

Chapter One

"It was a dark and stormy night . . ."

"Mom!"

Ellie Montgomery somehow managed to keep a straight face. Not an easy task when her daughter, Jessie, stretched the word out into several syllables. Obviously, the others in the room had less control than Ellie as snickers filled the room.

It was girls' night, and Ellie happily found herself surrounded by her favorite people. When Jessie, Blaise, and Blaise's daughter Piper - a surprising new addition to the group - were with her, Ellie was largely content with life. *Who needs anything more?* She glanced at Blaise, who was lounging on the sofa. Was it seriously just a few months ago when everything had changed?

Ellie knew that Blaise's life had been content, as well. Then she met her now husband Greyson Steele. Little did either of them know how that meeting would change everything. Hell, if Ellie hadn't been there, she would have thought it was a plot for some Hollywood movie. Instead, her best friend of fourteen years was the star of her own drama. Kidnappings, murders, secrets, all the elements were there. Ellie was just glad that the outcome was a successful conclusion and they could all be here together, eating junk food and teasing each other

mercilessly. Speaking of, she turned her attention to her frustrated daughter.

"What's the problem?" she asked innocently. "I was just beginning." *A story I should never have agreed to tell.*

"That is *not* how you start a story!" Jessie huffed.

"I'll have you know that it is a perfectly acceptable way to start a story! Some of the greats have used that line!" Ellie gave her daughter an exaggerated insulted look, causing Blaise and Piper to laugh even harder.

"Stop! You're going to make me pee!" The *greatly* pregnant Blaise rubbed her protruding belly lovingly.

"It's only *acceptable*," Jessie began. She tossed a *look* at Blaise that only teenagers can pull off, then focused on her smirking mother again, "when there are a campfire and s'mores involved!"

"S'mores?" Blaise sat up quickly – well, as quickly as an eight-month pregnant woman could. "Do you have s'mores?"

"Fantastic. Now, look what you've done. You woke up the Beast," Ellie laughed teasingly.

Blaise sent her a mocking glare, "scratching" her nose with her middle finger.

"Blaise?" Jessie called out sweetly. "You do realize that I'm almost seventeen, right? That gesture is *not* lost on me."

"Geez, she really *is* your daughter!" Blaise chuckled as two pairs of hazel eyes rolled at her. She looked at her own daughter, who shook her head in amusement and winked.

"Yes. Yes, she is." Ellie pulled her long, honey-colored hair back into a sloppy ponytail that made her look younger than her thirty-two years. It was more often than not that she was mistaken for Jessie's older sister instead of her mother.

Of course, being the mother of an "almost seventeen" year old meant a roller coaster of emotions and many surprises. Not the least being her willingness to tell her *daughter* about her "first time". Shit, she couldn't even blame alcohol since she wasn't drinking in solidarity with Blaise.

When Jessie had asked Ellie about *that* night, Ellie thought that maybe she should have told her about everything when they had "the talk". She knew she should have done it sooner than now and when they were alone. But, alas, here they were.

Having had Jessie when she was sixteen, Ellie certainly couldn't fault her daughter for having questions. And she wasn't naïve to think Jessie hadn't been in a situation where peer pressure had gotten to her. Her only solace at this point was Jessie swore she was still a virgin.

"I don't have everything to make s'mores, believe it or not." Yes, Ellie was aware she was avoiding the subject. Permanently if she could help it. *Maybe Jessie will wait until she's in her thirties to have sex. Ha! And, maybe I'll have sex in my thirties.* "But, I have cake and pie. I'm sure we can find

something to satisfy Blaise's monster." She made a move to get up but was stopped by Jessie's hand on her arm.

"Mom, you agreed." That fact in itself was surprising to Jessie. If there was one thing Jessie's mother had always been reluctant to talk about, it was sex. Jessie had always chalked it up to the normal uneasiness a parent feels talking to their kid about this stuff. But even when the subject came up - no matter how innocent - during girls' night, Ellie shied away from it.

