

## CHAPTER 1



### **MIA**

THE BELL RANG, INDICATING THE END OF FIFTH PERIOD. I exhaled, glad to have survived another lesson with Ms. Brown without hearing my name screeched in that high-pitched, nasal voice of hers. It was bad enough I wasn't as smart as the other kids in my AP Calculus AB class. There was no reason for her to call out my name every opportunity her eyes landed on me.

"Mia, could you please come here for a minute?" Ms. Brown took her glasses off and set them on her desk.

With my back to her, I allowed my shoulders to slump. I'd come so close to going unnoticed for a full period and slipping out to what promised to be a carefree weekend.

I stuffed my binder in my backpack and slung it over my shoulder. Taking a big gulp of air and steadying my voice, I said, "Yes, Ms. Brown," barely loud enough for me to hear

over the loud thumping of my heart. Keeping my eyes trained on my Chucks, I walked the five steps from my desk in the second row to the front of the classroom. Those five steps felt more like five miles than the actual four yards it was. On the final step, I raised my head to face Ms. Brown, bracing myself for whatever she had for me today. Seriously, the woman should have become an army drill sergeant. Maybe she'd tried that, failed, and ended up here instead. The expression she now directed on me made me suspect she at least had that part of the job description down. Who knew?

"Mia, I wanted to talk to you about your test."

*Oh, joy.*

"I'm not through grading them all, but I didn't want to wait until next week before I spoke to you."

*Why wait when you can ruin a perfectly good Friday afternoon? Might as well go ahead and ruin my entire weekend.*

This woman was unbelievable.

*Another round won in the game of ruining my life goes to Ms. Brown, ladies and gentlemen. Again.*

She eyed me as if she were waiting for me to speak. She hadn't a clue I'd already offered her a reply, just not one for her to hear.

When I continued to keep my mouth shut, she turned to her desk and leafed through a stack of what I soon realized were this week's tests. She pulled one from the stack and frowned. I was momentarily distracted by all the red markings on the page. The sight sent my stomach into a tumbling and swirling frenzy.

*I should not have eaten that extra slice of pizza at lunch.*

"Here." She handed me the test, and my eyes zoned in on

the big, fat red C-minus on the top of the page.

It wasn't great, but honestly, it could have been a lot worse. With all of those red markings, I was relieved it wasn't an F. I had felt lost as I filled in the test. God must have had mercy on me after all.

"These type of grades aren't going to cut it." Ms. Brown's voice interrupted my thoughts.

Trust her to remind me of the D I'd scored on my test two weeks ago and find another opportunity to rub that in my face.

Had she not tried Quantico? I swear, she would be better suited there than at Jefferson Prep.

"It's affecting your GPA. Berkeley isn't the type of university that accepts students with these kinds of grades. If you want to keep up the family tradition like Shane, Trevor, and Jacklyn, you're going to have to apply yourself more for my class." She gave me another one of her penetrating stares.

*Like I needed the reminder.*

I was the youngest of five. All my older siblings were smart; all had gotten into and attended Berkeley. Even Steve had been accepted, but he'd transferred to LAU after completing his undergrad program and was in his last year of law school on a full-ride scholarship. *Ugh*. Why did I have to be the non-brainiac of the lot? At least in calculus. Maybe my parents' powerful DNA had run out by the time my turn was up and I got dealt whatever was left? Don't get me wrong—I was fine with who I was. But as the youngest of five smart and successful siblings, it was the story of my life to have at least someone remind me on a daily basis how high the bar was set and how I needed to better apply myself.

*Newsflash, people: After eighteen years, I'm fully aware and not at all in danger of ever forgetting it.*

"I think it's time for you to get some tutoring," Ms. Brown said, interrupting my little pity party. Not that I couldn't return to it later. I was sure someone would say something to pummel me back to that wonderful place of joy and rainbows before the day was over. I mean, I was Mia Davis, after all.

"Tutoring?" I looked up from the test, still clutched in my hand.

