

# *If It Makes You Happy*

**CLAIRE KANN**

*Swoon* READS

*Swoon Reads*

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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For my troubles and my sorrow

# One

**m**y heart stuttered as thick gray smoke billowed into the air, rapidly filling Goldeen's small kitchen. Angry reddish-orange flames licked the sides of the formerly pristine stainless-steel oven, singeing it a sooty black.

Rage snarled bright and furious inside me. I had spent a whole hour last night polishing that oven!

Running on autopilot, I hit the emergency off switch and grabbed the fire extinguisher. "Move out of the way!"

My cousin, Sam, decided somewhere in the depths of her brain that panicking within an inch of her life would somehow magically put the fire out.

Hands shaking, I pulled the pin, aimed the nozzle, and let the life—and business—saving carbon dioxide flow, sweeping it across the base of the fire and into the mouth of the oven until the flames winked out of existence.

"I know what you're going to say." Sam fanned smoke away from her worried face. "So I think we'd be better off without you saying it. I'll just quietly get my bag and exit stage right—"

“Pursued by a furious Winnie. What the hell, Sam?” I slammed the extinguisher on the metal prep table.

Sam flinched. “It was an accident.”

Swaddled in her usual black and neon-colored gear—this time a mix of electrifying blue and dazzle-me yellow—with her permed bone-straight hair held back from her forehead with a headband, she nervously picked at her lips. She wore her post-exercise glow like a supermodel lathered in oil and dropped into an ocean to create that maximum shiny yet somehow sexy drowned rat vibe. Rain or shine, that girl got her endorphins in. And judging by the way sweat continued to glisten on her tanned skin and stain her clothes, it must have already been hotter than hell outside.

*Don't yell, don't yell, don't yell, don't yell.* I pinched the bridge of my nose, silently counting to ten. According to my mom, deep breaths in and out would help control my temper in times of crisis or “severe emotional instability.” I would have tried that, too—if I weren't standing in a kitchen full of lingering smoke because the oven had been on fire!

*Seven . . . eight . . . nine . . .*

Sam's eyes would start to water if someone looked at her funny. Berating her first thing in the morning after a near-death experience would make her unleash a torrential downpour at me.

It probably hadn't been her fault. Maybe. Hard to say. My cousin could not cook. Couldn't even follow a recipe to make toast without it ending in disaster. Goldeen's definitely needed a new oven, which hadn't done Sam any favors.

“I would hope so.” A joke formed in my mind, one Sam would appreciate. “I know Granny is in self-righteous mode right now and refuses to buy a new oven, but this is *not* how you scam an insurance company. You set an inconspicuous, untraceable, freak-accident fire, and flee the scene. You don't stand around screaming ‘*help me.*’”

Sam coughed and let loose a tiny smile. “I would make a terrible criminal.”

“The worst. Which is why you are always the alibi.”

She raised her right hand. “I accept my role as an eternal getaway driver, capable of convincing anyone of my ability to be in two places at once, and hereby subject myself to your masterminded whims.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Can I have a hug?” Her pouty, remorseful face was too cute for her own good.

“No. You’re all sweaty.”

“Okay.”

“Yes, you can have a hug. Come here.” Sam didn’t hesitate, clinging to me like a baby koala in milliseconds. She wrapped her arms around my waist, placing her head on my shoulder, and I perched my chin on the top of her head. The distinct sound of a snuffle made me sigh deeper than I wanted her to hear.

“Why does it smell like barbecued dog hair in here?”

Winston stood at the foot of the stairs that led to the apartment above the diner in his rumpled plaid pajamas with a neutral frown on his face. To be fair, that was his natural state: pseudo-surly and quiet. At fourteen, he’d already grown into a small giant, towering over me at a solid six feet two to my average five feet six, and gave me major attitude when I introduced him as my “baby” brother.

The fact that we didn’t look alike burned my biscuits faster than Goldeen’s faulty oven. Taller, thinner, with darker, richer skin that he’d inherited from our dad and strong, symmetrical facial features he got from our mom, how else were people supposed to know that he was mine if I didn’t tell them every chance I got? No one thought we were related at first glance because we looked like total opposites. I couldn’t trust people to just guess one of the most important facts of my life. I was his big sister—his *only* big sister. They needed to *know*.

“It does not,” Sam said, letting me go. “If anything, it smells like burnt Cinnamon Toast Crunch.” She had the audacity to giggle at her bad joke.

“Obviously.” He walked toward the emergency exit that wasn’t really an emergency exit because the alarm had been disabled so it could be used as a regular door, but it still had all of the fancy red-striped tape. He pushed it open and set a box of glass preserves jars on the ground to keep it that way. “It’s from the movie. I watched it again last night.”

We’d watched the original *Ghostbusters* on the two-hour flight to Misty Haven, the small town where our granny owned a diner: Goldeen’s. We stayed here every summer, me being the record-holder for twelve straight years, sort of like summer camp, except with less macaroni-and-popsicle-stick art, more family time, and better food.

Also, *small town* meant the smallest. According to Wikipedia—shut up—Misty Haven, with its population of 352, qualified as a village.

Correction: population of 354. The Berkowitz family had twins in April.

“What did you do?” Winston asked.

“Why did you assume it was me?” Sam whined. “It could have been Winnie.”

“I heard you screaming. And besides, Winnie knows how to cook”—he peered into the charbroiled mess of an oven—“cinnamon rolls, without it looking like a botched arson job. Goldeen’s doesn’t need money that bad. Granny will break down and buy a new oven eventually.”

“That’s exactly what I said. Great minds.”

“I thought the kids might like them.” Sam didn’t work in the diner like Winston and I. Somehow, she became *the* babysitter for Misty Haven. Her phone started ringing the second we crossed the town limits, as if all the desperate parents could sense her presence. They’d

probably been staring out the window, waiting to spot Granny's dark blue Cadillac—still in mint condition for such an old car—and lit up the community phone tree like it was Christmas and no one cared about the electricity bill.

"I'm sure they would have," I said. "Next time, ask for help. Please. I'm begging you."

"Fine."

"Winston, can you get me a rag and a bucket?"

"I cannot. My shift doesn't start until ten so I'm going back to bed. I just wanted to be nosy and get my insults in before you tried to make her feel better. Once again, I was too late," he said with a wistful sigh.

"Jerk," Sam said.

"Don't start." I pointed my finger in warning at both of them.

"Blame puberty." Winston shrugged. "I'm supposed to be this way and it's only going to get worse."

"Not in my house."

"Good thing this isn't your house," he said, walking away with a wave.