"I know. It's just . . ." Ellie sighed, glancing at the only other adult in the room. Blaise shrugged slightly. Even though she had a daughter the same age as Jessie, they had only just found each other. She had about as much experience at this as Ellie did. "Sweetie, nothing good came out of that night, except you." Ellie immediately dropped her head into her hands. *Damn it. I did not mean to reveal that.* When she looked up, three pairs of wide eyes stared at her.

"You got pregnant your *first* time?" Piper asked shyly. The poor girl was still getting used to her new life. She had grown up in New Zealand with people who had raised her to believe her mother had died. Only a few months had passed since she found out Blaise was very much alive, and Piper's life turned upside down. Or perhaps it turned out to be exactly how it should have been, finding her place within her new family. Ellie certainly couldn't blame the young girl for being bashful. The fact that Jessie and Piper became fast friends had helped considerably.

"Yep." Ellie took a deep breath. "It really *can* happen."

"So, my father was your first?" Jessie was shocked, and a little upset. Her mom never shied away from telling Jessie about her father when asked, but she *never* mentioned this. "Why didn't you ever tell me that?"

"I - I didn't think it mattered. Jessie, sweetie, I wasn't trying to hide anything from you." Ellie faltered. What no one needs to know is *why* she slept with Jessie's father that night. "The outcome is still the same."

"I knew I was a mistake, but . . ."

"You are *not* a mistake," Ellie replied vehemently. She took Jessie's hand and held it to her heart. "What I did that night was a mistake. *You* are a miracle." *Especially considering it took longer to get our clothes off than the actual act,* she thought miserably.

Blaise cleared her throat. "Okay, someone said something about sweets and did not bring me any. It is not nice to tease a pregnant woman!"

Ellie gave her best friend a grateful smile. "Calm down, kiwi. Do you want chocolate cake or banana cream pie?"

"What? No red velvet?" Blaise asked incredulously. She smacked her forehead with the back of her hand in a "woe is me" gesture, letting out a dramatic sigh. "What kind of best friend are you?"

Ellie raised an elegant eyebrow and snuck a peek at her daughter. At least she seemed to be distracted by the drama queen that is Blaise Knight. *Small miracles.*

"The kind that keeps making red velvet, and letting you take the whole thing every time you come over." Ellie crossed her arms and waited for a response.

"Oh. Right. You know what? Chocolate sounds good."

Jessie and Piper laughed at their mothers' antics. They both wondered if – and hoped – they would be as close when they were old(er).

"Wait!" Blaise stopped Ellie once again. "Banana cream sounds good, too."

Ellie put her hands on her hips. "Which one do you want, heiress? Please, I'm here to serve you."

"Banana cream," Blaise answered confidently. "No. chocolate cake." She rubbed her belly as though the baby inside would give her words of wisdom. Or at least the answer to this undoubtedly hard question.

"Girls, do you know what you want?" Ellie asked, secretly entertained by Blaise's shenanigans.

"Chocolate cake!" they answered in unison and then giggled hysterically.

"See how easy that was, Blaise?"

"See how easy that was, Blaise?" Blaise muttered mockingly. "You try being pregnant!"

"Been there, done that. Got the daughter to prove it," Ellie retorted playfully. "Now get your butt up and help me."

"Aww, come on! I'm as big as a house! People are supposed to be waiting on me," Blaise pouted to an unrelenting Ellie. "All right, all right. Girls, help me up." Blaise raised her arms and wiggled her fingers with feigned impatience.

The two teenagers dutifully helped Blaise up as Ellie looked on with amusement. If she thought Blaise was in any real discomfort, she would never have asked – or demanded, whatever – help. The fact was, it was disgusting how great the woman looked being only weeks away from giving birth. It almost pissed Ellie off. She couldn't remember ever having this 'glow'. *Different circumstances, Ellie.*

"You okay?" Blaise asked quietly as she joined Ellie in the kitchen. Ellie's apartment boasted a large, open concept, and the two women were able to have a semi-private conversation.