"Yes, tutoring." She raised her eyebrows, and I had the sudden urge to confess to eating Shane's piece of pie when he visited last Sunday—the piece he left on the counter before he ran to the bathroom and that happened to be gone when he returned. That piece. Maybe the CIA could use her when they interrogated America's most wanted terrorist. No force would be necessary when she put those eyes on you.

"There is a student in the AP BC class that has been tutoring some of the younger students. I'm sure if you asked him, he would be willing to help you," she said, completely unaware of my little meltdown.

"Tutoring?" I repeated, trying to focus on the topic and not my wandering thoughts about Ms. Brown in an interrogation room surrounded by knives and wires, a suspect tied up on a chair.

*Stop it, Mia!*

I did need help. So far, I'd asked my older brother for some help. He usually came home from Berkeley on the weekends. But lately, he'd been staying on campus more and more. He was dating a girl, Abby, who only ever went home during school breaks. I couldn't blame him. If I were head

over heels for someone the way those two were for each other, I wouldn't be heading home on the weekends, either.

"Mia, if you're serious about your college applications, I suggest you speak to Josh Morris." Ms. Brown's voice sounded flat. "If I'm not mistaken, he's in your history class? Do you know him?"

*Did I know him?*

Who didn't know Josh Morris? He was the smartest guy in our year. In our school, most likely. Probably even smarter than some of the teachers. Sure, he'd be able to help. But did I want to ask him?

"I'm sure he can help you," Ms. Brown droned on, "if you're willing to put in some time and effort." She put her glasses back on and took hold of her red marker. "I suggest you head off to your next class before you're late."

I shook my head and exited the class room.

What was it with teachers like Ms. Brown? Just because I was doing so bad in her class, she automatically assumed it was due to a lack of effort. She didn't have a clue that I'd spent hours preparing for that test, or that I always practiced extra problems even after I'd finished my homework. It just didn't work. My brain wasn't wired for calculus.

If only grades could be earned based only on time spent and the attention paid in class. I always tried, but sadly, trying just wasn't enough. Not for calculus. Not for Ms. Brown.

I dragged my feet as I walked down the hallway. Just five more months, and I could leave this all behind. No more high school, no more calculus. And no Berkeley, if I had my way.

But first, I needed to find Josh Morris. And I knew just the person to help me find him.



## CHAPTER 2



### JOSH

“HURRY UP, MORRIS. THESE BURGERS ARE GETTING cold.”

Gary motioned to a loud bunch of kids packed into the booth at the back of the diner. “Over there.”

I didn’t need to look twice to recognize the green and white leather varsity jackets. It was my school’s football team. Or, at least, some of them. There were way too many jammed in that small space. The booth could comfortably seat six, but these morons always insisted on cramming at least nine or ten of them in at the same time. Today they had some of the cheerleaders on their laps, bringing their number up to thirteen.

I loaded up as many plates as I could carry and walked over in the direction of the clamor and hollering.

“Get us a refill while you’re at it, Joshie.” Matt, the most

obnoxious one of the dim-witted football players, held his empty glass up.

“Sure thing.” I forced a grin on my face as I picked up my pace. At least he wasn’t calling me his other favorite name.

Returning with the last of the burgers and a pitcher of Coke, I filled up the empty glasses.

“Thanks, Joshie.” Matt smacked my shoulder extra hard, causing me to lose my footing for a second. Not that I was a wimp, but he did have three inches on me and at least twenty-five pounds. I straightened my back and eyed him, swallowing the words on the tip of my tongue. I wasn’t going to show the idiot he’d gotten to me. Sure, he was a brat, but there was no need to stoop to his level.

Getting into a fight with one of the rich kids from school would not help me get into Stanford.

I spun on my heel, their loud laughter reverberating like an accompanying track to my precise steps.

On my way back to the counter, I stopped off at the first table and dropped down in the seat opposite Kaycee.

“What are you working on?” I snatched her soda and took a big gulp.

“Hey, just because we share the same DNA doesn’t mean we need to share saliva. Get your own drink. Is your boss such a cheapskate he can’t afford to give you one?”