"He's going to be a demon by the time he turns sixteen. I can feel it." Unsurprising, really. We might not have looked alike, but we certainly made up for it elsewhere. "And he'll make an excellent apprentice." I twirled around. "Okay! Let's get this cleaned up before Aaron gets here and tries to glower you into oblivion."

"Umm," Sam said.

"Oh, no. You are not leaving me alone to clean up your mess."

"I'm sorry. My shift starts in twenty minutes and I still have to shower. You know how Ms. Fellows gets if I'm not on time."

"What's she gonna do? Fire you? No one else is willing to watch her kids."

"That's not their fault. They're good kids. Hence the cinnamon rolls." She inched closer to the stairs.



*One, two, three . . .*

One day, Sam would stop being so thoughtless and irresponsible.

*Four, five, six . . .*

One day, I would stop letting her get away with (cinnamon roll) murder.

*Seven, eight, nine . . .*

One day.

But one day was not that day.

“Go. And know that I hate you,” I said.

Sam changed direction, leaping forward and hugging me again. “You’re the best.”

“The beautiful. The only,” I muttered.

She bounded away, happy as a rabbit to once again skate by scot-free of consequences, while I covered my face, staring at the ruined mess of an oven through my fingers.

These days, fire and Goldeen’s went hand in hand. Kit and caboodle. Peas in a pod. You’d think an established diner would do anything to avoid that whole no open flames in the kitchen next to the full fryer of oil thing down pat, but no, not at Goldeen’s. Nothing short of a miracle that the oven didn’t explode set at—I squinted at the thermostat—500 degrees?

Yep. Definitely Sam’s fault. “How many times do I have to tell you that you cannot bake something at double the temperature to make it cook twice as fast?!” I yelled up the stairs, for the sake of doing it.

“I’M SORRY!”

“What in the world happened to my kitchen?”

Aaron—the day, night, always around and available cook—stood at the door, legendary glower already in place. White and tall, something like six feet seven or some unreal height, he had the honor of being one of the few people who actually made Winston look up. He also had dirty blond hair in a military-style cut, only wore white

T-shirts and dark blue jeans, and had a wicked scar on his left cheek. Nadiya, the mid-shift waitress, might or might not have been slightly obsessed with him. Said he resembled an actor who played a Viking vampire.

But, as far as I knew, and I knew more than most when it came to Top Secret Agent Aaron, he wasn't interested in anyone. Ever.

"Murphy's Law," I answered.

Samantha Murphy-Woodson. Winston had come up with the catchall explanation. With Sam at the helm, whatever could go wrong would. And then probably spontaneously combusted. Metaphorically and literally.

"We open in thirty minutes! Why did you let her anywhere near my kitchen?"

"Me? I didn't!"

I'd been upstairs, minding my merry, magical Black-girl business, getting ready for my morning shift. This summer I'd volunteered to work the shifts nobody wanted or that everyone wanted a break from: Crack of Dawn A.M. Rush, Midnight Oil Solo Burn, and I Dream of Deliveries.

Goldeen's had the best uniforms. Total fifties-style hoopskirts and button-up tops with rolled-up short sleeves in mellow mint-green and black. Instead of a poodle, a cluster of unicorn seahorses had been sown onto the fabric of the skirt in the front. And the best part? They were custom-made by a retired seamstress in town. I never had to worry about not being able to fit my uniform after a school year away or having to order a new one every summer. Miss Jepson, said seamstress who operated a costume shop, altered it for me, no questions asked.

"I ran downstairs when she started screaming," I said. "*Oh my God, it's on fire. Help. Someone help me.*" Somehow it didn't cross her mind to pick up the fire extinguisher."

“That child is an absolute disaster.”

“That she is. But she’s my disaster, and so I take full responsibility.”

Aaron side-eyed me, blue eyes narrowing into harsh slits that made me bare my teeth at him in a warped version of a smile.

“Nobody asked you to do that.”

“Some things don’t need to be asked.” I shrugged.

Sam’s mom died when she was four. After the funeral, she and her dad, my uncle Mark, moved in with my family—a short-term arrangement that lasted two years. When my parents wanted to buy a house, they came with us. She wasn’t my sister, but we’ve been together for a good chunk of our respective existences. I didn’t know a life without Sam in it every waking moment. Could barely even remember it.

Aaron raised his hand like he wanted to touch the top of my head, but stopped himself, arm returning to his side. “You’re a good kid.”

“I prefer almost-adult, but thank you.” I poked him in the side.

Physical affection was my jam, everyone knew that, but I didn’t really like it when people touched my hair without asking, so the fact that he stopped made me happier than if he would have actually done it.

Using a pot holder, he exhumed the charred remains of what should have been lightly browned, flaky deliciousness, soon to be topped with Goldeen’s secret-recipe cream-cheese icing cinnamon rolls.

“I’ll get this cleaned up. You handle the opening?”

“Deal.” I smiled at him, a real one. “Thanks.”

Goldeen’s stayed open twenty-hours a day, closing from two a.m. to six a.m. because those were “druggie and serial killer” hours, as Granny had put it.

Meanwhile in Misty Haven reality, that’s when the cleaning crew showed up to polish the diner to a brilliant shine.

Out front I booted up the registers, cashed in, and prepared the bank deposit, then leaped from booth to booth to open the blinds and left a message for Frank, the oven repair guy, to have him on standby.

Twelve whole summers of working and practically living in Goldeen's and I'd only been officially on the payroll for three of them—this summer being the most important one yet.

*Co-Assistant Manager.* Printed on my new shiny name tag and everything.

My family's business, our legacy, Goldeen's had stood strong and proud and profitable hundreds of miles away from me for almost fifteen years. She opened her doors right before my fourth birthday, right before Winston had been born, right before my family packed up and moved to the Bay Area.

When Granny had bought the building, she'd decided to keep the original Formica-topped bar and round stools in front of the kitchen, and the booths on the opposite side against the front windows. My dad had picked out the sea-green upholstery and the coral-reef-inspired tiles for the floor. My mom had decorated the walls: starfish, pearls, netting, paintings of mermaids and sirens, old boats and ship's wheels. And then, there was me, in all of my three-year-old, gap-toothed glory, given the most important job of all. I got to pick the name.

*"Gowdeens."*

I couldn't even say the name right, but it was my favorite Pokémon. Luckily, my mom spoke fluent Toddler! Winnie and knew exactly what I'd meant.

My parents had their careers, an English professor and a welder slash artist. Sam's dad had his, an exceptional carpentry business. Sam herself knew she wanted to be a nutritionist and kinesiologist, and Winston hadn't figured anything out yet.

