

Chapter One

What the hell was she thinking? It was a thought that went through Mylie Blake's mind daily. In fact, every time she looked across the room, across the table or the bed, the thought harassed her. How the hell had she ended up married to Jeremy Blake? Of course, she knew how, but she certainly didn't understand it.

She looked at her husband of several years across the dinette and pressed her lips. He wasn't even her type, not even close. Not that she'd had a lot of boyfriends before him, only one, actually, but he was vastly different. As were her feelings for him. She didn't particularly want to think about that man either, but she definitely knew Jeremy was not her type.

"You'll do the schedules tonight?" Jeremy murmured from behind his wall of newspaper.

"Mmhm," Mylie answered flatly, her gaze fluttering up. He'd been giving her the silent treatment for the last few days. To someone else, his sentence might have sounded like a question, but she knew it wasn't. She exhaled lightly and took a bite of her toast. When had she grown tired of it? Once she had appreciated the utter lack of brainpower it took to live with a man like Jeremy, but now? Now, it was stifling. For a moment, she felt a wave of grief that was so old it shouldn't possibly feel so encompassing, but it vanished quickly. There was definitely a reason she'd married him, it just no longer seemed like a good one.

"I need time to recheck them before they go up, so don't forget." The corner of the paper curled, and his brown eyes bore into hers. She searched them. What did she hope to see? Passion? Love? Respect? She almost snorted aloud. She would never see that, but she'd like to have seen something. Lately, he was beginning to get almost openly vexed with her, but at least, that was better than silence. God, she hated that.

"Yes, Jeremy, I know." She swallowed the frustration that edged its way up her throat. She picked up her plate, gripping the porcelain hard enough to make her fingertips turn white, and scraped her chair back from the table.

"Mylie! Good God, that's Tigerwood!"

"Sorry," she mumbled, taking her plate to the dishwasher. Her breath seemed to stick in her chest for a moment. The hardwood was so important, just like the menus for the restaurant and the laundry detergent; everything was so damn important to him.

"It was imported from Uruguay! It cost a fortune." He needled on, but she tuned him out. She focused on putting the kitchen back to the perfect order he liked. The toaster released crumbs like flakes of snow with a few sharp pats. She unplugged it and wiped it down. She disinfected the counters, and remembering to fold the dishcloth in three, hung it over the faucet.

"Don't forget to rinse the crumbs out of the sink, dear," he added flipping the page on the newspaper. Her jaw tightened.

"I haven't forgotten. I'm just getting your plate." She walked woodenly to his side to take his empty dish, but he waved to her chair.

"Sit down, finish your coffee. I'll do it." He smiled tightly. "If it doesn't get rinsed, the jam will never come off in the dishwasher." She grimaced as he folded the Globe and Mail back perfectly and flapped it down beside his placemat. He lifted his chair carefully as he stood. She gnawed the inside of her cheek.

"Besides, I'm dressed already," he added. She narrowed her eyes and stared hard at his perfectly groomed, dark blond hair and pressed suit. Words that would surely cause a fight, if she ever had the guts to speak them, sat like a mouthful of peppercorns on her tongue. They burned so much she wanted to spit them out vehemently. But Mylie Blake didn't talk back. Mylie Blake didn't start fights. She looked down, noticing her wrinkled frumpy pajamas and suddenly wondered how he had ended up married to her.

Mylie took a mouthful of her lukewarm coffee and watched him as he washed his plate before loading it into the dishwasher. He took a moment to line her plate neatly with his. She was mentally living out a fantasy of a rip-roaring fight when Harry breezed into the room.

"Good morning Blakes," he said, sliding a chair gently out from beside her. Even Harry knew not to mess with Jeremy's beautiful floors.

"Good morning," she said with a real smile. Harry, her reprieve from her stuffy husband, beamed at her. She breathed in deep as if he brought oxygen into the room with him. He jabbed a thumb towards Jeremy's back and gave a nod as if to say 'watch this.'

"Guess you couldn't hear me come in over the plate scraping." He looked at Jeremy and then smirked at Mylie. Harry always poked the bear. "Did you get the finish off that plate yet, Jer?" He chuckled and sat as Jeremy tossed a grouchy look over his shoulder.

"You look stressed, hon. What's up?" Harry patted her arm before leaning back. His red and blue tie wrinkled beneath his folded arms. Jeremy always smoothed his before taking up that pose.

"Mylie has been tardy with the schedules. Maybe she's stressed about that." Jeremy shot her an impatient look to match the slight bite in his words. "Or maybe that's just me." He was openly hostile, and it was very unlike him.

Mylie gritted her teeth again as he focused on drying the sink meticulously. Harry rolled his eyes to his business partner's back.

"Shall we have her tarred and feathered then?" He shook his head. "She'll get them finished in plenty of time, won't you, Mylie?" He winked at her, his long dark lashes fanning his olive skin. Her best friend since grade school brought an instant calm to her. At least, someone trusted her.

