scrubs headed straight for her.

"Mia Wells. You are Mrs. Wells, right?"

Her words were out of sync, like a movie when the dialogue doesn't match the actor's lips. Mia nodded, curious if it was still the right answer.

"Dr. Burke is out of surgery. She asked me to bring you up to the ICU."

Life pulled Mia to her feet. "Then he... he's still alive?" *The morgue, the morgue is where they take you to identify a body.* "If you're taking me to the ICU then he can't be dead, right?"

"Yes, he made it through surgery. Won't you come this way, please?"

But she could tell it wasn't good, the nurse not offering anything beyond *not dead*. Mia followed to the elevator, trying to keep comfort with those everyday things. As they waited, as the floors clicked by, she eventually got back around to Aaron Hough's bourbon. It was an everyday thing turned ominous, and the timing wasn't lost on her. She stepped from the elevator understanding that the short ride to the sixth floor was going to change everything. It didn't matter. It wasn't like she had a choice.

Double doors swung wide and Roxanne appeared. Mia stopped mid stride.

She was anticipating a pressed white lab coat, her name neatly embroidered above the pocket, everything in order, every blond hair in place. What she saw put context in the moment—bloody scrubs, hair stuffed tight under a cap, a band of sweat covering it. And the look on her face... The only thing to which Mia could relate it was the time she'd accidentally slammed Roxanne's hand in a car door. This was worse. Seeing her, Roxanne's pace slowed.

"I... I was going to change," she said from a distance. "I didn't want you to see me like—"

"Rox, are you... God, there's so much blood," she said, shuffling a few steps closer. She gulped hard and forced her stare onto Roxanne's face. "He's alive? He's in there?" she asked, pointing.

Roxanne nodded. But her gaze kept flicking past Mia's head, like she was looking for someone. "Listen, I don't know if I did the right thing. Michael, he—"

"Michael's at a concert clear across town," she said. "You know that." Then in a smaller voice, "I... I can't think about that right now." Mia closed the remaining space, ready to push right past Roxanne and go see for herself. And she would have if she could just get her mind around it, her feet to move. Stepping off the end of the earth would require less mental

preparation. For twelve years she had wondered. Gotten up and gone to bed with the same question. Thought maybe she'd dreamed him, thought he was dead. She thought he'd be better off that way if she ever caught up with him. More than anything, Mia thought that this was the moment that came after insanity. "Answer me Roxanne, are you sure it's Flynn?"