Personally, I'd always thought about my future in possibilities.

Maybe I'd go to college evolved into maybe I'd major in hospitality to maybe I'd be a diner owner someday. And maybe that diner would be Goldeen's.

Juggling the large key ring in my hand until I found the right one, I walked to the front door. Two cars were already waiting in the parking lot, and a third, a large white van, was pulling into the accessible parking spot. Customers ready and waiting before we opened usually meant it would be a good day, and a good day meant lots of profits, and lots of profits meant a happy Granny. Nothing made her happier than a nice bank deposit.

I unlocked the door at the same exact time as the all too familiar *whomp* of a fire starting erupted out of the kitchen, followed by startled shouts from Aaron.

*"Oh damn it,"* I said, already running. *"I'M COMING."*

## Two

There's an old movie about a girl dying from cancer who wished to be in two places at once, among other more pertinent things. And so, the boy who loved her, in true Prince Charming of the high school variety fashion, drove her to the state line. They stood together, straddling that metaphysical border, metaphorically making her wish come true, and subsequently ruining the real lives and standards of romantics everywhere.

Like mine.

Anyway, that's how the town lines between Misty Haven and its sister city had been set up. Cross a street and boom: WELCOME TO MERRY HAVEN. POPULATION 478.

Together, they were known as Haven Central but both town mayors had enough ego to put up back-to-back signs, depending which side of the street you were on.

THANK YOU FOR VISITING . . .

WELCOME TO . . .

I made the right turn out of Misty and into Merry, driving down Main Street—one long strip lined with shops on either side. Merry

had tried its best but definitely lacked the idyllic beauty that Misty possessed. But the houses?

Visitors would hop off the freeway, drive through Merry, and ogle the homes. They'd also stop at a few of the shops because why not, and eat at a diner because might as well. Cheaper than going to the movies and an excellent opportunity for pee breaks on road trips.

Most of the houses slanted toward becoming historical landmarks. Old enough to be considered too important to tear down, but sturdy enough to be lived in with some slight renovations. According to ye olde Mayor Way, any remodeling required city approval and usually excluded any "extravagant" exterior work. That's how most of the houses became a quirky mishmash of the past and the future. On the outside you'd think you'd find a house full of Puritans ready to hang some witches, or witches ready to bake some kids, but inside you'd swear someone let Steven Spielberg have at it to create a futuristic domestic wonderland.

The Meyers, the most (in)famous family in Merry, had the distinct honor of being my first delivery of the day. I'd been to their house dozens of times last summer on official Goldeen's business but had never gotten past their kitchen, which kept things disappointingly normal for the most part. Chrome with black trim everywhere and a hardwood floor that probably killed their heating bill in the winter. Or they wore a lot of socks and flannel to keep warm. That's what my family did anyway.

I slid the gigantic tray of deviled eggs onto the counter before heading back out to the car for the array of pretentious-yet-delicious finger sandwiches, multicolored macarons, and mini egg-and-bacon quiches with the finest chops of green onions. Aaron always sent a list of typed-up instructions for how to reheat the food if they wanted, so I placed that on top of one of the lids, in plain sight.

“Hey! Delivery lady who no one thought to help carry the trays needs a signature!”

A familiar voice replied, “Do you always yell in people’s houses so early in the morning?” Dallas Meyer. The bane of my romantic existence.

Distracted and trying to find the delivery paper, I said, “Only if they’re special.” I looked up—a startled gasp ripped out of me. My hand slapped over my mouth on reflex.

Dallas had shaved his head! All of those soft, natural curls—gone. Just gone! I moved my hand long enough to whisper, “You’re bald! Oh my God, you’re bald!” before putting it right back over my mouth.

“Not quite.” He laughed.

The remaining shorn hair made his light brown skin, which he took amazing care of, seem brighter.

Ordering Korean beauty products and using face masks a minimum of twice a week kind of amazing. He even had his eyebrows professionally done once a month. Anyone who spent more than two minutes watching YouTube videos could tell that was not a natural arch. Not that he kept his beauty routine a secret or anything. In Haven Central, secrets of any kind never lasted.

Dallas walked toward me, still smiling. My inability to stop making an overdramatic fool of myself must have been amusing. He stood on the other side of the kitchen island, kitty-corner to me.

Me, who couldn’t stop staring at the top of his head.

He leaned forward into my space. Mint and some kind of sweet-smelling cologne washed over me. He’d already put in his contacts. Clear ones because he didn’t need to enhance his already freakishly lovely blue-green hybrid color.

I planted my feet, waiting, looking him in the eye, but blinking far too often. He probably thought I’d developed a twitch in the



last thirty seconds. Eye contact made me nervous sometimes, but I wanted to do this. I wanted to be there in that moment, so I pushed myself to be strong.

“Dallas?”

“Hmm?”

I’d had dreams about touching those curls. Long, detailed dreams that I would *never* confess to, not even to save my life. It was just hair. It would grow back. But still—“Why did you cut off your hair?”

He smiled wider, squinty and cute with his stupid button nose, and rubbed the top of his head. “Kind of just decided to do it and then did it. My mom screamed when she saw me. Do you like it?”

“I don’t dislike it,” I admitted before grinding my teeth at my stupidity.

His hand seemed to move in slow motion. Before I took my next breath, I knew where his hand was headed . . . and I waited. I waited for him to touch my braids. His fingers wrapped around a cluster of them, holding them loosely in his open palm. “These look nice on you. I like the little gold clips.” He kept on staring at my braids while I shamelessly stared at his bow-shaped lips.

A swirl of infatuation and self-loathing curdled in my stomach, made my palms sweat, and my heart beat fast enough to register some kind of arrest—until I stomped a mudhole in it, forcing it down, down, down for the millionth time. It was never going to happen. Never. Boys like him didn’t date girls like me. The End. No need for a sequel. No need to waste my emotional energy.

A small voice in my head, which sounded suspiciously exactly like my mom’s, screamed something about *self-rejection*, but I ignored it. I always did.

Taking a halfstep back, I angled my torso away from him as my braids slid out of his hand. He looked up at me, eyebrows slightly raised.

“No touching without permission.” I winked at him and smiled. It would have been nice if he had asked first, but I wasn’t mad. I would’ve stopped him if I truly wanted to. So.

“Ah, sorry.” The tiniest bit of redness flooded his apple cheeks as he cleared his throat. He righted himself before saying, “I’m surprised Goldeen’s sent you.”

“It’s my family’s diner. I sent myself.”

“I doubt it. When have you ever voluntarily made deliveries?”