"Harry, they have to be up tomorrow, or the staff will have a fit. I need to look at them before they go up, and with the opening of Essence, I'm a little too busy to worry about her forgetting right now." His voice held a little more than the usual hint of exasperation.

"Ouch," he mouthed looking at Mylie. "Easy, Jer, I know things are tight, but I think Mylie can handle it. You've been checking them for over a year, and have you ever found a mistake?"

Jeremy visibly stiffened. Harry was the only one that managed to get anything to sink into Jeremy's thick head.

"You're right." He drew a breath, wiping the tap off and drying his hands before looking at her and exhaling slowly. "They need to be up on the board by ten a.m." Mylie didn't fail to notice the 'you better be right' and the 'I am' looks that passed between her husband and best friend.

"And hey, if you need any help with things, Jer, I'm here. Just tell me what you need." It was Mylie's turn to pass her friend a sympathetic gaze. Jeremy ran the business—dealt with the details, Harry was the chef, the creative genius and the people person. He wooed and wowed the patrons while Jeremy took care of the less glamorous side of things. And while Harry didn't find

anything wrong with blurring the lines occasionally, Jeremy kept them clear and was adamant about it. He would no more trust Harry to help him than he would the homeless guy down the street.

They made a perfect team, though. The restaurant, Venus, was such a huge success that you needed months to get a reservation. Harry's cooking was an art form, one part feast, one part entertainment, and Jeremy held it together with his organization and sharp business sense. It had been going strong for years and had completely defied the normal shelf life of a trendy restaurant.

Harry watched the two people he loved most in the world move around the house like strangers. Not strangers to each other; he supposed, but to him. Their marriage, although never perfect, was cracking like dried out wood planks on an ancient sun-beaten deck. Mylie had been changing lately—a good thing if you asked him, but Jeremy didn't seem to think so. He thrived on control, and Mylie had been perfect when he first introduced them. She had been quiet, obedient, and content to follow him wherever he led. She even gave up her dream job to help them with the restaurant. Now? She finally had a light back in her eyes. The spirit she once had was almost breaking through the surface—like a baby bird breaking through its shell. It's what he had wanted for so long, but Jeremy obviously hated it.

The emotion that partnered his thoughts almost overwhelmed him with its intensity. Poor sweet Mylie had been a wreck back then, after the fire—left a burnt out shell like the home of her youth. Memories of that night long ago haunted him for a moment before dissolving with his new train of thought. What was going to happen to the life they'd built now that Mylie wasn't so complacent anymore?

A thought arced through his brain like a meteor bent on destruction. Had he done the right thing by pushing them together? Was it more for Jeremy or her? He rolled his neck. He just didn't know anymore.

"What's with the worried look?" Mylie asked, placing a mug of steaming black coffee in front of him. Jeremy peeked to make sure it was on the placement. Mylie looked like her jaw might crack from clenching it so tightly. She nibbled on the bottom corner of her lip when she noticed him looking, so he smiled to reassure her.

"Nothing." He patted her hand. "Get dressed. We don't want to be late." Her brow furrowed at his instruction. He had to stop doing that. It just aggravated her now. No one needed to tell her what to do anymore.

"You think I'm going to screw up on the schedules too, don't you?" she whispered harshly as Jeremy's back disappeared through the door to the den. "You were just playing devil's advocate." Harry watched her arms fold protectively around her middle. Her hair hung in natural golden waves over her shoulders, enhancing her insecure look. She looked young, like the girl he remembered from high school again, but without the spunk. It made his heart ache. He took a deep breath. It seemed he was having a sentimental day.

"Nope." He beamed at her. "Trust me, I'm worried about bigger things." He winked. "The success of a new recipe is way more important to me than the schedules. Sandra can deliver it or Carlos—doesn't matter who, because it won't change the taste." She nodded, looking unconvinced and left him to get dressed.

Jeremy was ready, looking almost perfect in his expensive Italian suit. It hung just a bit loosely, Harry observed. Stress always made Jeremy lose weight. Even ten pounds could throw off an expensive suit, and though Jeremy could afford to lose it and to buy a new suit, it still worried Harry.

"I'm going to sneak out to Al's diner later and get you a greasy burger and chili cheese fries for lunch," Harry said, making Jeremy raise his brows.

"You're going to get me a burger and fries? From your mortal enemy, a greasy spoon diner?" Harry wasn't a fan of Jeremy's newly acquired beard either, he decided, but kept that to himself. While he'd outgrown the self-conscious phase of adolescence, Jeremy never had. He still worried all the time that he wouldn't measure up.

"Sure, why not?" Harry shrugged. Jeremy rolled his eyes.

"Stop worrying, Harry," he stated plainly. "The weight loss is intentional."

"It is?" Harry's brow wrinkled. "You didn't tell me you were trying to lose weight."

"Well, if I want to have kids, I want to live to see them grow up."

"Kids?" Harry stood, the chair scraping made Jeremy wince. "Really?"

"Yes." Jeremy smiled.