"Mhmm. Are you?" Ellie nodded towards the big belly Blaise was absently massaging.

"Hmm? Yes, of course. This isn't my first rodeo, you know."

"No, but you're older now. Can't be any easier." Ellie grinned at Blaise's indignant look.

"You're avoiding what you *clearly* know I got my pregnant ass up for." Blaise tapped her neatly manicured fingernails on Ellie's granite countertop. Something she knew annoyed the hell out of Ellie. "Why haven't you told me about Jessie's father? How did I not know he was your first?"

And only, Ellie added silently. "You know I don't like talking about it, Blaise." *It* meaning sex in general. She knew it

sometimes bothered Blaise not having a "normal" best friend that talks about this stuff all the time. Hell, Ellie sometimes wished she could *be* normal. She shook off those feelings and brought out both desserts.

"This is about more than just sex, Ellie." Blaise leaned as far over the counter as her belly allowed. "Did something happen? Did he . . . Ellie, did he hurt you?"

"No!" Ellie glanced over at the girls who were too busy taking selfies and laughing to worry about her little outburst. "No," she repeated quieter. "He was . . . I am the one who initiated it. He was just as nervous as I was."

Blaise eyed Ellie as though she were trying to discern if she was telling the truth. Finally, she nodded. "Does she ask about him?"

"Not as often as you do," Ellie remarked snidely, immediately regretting her attitude. "Sorry. Not my favorite subject. To answer your question, I think Jessie doesn't want to care about someone who never wanted her. She's asked about him once or twice. And, as much as I've wanted to shield her from that kind of hurt, I couldn't lie to her about his willingness – or lack thereof – to be her father. He was young, and just wasn't ready for the responsibility." *Among other things.*

Blaise snorted. "You were young, too. You didn't shy away from the responsibility."

"No, that's true." Ellie divvied the treats up like a pro and transferred them to beautiful dessert plates as she spoke. "It was offered, of course. But I couldn't bear the thought of

having an abortion." Tears gathered in Ellie's eyes as she gazed adoringly at her daughter. Right at that moment, Jessie looked up from her phone and smiled brightly at her mom. *I'd do anything to keep her love and trust. Anything.*

"Hey." Blaise placed her hand over Ellie's. "Where did you go?"

Ellie gave Blaise a bittersweet smile but avoided the question. "I know why Jessie is interested in my story. She's feeling the pressure."

"Pressure? What kind?" It finally dawned on Blaise what exactly Ellie was talking about, and she gasped. "But, she doesn't even have a boyfriend!" Terrified eyes moved to the teens. Blaise was definitely not ready for Piper to have these feelings. "Oh God! Do you think Piper? . . ." She couldn't even bring herself to finish the question.

Ellie patted Blaise's trembling hand. "Ask her. I know that you two are just getting to know each other, but you're her mom." Ellie tried not feeling the hypocrisy of the statement. "Besides, if *I* must have this conversation with Jessie, it's only fair that you should go through it, too."

"I hate you," Blaise mumbled.

"You love me," Ellie answered in a singsong voice as she pushed two plates towards Blaise, and took the other two herself. It was most certainly time to get off this topic and get this night back on track. No way did Ellie want to keep

fielding questions about her non-existent love life. Facials were obviously in order.

"Jesus, I am exhausted!" Dr. Hunter Vale practically threw herself into the booth, barely resisting propping her feet up. *At least it's clean*, she thought, giving the place a tired glance over. Oh, how she longed to lay her head down, and sleep for at least three days. *Work be damned!* She glared at her wide awake, smiling friend. "Why did you bring me here? And if you're *this* awake after a shift like that, you clearly need more work."

Maureen "Mo" Vanelli knew better than to tease her friend when she was in a pissy mood. And Hunter was definitely in a mood. It had been a hard night at the hospital for the doc, which was the exact reason Mo brought the tall, brooding woman here. She knew if she had let Hunter go home, she would have ended up going over every fine detail of the night wondering what she could have done differently. Better to have her worrying about what kind of pie to get than something she can't change. And from what she's heard about the sweets at this place, Hunter would be distracted in no time.