“Never.” The summer I got my license, actually. I drove *everywhere* but pretended like I hated it to earn some martyr points with Granny. It didn’t work. “But I decided to make a change this summer. Like the song.”

“I think he was talking about things a bit more serious than making deliveries.”

“Everyone’s gotta start somewhere.” I shrugged. He smiled. And my knees turned to jelly when he laughed softly.

“I see you haven’t actually changed, though.”

“Why would I? I’m practically perfect in every way,” I said, regretting it immediately. Playing Quota-Pun-Looza with Sam, Winston, and Kara all the time had *ruined* me and any hope I had for normal interactions with other people. “I don’t mean that. I mean, it was a quote-joke. It’s from *Mary Poppins*.”

“I know,” he said, still smiling, perfect eyebrows still raised. They had to be tired by now, right?

I gestured with my chin, keeping my mouth shut before I embarrassed myself again, sliding the delivery paper forward.

He plucked a pen from a silver cup near the fridge. “In a rush?” Instead of signing, like he should have been doing, he used the pen to tap a steady rhythm out on the counter.

“A little bit.”

“More deliveries?”

“Why?”

“Just wondering.” He signed the slip, a fast scribble where the only discernible letter was *D*. “Are you going to the street fair tomorrow?”

“Probably? I dunno. The HSR always makes me feel weird.”

“How come?”

Some towns had annual beauty pageants for Little Miss Milkmaid Haybelle of the Year. Others put on plays where the prize positions were (a) the director or (b) the leads. It always had to be something good and wholesome before things somehow always went awry.

Chaos—and bigotry, depending on the story you were in—came home to roost. There would be (first) kisses, temporary heartbreak, inspirational transformations, and a healthy dose of comeuppance for those that deserved it.

In the 1970s, Haven Central had decided to skip all of that only to replace it with something equally sinister.

Haven. Summer. Royalty. A sham of a matchmaking system.

Anyone who had their hearts set on becoming Haven Summer Royalty put their names in a giant, glittering fishbowl made of dreams and glass. Someone got picked, they stood on stage, and then the mayor called for volunteers to be their counterpart. The resulting pair would wear crowns and sashes, be in the parade, kiss babies, pose for pictures, put ribbons on animal cages, judge contests, and *blab blab blab*.

Problem was, there usually ended up being more than one volunteer. The more popular and prettier the person was, the more volunteers they racked up. Haven Central went full-on medieval court affair after that, and then things got *really* weird. Extremely so.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It just seems so antiquated. It’s like an unofficial beauty pageant hell-bent on pretending it’s not a popularity contest merged with arranged marriage minus licensing. It’s weird.”

He laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard it described that way.”

“But am I wrong?”

“Everyone has to volunteer, so kind of?” He closed one eye, openly judging me. “I don’t know. I’m not convinced. I don’t think I can give this one to you.”

“Oh, come on! With the dates? And the games? Don’t even get me started on the tiebreakers.”

His face morphed into a serious frown. “Tiebreakers are definitely weird, yeah.”

“Thank you.” I picked up the delivery slip, sliding it into my front pocket. “I would never enter that contest. *Never*.”

“But you’re still going to watch, right? It’s like reality TV in person. Everyone loves that.”

What he *said* didn’t make me look at him, but rather his *tone* did. Unsure and breathy, as if he wanted to laugh to cover something up. His smile seemed a bit stiff, too. Strange.

Talking with Dallas had always been easy, *too* easy—turns out, steadfastly denying that you had feelings for someone did wonders for your conversational skills—but our paths had never crossed much. He had his friends and I had mine. And I was also sort of maybe obsessed with Goldeen’s and very rarely left it, preferring to work my life away instead of running wild with Haven kidfolk.

“FYI, I don’t love it,” I said. “But Kara does. If she goes, maybe I’ll be there. Maybe.”

His smile relaxed into a grin full of perfect teeth made possible by what had to be painful years of braces. “Well, maybe I’ll see you there, then. Maybe.”

# Three

**A**fter leaving Dallas's house, I deserved a break. Admittedly, *deserve* was a strong word, but I was taking one anyway.

The stoplight turned green, and I made the turn back into Misty Haven. Main Street turned into Main Circle—a giant roundabout with a memorial gazebo erected in Misty Haven's honor at the center.

I drove past the ice-cream shop, Meltdown Scoops, which always had a reserve of praline ripple just for me; the coffee bar, the Travelling Cruz, which supplied Goldeen's with freshly roasted beans in exchange for advertising space on the diner's menus; the dance studio, Day and Night, where I made it through six summer-school lessons before breaking my ankle and never going back; the twenty-four-hour grocery and convenience store, Nina's, where I'd worked the overnight shift after the diner closed for a few weeks last summer with my partner, Kara, to earn money for a new Cuisinart—something that Kara absolutely had to have but her parents refused to buy for her; and the joint post office/town hall/government building across from the gazebo.

Every second, every scene and sidewalk and side alley, every inch held a memory. My heart would always belong here.

At a stop sign, Mrs. Pantoja awkwardly tried to wave as she crossed the street, hands full of leashes for the ten dogs she walked. She'd worked at the local shelter for as long as I had known her. The scene looked a bit like a picture you'd randomly see online.

A digital painting of a lady walking too many dogs on a breezy day in the middle of a quaint town that made you smile, and get all warm and fuzzy.

Summer in Misty Haven had that kind of artistic, frozen feel to it.

Almost like it could make you believe time didn't exist and everything would be perfect forever. Plentiful trees, flowering bushes, green grass full of picket signs asking people to not walk on it, little kids with scraped knees running around and yelling because they had nothing better to do.

A place where you'd be just as likely to be eaten alive by mosquitos, born and bred in the swampy parts of the man-made lake at the west edge of town, as you would be to have a hate-to-love romance with a cutie-with-a-booty who had moved to Misty during the spring and had a supernatural affinity for math, working out, and also adored kids.

I pulled into an empty parking spot in front of Winter Wonderland Books. The door chimed as I entered, but no one greeted me. No one at the front desk meant Kara was on duty and had abandoned her post to go bake something.

Easily fixable.

"DO LIBRARY RULES APPLY IN THIS PLACE? I HAVE A LOUD SPEAKING VOICE BUT REQUIRE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOOKS."

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

A scream shattered the silence of the bookshop moments before Kara appeared. She ran at a full sprint, arms outstretched as she launched herself straight into my waiting arms.

In the five years I had known Kara, she'd barely changed. She still had the same super curly, auburn-colored hair; face full of the same-colored freckles; and the same olive-toned skin. She always wore the same rectangular deep-purple-red glasses and a shrewd, calculating look on her face at all times. She hadn't even grown a single inch, still clocking in at an impressive five feet zero, with the same slightly chubby build and penchant for wearing jumpsuits.