"But shouldn't we talk about it?"

"Why? It was always the plan."

"But?"

"But what, Harry?" The challenge on Jeremy's face made Harry back off. It was true he'd always planned to have kids. The business was doing more than well. It shouldn't be a shock to him, but it was. It was a big step for Mylie.

"Listen, we'll discuss it later." Jeremy looked at his watch, a Christmas gift Harry had bought for him after the restaurant starting making real money. Those early days had been rough, and for a while, Harry didn't think it was going to happen at all, but when Jeremy came through with the finances, the rise to the top had been breakneck.

"I have a meeting in twenty minutes." He clapped his big hand on Harry's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "It's all good, I promise. Now can you please drop Mylie off at work and make sure does the schedules immediately?"

"Yeah, okay," he said distractedly. Kids? Was Mylie ready for that? Would Jeremy care if she wasn't?

"I'll fix it so we can go to dinner and hang out tonight." He walked to the bottom of the stairs in the foyer. "Mylie?" When she appeared in a pair of designer jeans and a button down shirt, Jeremy frowned. Mylie's nonverbal retort was a look of frustration.

"What is it Jeremy?" she snapped. Harry almost smiled. He loved Jeremy, but damn, it was good to see Mylie toughening up.

"Can you work the bar tonight? There was a call in, and Sandra couldn't replace it." She nodded, and Jeremy smoothed his tie. Mylie was always willing to pick up the loose ends at the restaurant. Jeremy took her for granted. He'd have to remind Jeremy just how much she did at Venus. When she disappeared, Jeremy turned to Harry.

"I'll fix it with Sandra on the way. You and I are going out tonight for some quality time."

Harry knew Sandra would do anything to please Jeremy. Kind of like Mylie, he thought, but with Sandra, there were ulterior motives. She wanted a promotion to manager. Jeremy told her he planned to scale back hours shortly and needed someone reliable to be in charge. Harry knew why he planned to scale back now, which explained Sandra's snit lately. She didn't like Mylie, and if he was any judge of character, he knew why. Sandra wanted more than a promotion; she wanted Jeremy. The thought made Harry smirk. She had no idea how absurd that was.

* * *

The schedules were up and posted by nine, and as Mylie pinned them on the board outside Jeremy's office, she felt smug. She took a photo of them and texted it to her husband.

"There you go, asshole," she murmured as the message sent. He wouldn't reply. He rarely did.

She looked at her phone when it buzzed, surprised, but it was only a notification for a doctor's appointment. Her stomach churned at the prompt. Deep down, she knew the step she was about to take would lead her right off a cliff, but she put her phone in her pocket and went to grab her coat. Her lab results were back.

* * *

In the doctor's office, there were three glowing women with various sized baby bumps and one frazzled looking mother, ready to pop, clutching her toddler's hand. Anxiousness flooded Mylie. Her legs itched to run away. She wasn't ready for this. Heat flushed through her, and her respirations spiked. She hesitated when the nurse called her name and pretended to be focused on the toddler grinding his fishy crackers into the carpet. She almost considered pretending she wasn't Mylie Blake at all.

"Mylie?" The pink scrub-clad nurse called her again, looking directly at her, so Mylie rose. She probably had a deer-in-the-headlights look. Breathe. She didn't have to make any decisions today; she reassured herself. She licked her dry lips.

In the small office, Mylie looked at pictures of babies on the wall. Some were adorable, and others looked more like little aliens with misshapen heads. She thought back to her teen years and remembered her yearning for the day when she would have her very own squishy bundle. She had dreamed of it nightly—fell asleep imagining herself sitting in the summer heat with a bulging belly watching her husband wash the car. Hormones made him shirtless with hot sweaty skin, but now the thought of it gave her cold shivers.

Feeling her brow tighten, she frowned. Was she even capable of being a competent mother? She loved working at the Sweet Pea Preschool during and after her placement in college, but she was one of several teachers. With so many eyes and ears on the kids, she didn't

worry so much. But in the last ten years, she'd never even taken care of herself. Her mind went to the accident that killed her parents. She shook her head – hoping the physical movement would knock the thought away. Not now. Don't think of it now. Mylie swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. Worse was the way the accident had turned her into a feeble mouse of a woman.

She didn't even know why she was still sitting in the chair. At least, that's what her pounding heart and erratic breathing told her. But Jeremy had told her he was ready for kids. *He was ready*. Her mouth firmed. Suddenly, she wasn't quite so content being a passenger in her marriage anymore. Would having kids change that? Mylie exhaled forcefully. Having kids wouldn't change her marital discontent. It was only going to add more discord. The last time she thought about kids, she was with a different man – one she wouldn't have thought twice about having a child with. The one she'd imagined shirtless and sweaty washing the car. It was the second time that day she'd thought of him. She considered for a second who she was back then— who she'd wanted to be, and who she'd loved. And again, for what must be the millionth time, she thought, how the hell did I end up married to Jeremy Blake?