

CHAPTER TWO



Five hours into a two-and-a-half-hour drive.
Or so it seemed to Hunter.

He glanced at the sullen teenage girl in the passenger seat. Normally chatty and effusive, Brylie had spoken little in the eight days since he'd been called to Mount Pleasant, Texas, in the middle of the night. Only hours after a car accident had taken their mother.

Now on the road home to Fort Worth, the weighty silence stretched the miles even farther apart, despite the country music wafting through the speakers.

Usually, he'd be on the phone with a client or one of the other lawyers from his firm, getting work done while behind the wheel. Over the last week, however, he'd kept the device on Do Not Disturb to be here for his sister.

Because, truth be told, there was nobody else. He was it. The enormity of which hit him as he stood at his mother's graveside, next to where they'd laid his grandmother four months before. He and Brylie were now the last two of their family still living.

Brylie's no-good drunk of a father didn't count. He'd become a non-entity to Hunter when he abandoned Mom and

Bry because he gave the bottle more value than his wife and daughter.

If only Mom had lived long enough to enjoy her much-deserved freedom longer than twenty-one months.

Now, Hunter's normally pristine BMW sedan traveled down Interstate 30, packed to the gills with all of Brylie's earthly belongings. Or, more accurately, what was left after they'd sold off what little their mother had accumulated in her short but rocky forty-five years.

He'd worked sunup to head-down on his pillow over the last week to clear out Gran's house, leaving this afternoon with a *For Sale* sign glaring at him from his rearview mirror. The only time he'd return to the little town that had raised him would be for the trial of the man who murdered his mother with too many shots of tequila and a pick-up truck.

He chanced another glance at this little girl who owned his heart, because in his mind, she'd always be little. As she had been since leaving Mount Pleasant over an hour ago, she sat silent. Still. Elbow propped on the door, head resting on her hand, staring out the windshield.

His chest tightened. Completely out of his element here, same as he'd been the night of the accident when he walked into the foster home she'd been taken to and she'd dissolved into gut-wrenching sobs in his arms.

He'd never been so helpless or unprepared, with no idea what to do for a girl who'd lost her anchor in the split second it had taken a drunk driver to blow through a red light. The only smidgen of comfort Hunter could take from any of it was that Mom had died instantly. No pain. Now at peace. Reunited with Gran, if her and Gran's belief in heaven proved true.

He cleared his throat of the thickness that had been stuck there the better part of this beyond abysmal week. "Hey, Bry, we have about forty-five minutes before hitting Dallas. You need to stop for anything? Restroom? Something to eat?"

"I'm fine."

He nodded. She was anything but fine. "I'm going to make a quick stop at the Buc-ee's up here. We might want to pick up a few things. I don't ... well, there's not much at my condo. We'll need to do some grocery shopping tomorrow, but maybe you can find a few things at Buc-ee's you like?"

Her shoulders hitched in a shrug. "Maybe."

"Speaking of groceries, why don't you start a list? We can get anything you want. I also have a service that delivers fresh meals during the week. We can go through the list when we get home, and you can preorder whatever sounds good."

She turned to him and narrowed her bluish-gray eyes. Their mother's eyes. The same eyes he saw every day in the mirror. "You don't even cook?"

His gaze returned to the road. "I don't usually have the time, and I can heat them up at the office. They're much healthier than take-out or fast food. I'm sure you'll find some things you like."

She stuck her cheek in her hand again. "Whatever."

His heart grew another crack, and apprehension crawled along his spine. What on earth was he supposed to do with a fourteen-year-old girl? He worked seventy-plus hours a week in a bid to make partner by the time he turned thirty, his goal from the moment he accepted the junior associate position at his firm straight out of law school. Now the youngest senior associate after two promotions, and with only eighteen months to make it a reality, it would be difficult to cut back now.

But he couldn't leave Brylie to her own devices until he got home at nine or ten every night. Or on the weekends when he would spend several hours in the office or in his study at home scouring case law for research on his laptop.

As for a social life, that was usually a Friday or Saturday evening with friends from work either at a club or some sporting event. But he could give that up easily enough to accommodate Brylie. He'd rather spend time with her, anyway,

than guys he saw every day already. And there hadn't been a woman in the picture for a couple of years.

Although old enough to be left alone for a little while, living as she was in the grip of grief, she would need someone there for her. Maybe there were after-school programs he could check into. Or she could take the bus to his office and stay there until he was done.

No. That wouldn't work. She'd hate it, and it wouldn't be fair to her. She'd already been yanked out of her home and needed some semblance of stability. Well, maybe not *home*, exactly, because Mitch had moved them every time he lost yet another job. The last year-and-a-half Mom and Bry had lived at Gran's were the most stable she'd ever known.

He had to do better by her than her father ever had.

Moisture blurred his vision behind the sunglasses he'd donned against the late afternoon sun setting in front of him. Yes, she deserved so much better. This sister he'd vowed to protect at any cost, if it came to it, the day his mother and stepdad brought the tiny baby girl home two weeks after his fourteenth birthday.

Now it had come to it. The little girl who'd followed him everywhere the first four years of her life, would barely leave his side every time he'd come to visit, texted him videos and gifs to make him laugh, or would call to *just talk* at least once a week, now needed him like never before.

And as with his goal of being promoted to partner, he would not fail. If only he could figure out a way to accomplish both without sacrificing either.