And my heart still thumped extra hard against my rib cage every time I saw her. Truth be told, I wasn't always sequestered away in Goldeen's. Winter Wonderland Books took third place on the where-to-find-Winnie list. Second place? Kara's room upstairs.

"You didn't tell me you were coming over, punk!" She let go, slapping my arm.

"I like it when you scream for me. Makes me feel special and wanted, and also kind of scared. Keeps me on my toes."

Kara laughed. "Working?"

"Eternally."

"Figured. How long you got?"

"Not very. Just wanted to see your face."

"I like it when you make good life choices. Come on." She didn't wait, grasping my wrist and leading me forward. "I just finished making waffles."

"Scratch or Eggo?"

"Girl, please." Kara gave me a withering look.

The tiny kitchen with its rounded retro teal refrigerator and oven/stove combo looked and smelled like the single greatest bakery disaster area in the history of explosions. Collateral damage included flour

*everywhere*; a fleet of similar-sized bowls dripping sticky glaze onto the counters; piles of unfrosted cupcakes arranged haphazardly on cooling racks; baking sheets stacked with a multitude of cookies; a seven-layer rainbow cake practically screaming for fondant, pearls, and sprinkles; and icing stuck to the cabinet doors like she had flung it to check its consistency.

I'd actually seen her do that last one once. Kara baking in the kitchen was An Experience™, but she ignored it all, not attempting to explain, apologize, or make excuses for the mess. Instead, she marched to the wooden table in the center of the room, where a red Belgian waffle iron steamed and hissed with urgency, and pulled out a chair for me.

"Why does it smell like brownies? You said waffles." I sat down. Above the scents of sweetened cream cheese, irrepressible vanilla everything, German chocolate heavy on the coconut, powdered sugar delightfulness, chocolate with that slightly burnt smell that never stopped it from still being delicious, cinnamon, and graham crackers, I caught a whiff of something cooking that didn't quite make sense.

"It's the best of both worlds." Kara grinned with feverish pride as she lifted the lid. "My two-hour-old secret recipe for crisp brownie waffles. Toppings pending, but I'm leaning toward ice cream, whipped cream, and/or fruit to give it that familiar funnel-cake vibe." She inhaled. "Doesn't it smell *amazing*?"

It did. Truly. But it was unfortunately off-limits, as were just about all of the baked goods in the kitchen. A severe gluten intolerance was nothing to mess with. I had finally been diagnosed a year ago, after enduring a solid two years of mysterious and at times debilitating pain. Not even the most delicious looking and smelling brownie waffle would be enough to tempt me to try it. That pain aimed to jack up your whole life. Enduring that was not worth even a single second of delectable happiness.



Not even if Kara made it.

"I got the idea from s'mores," Kara continued. "I used a combination of marshmallows in my scratch chocolate-chunk brownie batter recipe that I came up with last year to give it that magnificent sticky-goopy crunch. The heat and steam from the waffle iron keeps the white-chocolate Chex mix from getting soggy, but only if you place them just right. Oh, *and* I'm working on a gluten-free version exclusively for that special someone in my life."

"You're too good to me," I said, voice slipping into that everlasting-awe tone reserved solely for when Kara immersed herself in her craft and allowed me inside her world.

"It's what you deserve." Kara grinned at her quote-joke, and the world got that much brighter. "I've been testing out potential entries for the Sana Starlight contest."

"*Sana Starlight?*" I choked on air, sputtering in disbelief. "*The* Sana Starlight? Cooking show, bestselling books, and national tours, Sana Starlight? What the *what?*"

"She's filming a pilot for a new show here." Kara removed a bright orange piece of paper held to the fridge by a giant seashell magnet. "*Small Town Spotlight with Sana Starlight.*"

I managed to stop myself from being a complete heathen and didn't snatch the flyer out of her hands.

Sana Starlight, the next big foodie mogul, and her crew planned to film the pilot episode of her show, calling it "My Sweet and Savory Haven." Her inspiration for the theme came from the dual towns' history, with *sweet* representing Misty and *savory* representing Merry. A preliminary round to narrow down the contestants to ten per category would be held first, followed by the final competition and taping taking place at the annual M&M Carnival. There'd be three winners, one for both categories, and a grand prize overall.

"They started filming B-roll about two weeks ago." She sat in the

seat next to me. “The camera crews are gone now, but they’re supposed to come back for town events. Shelley gave them a schedule, I think. Everyone’s saying they’ll be here tomorrow to get some shots of the HSR.”

I frowned at Kara. “How long have you known about this and why didn’t you tell me?”

Since when did she keep secrets from me? Especially ones that the entire town knew about? Oversharing was our brand. We knew each other and the minutiae of our lives inside and out, backward and forward.

Got an A on a test? Texted Kara.

Saw a rabbit while driving? Called Kara.

Fell down the stairs and cracked two ribs? GOTTA TELL KARA. Who needs an ambulance anyway?

“Because there’s an issue,” Kara said. “Granny’s not entering Goldeen’s.”

A beat passed. I blinked at her. “Excuse me, what? I don’t think I heard you correctly. Did you just say my granny’s not entering a contest with a wicked grand prize that she’s a shoo-in to win? Literally no one could stand against us.”

“I asked her about it, and she said the meetings and prep would be too much for her, so she couldn’t. And since she’s the business owner, Goldeen’s is out.” Kara shrugged. “I’m entering the sweet competition, but since I’m not eighteen yet, my dad had to do all of the entrant requirement stuff with me.”

Those brownie waffles weren’t even close to their final form. Like clockwork, Kara would find something wrong with them and knock some sense into that recipe until it acted right—if that was even what she’d choose to enter. My girl came up with recipes in her sleep. Something bigger, better, bolder could come along at any moment. Her empire would be frosted in twenty-four-karat gold icing. Nothing

would stop her from becoming the immensely successful love child of Betty Crocker and Rachael Ray.

"My condolences to your competitors," I said only half joking. "May their pride rest in peace."

She laughed. "Julia dropped out when the judges agreed to let my dad be my proxy."

"Seriously?"

"Yep. At first they said I couldn't enter but my dad talked them into it. You know how he is," she said with an affectionate eye roll. "And then after the announcement, Sanjay told me Julia said something like, 'I'm not going to let a kid beat me on national TV.'"

"Wise woman. Her cupcakes are terrible and she knows it."

"Winnie!" She cackled behind her hand.

"What?! *She knows it*. If you ask her, she'll tell you. I don't know why she sells them."