I chuckled and took another chug, almost finishing the glass. Gary could be a real grump, but he had the softest heart; especially where Kaycee was concerned. Yet she still made such harsh jokes about him. Maybe it was because of her attitude that he’d taken such a liking to her. Peas in a pod, and all that.



At sixteen, Kaycee acted tough, but she was still my baby sister. And we'd shared almost everything our whole lives. We'd had to, the way we'd grown up. There wasn't any other way.

"You know you love me." I grinned, snatching a fry from her basket.

"Hey." She swatted at my hand, but missed. She always tried, but I was too fast for her. "If I loved you, I wouldn't have licked all of those five seconds before you sat down."

She picked up another fry and demonstrated. I shook my head and called her bluff, dropping the fry in my mouth before taking another one and shoving it in my almost full mouth. Kaycee was all bark and no bite.

"Mmm. Kaycee cooties." I ran my hand over her long, dark hair, mussing it up.

"Hey, you just ate fries with that hand. That's disgusting." Kaycee's face contorted as she attempted to straighten her hair without touching it with her own grease-covered fingers.

"Touché." I backed away from her with my body still faced toward her.

I picked up the next order and made my way over to table six.

"Enjoy." I smiled and set the two forks down next to the single plate I placed in the center of the table. The older couple came in every week and ordered their pie on one plate to share. I suspected they were well in their seventies, but they shared their dessert like a couple of kids in love. Kaycee insisted it was sweet. I figured at their age they each deserved their own slice, but whatever.

“Thanks, Josh.” The woman smiled.

I still had to clear up the empty plates on the counter and wipe down a couple of tables. My shift ended in forty minutes. I picked up the wet rag and the cleaning spray and set about cleaning up the counter up front first. The last patron at the counter had left about five minutes ago. Best to clean up before someone new sat down. The bell above the door rang, and I looked up and my hand froze.

Mia Davis stood in the entrance. Her long, brown hair was down, and it had soft curls in it. She turned her head and the evening sun reflected on her hair, making it look more golden than brown. When her icy blue eyes met mine, my heart started pounding in my chest.

Mia had that effect on me. She always had, ever since I first laid eyes on her freshman year in Mr. Sanderson’s geography class. She’d been pretty as a ninth-grader, but Mia as a senior was drop-dead gorgeous. That easy smile that was typical for Mia appeared on her full lips, and my insides turned to mush. Before I could return the smile that looked as if it was directed at me, Matt snuck up beside Mia and slung his arm around her shoulders.

Of course he did.

I mean, this was *Mia*. What had I been thinking? I’d almost been too blinded and returned her smile. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t get distracted by any girl, especially Mia. I needed to stay focused on my goals.

Matt’s loud voice boomed through the diner, interrupting my straying thoughts. “Mia, baby. What kept you? Come on. I’ve been saving you a spot.” He smacked his huge thigh and winked at her, making even *my* skin crawl. I never understood

what the chicks in school saw in that idiot. Was Mia just as stupid?

Mia shuddered, and hope bloomed inside my gut.

“Matt.” Mia pushed his meaty hand off her shoulders. “Trust me, if I wanted to join you, I would have come earlier. And don’t save that spot for anyone. Nobody in their right mind would park their butt on your lap. Beat it.”

I couldn’t help it; a laugh burst through my lips.

She spun on her heel and directed those icy blues on me again, causing me to immediately shut my mouth.

“Ah.” She kept her gaze firmly fixed on me and walked over with determination. The way her hips swayed in those tight jeans had me drying my palms on my own jeans.

When she reached the counter, she sat in the seat next to the one I’d just cleaned. It was still dirty, but Mia didn’t seem to mind. She leaned her arm on the counter and rested her head in her hand, all the while keeping her eyes fixed on me.

“Josh Morris. Just the man I wanted to see.” She peered at me and pursed her lips.

She had no idea the way my heart leaped in my chest at the sound of those words. I schooled the most neutral expression possible on my face before replying. “What can I do for you, Mia Davis?”