"I need food. You need food. We're getting food," Mo answered in her usual no-nonsense way. She sensed Hunter's impending snarl and cut her off before she could even curl her lip. "Stop. You did what you had to do. You know it, and eventually, *she* will know it. Let it go."

"Easy for you to say," Hunter mumbled grudgingly. She *did* know it, but that didn't make the decision any easier. Nor did the

fact that her patient was upset. She looked over at the stout woman with short, dirty blonde hair. It amazed her sometimes that they were still friends after all these years. They couldn't have been more different.

Though Mo was nowhere near overweight, she had muscles on top of muscles that gave her short stature a husky look. Hunter, on the other hand, had a trim, athletic body. At the ripe old age of forty-one, Hunter had to work a little harder to keep her almost six-foot frame in shape. But the effort paid off when heads turned her direction wherever she went.

"Yeah, it is easy for me," Mo said, cutting into Hunter's musings. She smiled at the young waitress that seemed to materialize out of thin air with menus.

"What can I get ya to drink?" the young woman asked, a slight twang in her voice.

Probably a wannabe actress, Hunter thought, blue eyes lifting to make eye contact. She couldn't help but smile slightly at the exuberant girl. *Oh, to be young and full of energy again.* "Coffee, black. Biggest cup you have."

"Um, we only have one size cup," the young waitress apologized, obviously taking the request seriously.

Hunter chuckled. "That's okay. Just keep it coming."

"You got it! And, for you?" she asked as she turned towards Mo.

"Coffee sounds good. Lots of cream for me," Mo said with a saucy wink.

"Jesus, Mo! You're married!" Hunter hissed as soon as the oblivious waitress was out of earshot. She shook her head at her oldest friend's antics. Having years of knowledge of this kind of behavior didn't make it any easier to tolerate.

The two women had grown up together, braving high school in Ontario (California, not Canada), before Hunter left for higher education at Harvard Medical school. Mo opted to stay local, studying nursing at UCLA. Ending up at the same hospital years later was a happy coincidence. Even so, sometimes Mo's juvenile outlook on life could be a little too much for Hunter.

"Not dead," Mo muttered defensively.

"That could certainly change once I tell Patty you've been flirting with some young thing!" Hunter felt no guilt whatsoever about threatening to tattle on her best friend. Not even when Mo's eyes widened in fear.

"I was not flirting!" Mo argued quickly. "I just asked for coffee creamer! Please don't tell Patty I was flirting. I'm begging you, Hunter! The woman will kill me for sure!"

Hunter chuckled wickedly. "Just one more thing to hold over your head. You know, it's getting to the point where you owe me so many favors you should just become my personal slave."

"Didn't know you were into me like that," Mo shot back smugly.

"Not like that, you perv." Hunter picked up her menu, effectively blocking out her blockhead of a friend. This was

their routine. Insult, threaten, laugh, repeat. It may be a strange relationship that not many would understand, but it worked for them. Mostly. That's all that mattered.

"What are you getting?" Mo asked. She hoped that if she changed the subject, Hunter would forget about snitching on her. "I hear the pies are "to die for". Patty and her girls swear by them."

Hunter peered over the menu, narrowing her eyes at her friend. "Why am I just hearing about this now?" Hunter was known for her sweet tooth. A self-proclaimed 'dessert connoisseur'.

"Uh, because you've been *busy*."

Mo's annoyance was not lost on Hunter. "I have not. At least not for a while," she said softly. "I told you, I'm done with that shit."

"Yeah, until . . ."

"Until nothing," Hunter interrupted firmly. "I'm done. Believe me, I've been disgusted enough with myself. I don't need any help in that department. Okay?" She waited for Mo's sheepish nod. "I just want to find . . ."