"Because tourists don't know any better. It's not like we're going to warn them. Havens over everyone else."

I nodded in agreement before staring at the flyer again. "I can't believe Granny didn't enter. We'd dominate savory, because obviously we wouldn't enter sweet. No offense, but we probably could have won overall, too."

"I have no shame in admitting I'd lose against Aaron, that experienced and talented jerk." Kara tore off a piece of cooled waffle and ate it. "Damn, I'm good," she said still chewing. "I'm pretty sure Colin threw a party when he heard Goldeen's wasn't in."

Colin owned Archie's, the Goldeen's equivalent in Merry. I'd never eaten there, but rumor had it that while his food was better than average, it couldn't hold a candle to Goldeen's.

"And I guess it's too late to enter."

"Why would you? You don't cook."

"But Aaron does."

“And Aaron works at Goldeen’s.”

“Yes,” I said, thinking it through. “Granny doesn’t want to enter. I could do it for her. Be her—young proxy.”

“No.”

Damn. She didn’t even give me a chance. “I could! And then use the prize money to buy Goldeen’s a new oven.”

“There you go.”

I almost laughed at her disapproving tone. “*What?*”

She narrowed her eyes. “If your granny really, truly wanted a new oven, don’t you think she’d buy it herself?”

“Maybe. But that thing keeps exploding! She’s not in the kitchen! She’s barely in the diner now that Nadiya has ascended into Granny’s good graces. She really trusts her,” I said, fire dwindling out of me. “If I won, I could use the money to buy it for her. It could be a functional present.”

“She’s doesn’t need you to do that.”

“It’s not about need. It’s about want. What I want. And I want to do this for her.”

“Okay. Fair.” Kara sat back in her seat, raising her left leg and holding her knee to her chest. “But just because you want to do something doesn’t mean you should. *Or* can even do it. Did you miss the part where it said TV show? TV as in cameras and interviews.”

My weird feelings weren’t the only reason why I’d never volunteer to be Haven Summer Royalty. I might have had just a tad bit of trouble coping with public speaking. And being the center of attention. And people looking at me.

The thought of talking on camera, knowing anybody anywhere in the world would be able to watch it and I would be powerless to stop it, almost made me start dry heaving.

“I-I-I can handle it.” *God*, how were my hands sweating *already*?

Kara scoffed.

“I can! It’s different when it’s not about me. This is for Granny,” I said and would keep saying until I could trick my brain into believing it. “I can do it if it’s for someone else. I think. I’m at least willing to try! And if I fail, then—I fail. I guess. I hate losing, so maybe that will overpower the fear?” Kara wasn’t convinced. Lucky for me I knew exactly what to say to get her on my side. “Besides, it could be something we do together.”

Secret weapon deployed, I let the moment stand as Kara’s eyes slowly lit up, as a smile crept across her lips.

Long-distance relationships of any kind sucked. They’re hard and stupid, and I hated everything about them. But choosing to be together had been the right choice for us. We stood by that and did the work. Commitment. Dedication. Communication. None of that came easy.

So when something that *was* easy came along? We both jumped at the chance.

“If we’re going to do this,” she said, “we have to do it right. There’s still a few weeks of casting calls. They hold them every Friday for an hour or two.”

“Casting?”

Kara nodded. “Pretty much everyone who signs up gets to compete in the preliminary round, but only a select handful of entrants from that pool will appear on the show. Including yours truly.”

“Shut up. I mean, I’m not surprised, because look at you, but shut up.”

“Oh, and that’s not the best part. I’m not only cast, but I’m being *featured*. Think like a TV producer: an underage prolific baker who dominates school bake sales already accepted to a university with a prestigious adjunct culinary school on a merit scholarship and the dad that fought for her to enter the contest. Of course they let me in, and they’ll do the same for you. A Black-owned family business

beloved by all and the granddaughter determined to keep her family's dream alive, so much so that she's tied her entire collegiate future into it? That is ratings gold."

"Why you gotta play the race card like that?" I joked.

"Because they'd use it against you if they could. Might as well play it up and shove it in their faces."

"You're absolutely vicious with this kind of stuff," I said. "I love it. You're amazing."

"Naturally."

Unlike hers, my story for TV wasn't entirely true. Goldeen's was Granny's dream. My dad and uncle weren't exactly all that jazzed about the family business—they'd already tried, more than once, to get Granny to sell Goldeen's and move in with us so they could take better care of her, but she refused. Her exact words were, "*No. And stay out of my business!*" Also? My collegiate future didn't really have much to do with Goldeen's. It actually had more to do with Kara than anyone else.

But the casting producers, or whatever they're called, didn't need to know all that.

"Think you can convince Granny to let you enter on her behalf?"

I chewed on my lip, thinking. Granny could have the last unpolluted water tank in existence during the end of days under her care and say no to someone dying of thirst on the street because of an inconsequential slight from forty years ago. She had a memory like an elephant and a will made of pure iron. If she didn't want to do something, there wasn't a force alive that could make her change her mind.

"Maybe. We could really win, though," I said. "Wouldn't it be kind of weird if we both win? Ungirlfriends, going to the same college, all set to be roommates . . ." I trailed off.

Ungirlfriend: a curious step after friendship. A knowing jump beyond best friends. A leap of faith into an abyss of commitment

that didn't have a name that we liked yet. And I quote, "*I'll be damned if I let anyone refer to me as zucchini.*"

So Kara had given it a new name and then gave it to me.

"Coincidences make amazing reality TV." She walked over to the fridge, returning with bright blue Tupperware. "Besides, we don't have to tell them *everything* about us. Just the pertinent bits. Here, I made you cupcakes."

Chocolate and buttercream, Funfetti and pink cream cheese, red velvet, bare-faced vanilla—"But you didn't know I was coming by?"

"I always make you cupcakes." She leaned against a chair, hand on her jutting hip. "The extra freezer is filled with them."

## Four

**T**he next day, I decided to make my move. Time, essence, all that good stuff.

Watching Goldeen's come alive during the midday rush launched me into the oddest state of slo-mo euphoria. The sea green shone, the pearls caught the light just right to sparkle, and there was a good chance I'd entered hallucination territory at this point, but the mermaids seemed more playful and the sirens much more murderous. Every meal, every dish, as tempting as an apple—or a pomegranate, if you were into historical biblical accuracy—in Eden, snake and all.

The enduring charm of Goldeen's could never be embellished. One sniff, one bite, and you'd become a regular for life.