I patted myself on the back for sounding so confident and relaxed, when in reality, I was sweating bullets.

“Ms. Brown told me you’re doing some tutoring. I’m free on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” She smiled easily, and for a moment, my mind went blank. Okay, not exactly blank. I was conjuring up all kinds of fantasies. The kind that involved those smiling lips pressed up against mine. A guy

could easily get lost staring at those lips and that beautiful face.

But this was Mia. The girl that seemed to have a different guy every other week.

*Pay attention, Josh!*

“Good for you.” I smirked as I returned back to my senses.

“Which day would work best for you?” Mia’s grin stayed on her face despite my dismissive comment. She’d probably never had anyone *not* agree with her.

“Neither.” I grabbed my rag and started cleaning the counter right in front of where Mia sat. I kept my eyes trained on the counter, south of those tempting, full lips. I could not afford a single glance. Not while she was asking me favors. One more distraction, and I might agree to something I wasn’t up for. Or worse, pull her on my lap and show her just what kind of fantasies I was dreaming up.

“At the moment, both days work for him.” Kaycee snuck up next to Mia like the sly cat she could be.

“No.” I gave her the stink eye, but didn’t elaborate further.

Mia stared at me with a question written on her face. “And you need to be studying.” I pointed my index finger to Kaycee.

“I’m taking a break.” Kaycee held her empty glass out to me. “Refill, please.”

I exhaled the breath I held and counted to ten internally before grabbing her empty glass with a bit more force than necessary. I turned to the soda dispenser and refilled her Coke.

“Ignore the crabbiness. He hasn’t eaten since lunch,” Kaycee said, causing Mia to giggle. “He works on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but not until six. I’m sure he could squeeze you in before.” Kaycee’s voice took on a suggestive tone, causing Mia’s face to scrunch together.

“No, I can’t,” I said, setting Kaycee’s glass in front of her, interrupting whatever it was she was implying. “Here, break is over.”

Kaycee eyed me, but didn’t protest. She knew better. She did waggle her brows and point to Mia as she returned to her seat. She mouthed *Go for it* and balled her fist and extended her arm in the air.

Curse Instagram and my own weakness two years ago. If not for that, Kaycee would have never found out about my secret obsession with Mia. But she’d snuck into my room at the exact moment I was browsing Mia’s page.

Okay, *lurking* on her page.

Okay, checking out each and every pic she’d ever posted.

I was that pathetic.

Kaycee pestered me about it for weeks. She even threatened to DM her. She eventually let it go, because I don’t date. No way was I going to chase after the girl that had caught my attention. I needed to keep my eye on the end goal. No messing around. Plus, it wasn’t like Mia would have been interested. Or interested longer than a few weeks.

Mia lifted her brows. “Can’t, or won’t?”

“Does it really matter?” I shrugged.

“It does to me.” Her eyes bored into mine, and my resolve wavered, ever so slightly.

The bell above the door rang again, but our eyes stayed locked.

"There you are." Charlie, Mia's best friend and nosiest girl in the entire school, plopped down on the seat next to her.

"You did point me in this direction," Mia said, her eyes still fixed on mine.

And there I was, thinking Mia actually knew I worked here. It was all Charlie's doing. Of course it was. I should have known Mia wouldn't have a clue about me.

"So, Tuesdays or Thursdays?" Charlie nudged Mia.

"Still working on it," she said, still staring at me.

"Like I said." I picked up the rag and the spray. "I don't have time." I began to walk off.

Mia followed and stopped next to me as I started spraying and wiping down another table. "I can try to free up my schedule on Wednesday. Would that work?"

"No."

"Josh." Mia's voice sounded near my ear. Soft, tender. But I couldn't give in. Mia was one of those girls that always got her way. Didn't matter who or what got in the way. I hated people like that. I would not fall into that trap.

I finished cleaning the table before facing her.

"No, Mia," I finally said.

Her shoulders slumped, and for the first time ever, I saw Mia Davis look something other than completely confident. I wasn't sure if I should feel good or bad about being the cause of that.