"Here ya go!" Their peppy waitress - too peppy for this early in the morning - set the coffees down on the table, along with an overflowing bowl of creamer. "Did you decide on something to eat?" she asked and took out her pad, pen poised to write.

"Yeah," Mo began at Hunter's go ahead. "I'll have one of those deluxe breakfasts, a big glass of chocolate milk, and, um, a

slice of that lemon meringue pie." She caught Hunter's wide eyes. "What? I haven't eaten since dinner!"

"Dinner was less than four hours ago," Hunter reminded her with a shake of her head. "I'll just have a slice of apple pie, and a glass of milk for now, please."

"You got it. Would you like the pie now, or when I bring out the rest of the food?"

"Together is fine," Hunter answered, and glanced at the girl's nametag. "Thank you, Charity."

The girl smiled and trotted off. *Either she's too damned perky, or I'm too damned grumpy. Or both,* Hunter thought with a hidden grin.

"Now who's flirting? Think she's?"

Hunter held up her hand. "Absolutely not! Don't even go there. That kid is way too young for me."

"Bah! If she's eighteen, she's legal." Mo was too busy stirring in her fifth shot of creamer to notice her friend's irritation.

"Sometimes I wonder how we're still friends."

"Hey!" Clearly hurt by the statement, Mo glowered. "I stood by you for all these years while you did whatever the hell it was you were doing. I didn't judge you. That was uncalled for."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Hunter apologized sincerely. "Still, no one under thirty-five." She was firm on that.

"Oh, come on! At least make it twenty-five." Hunter shook her head. "Okay, thirty. Give yourself a little wiggle room." Mo wiggled her eyebrows to emphasize her point.

Hunter laughed. What else could she do? Mo was a nut, and that wasn't about to change. It had surprised the hell out of her when Mo settled down and got married. But if Mo could find a woman to tame her, it gave Hunter hope. "Fine. *If it's a mature thirty, I'll consider it.*"

They fell into a companionable silence after their food arrived, deciding to enjoy their food without their usual banter. Mo dug into her breakfast with gusto, while Hunter tried to savor every delectable bite of her apple pie.

"This is the best damn pie I've ever tasted," Hunter exclaimed with enthusiasm. Another bite, another unbidden moan of satisfaction. She winced as she glanced up, surprised that Mo wasn't making lewd comments about Hunter's obvious enjoyment. *She must really be enjoying that food.*

"Tole you," Mo mumbled with a mouthful of eggs, bacon, hash browns, and whatever else she could stuff in there.

"I can't believe you kept this from me. Mmm, guess whose birthday is coming up. She would love this!" Hunter took another bite. "Do you think they sell whole pies?" She wished now that she had kept the menu. If the apple pie was this good, she could just imagine what the others were like.

"Don' know," Mo muttered around another forkful.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Hunter glanced around. She smiled when she found their waitress, who quickly made her way to their table at Hunter's signal.

"Need a coffee refill?"

Hunter frowned. The pie was so good she had completely forgotten about her coffee. Or the nectar of the Gods as she preferred to call it. Weird. She actually found something good enough to make her forget about caffeine.

"Um, yeah. Maybe a new cup? This one is cold." She handed the girl her cup. "Also, do you sell whole pies?"

"Oh, uh, I'm not sure. Sorry, I just started working here like a couple days ago. Hang on, let me get Miss Ellie for you." She scurried away before Hunter could say anything else.

"See?" Hunter threw a crumb at Mo who looked up with a scowl. "I could never date someone who says 'like' in the middle of a sentence."

That brought a snort from her friend. "Well, maybe you can ask 'Miss Ellie' out. I'm sure she's older than thirty-five."

"Ha, ha. Miss Ellie," Hunter repeated with a smile. "I bet she's some white-haired, little old lady who's been making pies for fifty years."

Mo's eyes rounded comically when she saw the woman coming towards them. "Uh, maybe not."

"Huh?"

Ellie gave Mo a smile. "Can I help," she met Hunter's startled eyes, "you?"