Between Granny's recipes and Aaron's preternatural cooking skill, magic happened in that kitchen. The smoky bacon, seared hashed browns, and freshly baked biscuits slathered with homemade organic jam bought from a local farmer two towns over would have stomachs rumbling in one millisecond flat. Sweet, fluffy pancakes with crispy edges drenched in honey butter, because syrup was outlawed in the



diner, made the patrons groan in anticipation. Tangy seasoning, fresh lettuce, delectable tomatoes and salsa, and warming corn tortillas made customers pout because that gastronomic goodness existed for me and me alone.

A little thing I liked to call Proprietor's Progeny Perks.

Another of said perks? The music. I sat in my usual sunlit corner booth during my lunch break, tapping the tabletop with my fingers and bouncing in my seat as I waited for my tacos. I tried to keep it family friendly when I took a spin as Goldeen's DJ. A solid mix of pop, R&B, and funk from across the decades—a little something for everyone. Every now and then, I'd slide in some '90s New Jack Swing, in honor of my dad, or some K-pop for Layla.

Which just got turned off.

"Winnie." Granny appeared beside my table just as the music started up again. Back to Motown Goldeen's went. "What did I tell you about touching my music?"

"You told me that I could—" It's not like I didn't include her music, too. I totally did. "—not."

"So why did you change it to that mess?"

"It is not *mess*. It's music, which the patrons were enjoying, thank you very much."

Granny had on her favorite tracksuit—the one she owned in nine different colors because when Granny liked a style, she stuck with it. Color of the day? Royal blue with her white tennis shoes, and her giant tan-and-gold purse hanging from the crook of her elbow. She had slicked back her pressed gray hair into a low bun and dappled on the tiniest bit of makeup. "Just enough to make 'em wonder," she had said once.

Truth be told, makeup or not, no one could ever guess Granny's real age.

"I don't care. My diner, my rules. Don't make me tell you again."

Don't touch the music. The customer is always right. Goldeen's never closes early. *Ugh*. All the other rules followed commonsense laws, but I always seemed to struggle with those three for some reason.

I puckered my lips and puffed out my cheeks. Tantrums, no matter how cute or mild they were, didn't go far with Granny. But it was enough to make her lean over and kiss my forehead.

"Your hair smells like smoke."

"Three fires in one morning will do that." After the last blaze, we had to upgrade—up the stairs to use the oven in the apartment. Frank had finally shuffled into the diner twenty minutes later, declared all was not lost, and fixed it.

Bless him and his bald head.

"That damn oven. Not worth the money I paid for it, but I'm gonna squeeze every last dime out of it."

"Fire hazards be damned."

Granny snapped her fingers, lips shriveling until they barely moved as she said, "Cussing in my house, you must have lost your last mind."

"Sorry." I held back my smile and my comeback that Granny had also just cussed. Double standards could be such a thing of humorous beauty.

"I don't know what your daddy is down there teaching you, but you better watch your mouth up here."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And your mama called. Your school sent an email about your vaccinations not being good enough."

"No they didn't."

I pulled out my phone, opening the email I'd specifically created for applying to schools. Lo and behold, an email did exist, already opened. It seemed the offspring of anti-vaxxers had grown up safely

to cause measles outbreaks on a few college campuses. All incoming students had to get a blood test to prove immunity or get a brand-spanking-new rubella inoculation.

*“Mom.”*

“Mm-hmm.” Granny pretended to rummage in her bag. “I see she hasn’t changed.”

A side-eye would’ve earned me a quick smack upside the head, so I frowned instead.

Rejection and I don’t get along. I applied to ten schools, gave my mom a list of my top five, and had her check for me when acceptance/rejection emails started rolling in. Lucky for me, my top choice said yes and accepted my college fund as a dowry.

The other nine shall forever remain a mystery—my mom deleted them all before I could see them.

“I gave her the password,” I said. “She was helping me field rejections.”

“Any school that wouldn’t accept you clearly don’t know what they’re doing and they don’t deserve you anyway.” She smiled. “I made an appointment for you on Friday to get the test done.”

“Oh joy.”

“Stop it.”

“I hate doctor’s offices. But thank you. I appreciate you.”

She held me softly by the chin. “You want anything while I’m out? I’m going to the bank and out to Beliveau Farms to renew the contract. I’ll be back before they do that royalty thing in town.”

Almost all of Goldeen’s food and supplies came from local vendors. Beliveau supplied the diner with dairy, beef, and pork, but another farm had contacted Granny boasting cheaper prices. It wasn’t the first time this had happened—Beliveau always matched the new offer or, if they couldn’t, included a boon for loyalty during contract renewal.

I sopped up every bit of knowledge I could glean from Granny's dealings. Being a diner owner wasn't just working the floor or the kitchens or ensuring the books balanced every month. I would have to work with farmers, vendors, and grocery stores. Learn how to read and write contracts, maybe even vet a good lawyer to help. Study advertising and the market to make sure I didn't get swindled.

When it came to business, people saw old Black lady and dollar signs appeared in their eyes. When they saw me coming, those dollar signs would probably quadruple. But Granny had been born shrewd and no-nonsense.

I had that same blood in me.

"No, I'm good. But, um, I was wondering about something else." I placed the flyer on top of the table. "Kara told me about this contest."

"What about it?"

"Well, I was thinking Goldeen's should enter. Making it to the finals guarantees we'll be on TV, which would be amazing, and the prize money could buy a new oven."

"I don't have time for that, baby. I know all about it—meetings, interviews, preliminary rounds, and jumping through six hoops on Sundays no less. No."

"That's the cool thing. Kara couldn't enter without her dad's help so we thought that maybe the judges would bend that same rule, only backward. You don't have time, but I do. Pitch it as a family thing."

"You? On TV? In front of a camera?"

"Why does everyone keep saying that? I'll be *fine*."

Her skeptical look pinned me into almost telling the truth.

"I can do it. No sweat." Lots of sweat, actually.

"Mm-hmm. I heard about your little laryngitis stunt."

I cringed so hard, I'm pretty sure I cracked a tooth.

Once, I had to make an oral presentation in history class. Begging,

pleading, *crying*—nothing would convince my teacher to give me an alternative assignment. Desperation took over, and two days before my turn to present, I pretended to have laryngitis to get out of it. For two solid weeks, I didn't even speak at home. Winston knew the truth, willingly playing along while simultaneously tormenting me to force me to break. As expected.

My parents had gotten so worried they nearly forced me to go to the doctor. Magically, my voice had returned at a strained whisper the day of my appointment—a true Christmas Miracle! Except that pretty much gave me away. They'd figured out I had faked the whole thing.

It was a shitty thing to do, I knew that. But I'd gotten to write an essay instead. Yay for positive reinforcement for bad behavior!

"That was different," I said. "And before. I'm much better. I've been working on it. You know, a personal goal. Getting over my fear. And stuff."

"And what about your shifts?"

"I wouldn't miss those. Not a single one."

"That's a lot, baby. Staying up until two a.m., getting up at five, skulking around my diner all day because you refuse to go *outside*—when are you going to have fun?"

"I have fun! This is f-f-fun for me." I couldn't even lie straight. Winston would have thought that was hilarious. "And honestly, high school really isn't how you remember it. It's way more intense than this. If I can get through that without having a nervous breakdown, I can work and enter the contest. I can handle it."

"And that's why you're supposed to relax in the summer," Granny said. "I know exactly how hard you work. You come here to relax and earn some spending money for yourself." She shook her head. "No."

"But—"

"I said *no*."

And that was that.

I watched her leave, frowning at the slight limp she'd developed. Her Dr. Skinner—ordered cane must have been collecting dust somewhere in the back of a closet.

When Granny said no, it left zero room for negotiation space—no light, no hope, like a black hole sucking the joy out of life.



### **Kara (Kara Kara Kara Kara) Chameleon**

**Kara:** Hey babycakes! How did it go?

**Winnie:** I'm certain I have no idea  
what you're talking about

**Kara:** Yikes. That bad? Want me to stop by  
this afternoon during your split? We could  
brainstorm before going to the HSR

**Winnie:** Stop by? Always. Brainstorm?  
Ehhhh. Demoralized. I am it.

**Kara:** I get it, but you know . . . I told you so. You  
know I told you so, right? Because I told you so.

**Winnie:** We're breaking up.

**Kara:** Aww! But I already tattooed your  
name on my shoulder! Don't make me go get  
a rose cover-up. Please love me again?

**Winnie:** Ha!

**Winnie:** Did you really want to go to HSR?

**Kara:** YES.

**Kara:** Pack your bags and tell the kids.

## Five

**T**he Haven Central Wednesday Night Street Faire started and ended, and vice versa, at Misty's gazebo and Merry's statue.

That stretch of crowded ground was packed with craft vendors selling customizable flower crowns and spray-painted street art. Food trucks had rolled in from out of town to coexist with the local restaurants and specialty shops, front doors wide open and decorated in brilliant window-marker designs. As part of their fundraiser, the sheriff's department sold sparklers, party poppers, and the kind of fireworks that were loud and did almost nothing. Dance music from the party 80's, heavy on the synth, floated around us, because according to Shelley Way, the mayor's wife, that decade had the best music. Even fireflies appeared out of nowhere to twinkle and show off after all the other hell-spawn insects retired to their crawl spaces of evil for the night.

And Kara had been right. Two camera people from Sana Starlight's team, dressed all in black, weaved in and out of the crowd, recording everything. A silver curlicue S shimmered on the backs of their shirts as they moved.

For as packed as it was, I thought I'd see more unfamiliar faces, but had only spotted a few here and there. Part of me wanted to mingle. Maybe say hello to some of the people I hadn't seen in a year. Like Jenny Randall, the manager at Nina's, and her new husband. They had commandeered a prime spot on a bench close to the gazebo. Her mouth seemed too busy to say hello, unfortunately. Aloof suited me better than social butterfly anyway. Besides, if they wanted to come talk to me, they could.

Sam, Kara, Winston, and I hung around the fringes of the fair, sitting atop the short stone wall in front of the library. Far enough away to look like we didn't care about the goings-on, as was the Murphy-Woodson-Alviar way, but also in the perfect location to witness everything that would go down. Because once the sun set and the dreamy town lampposts turned on, both mayors of Haven Central would stand in Misty's gazebo together.

Granny almost never sat with us. She either stuck with the other grannies—I dubbed them the Hell's Belles—or with Mr. Livingston. Kara had told me about it of course, that she'd seen Granny around town with him more often than not and guessed Cupid had gotten trigger happy. I never really thought I'd see the day where my granny canoodled with anyone, but the two of them next to the shaved ice cart had proved me wrong.

Grampy—pretty sure that's what I'd call him—didn't exist, and if he did, no one ever talked about him.

I looked for Dallas, too. His usual group of friends had clustered close to Penny's Antiques, but he wasn't with them. It took a bit of squint-searching—because I really needed to get some glasses—and neck craning, but I finally spotted him sitting with his parents on a picnic blanket near the memorial willow tree. I only knew surface-level basics about them. His mom, Madeleine, a quasi-famous Parisian singer. His dad, Rob, a retired but easily recognizable



American football star that had chosen Merry Haven as the place to settle down. They loved their only son.

Madeleine threw her head back, laughing at something Rob said. Turns out a laugh could be both booming and elegant. Interesting. Dallas shook his head in that omg my parents are so embarrassing kind of way, but his entire face turned a wonderful shade of ruddy peach from trying not to laugh. I guess I knew one more thing, too: he loved his parents.

Even from where I sat, I could see it. You didn't look at people the way he looked at his parents unless you loved them. You didn't sit with your parents, fully present and engaged with them, when your friends were fifty feet away, unless you wanted to.

I struggled with that sometimes. A lot of the people I hung out with back home didn't like their families for whatever reason. One person, who shall remain nameless, said, "Stop trying to make everyone jealous. We get it. Y'all are the Black Brady Bunch. No one cares."

It felt good to see Dallas with his family like that. Validating, even.

I wish my parents could have come up this year. My mom would have loved this fair.

Something about Haven Central made me want to believe it might be okay to relax and be my honest self. Might be safe to give whimsy a chance, have a good old-fashioned magical time. Not quite distressed enough to make a deal with a sea witch, but also not in a position to say no to a beggar who would ask me to enter a mysterious cave in exchange for money.

As long as I didn't have to ask Granny for permission.

"I mean, I really don't know what you expected her to say." Winston had lined up a row of small pebbles next to him, flicking them into the crowd, one by one. "Obviously, she knew about it. If she wanted you to enter for her, she would have told you to."

“It never hurts to ask.” I hated when he got like that. Baby brothers were not supposed to be more pragmatic than their big sisters. That’s exactly why I didn’t tell him about it beforehand. Both he and Kara belonged to the no-chill brigade when it came to rubbing in *I told you so*.

“And she really wouldn’t say why?” Sam asked, around a mouthful of ice cream. Earlier, at Meltdown Scoops, she’d made Sascha smash six scoops of cookies-and-cream into a standard-size waffle cone.

“When does she ever explain herself?” His hardcore frown at Sam gave way to an irritated eye roll. Another one of his pebbles shot forward, nicking Joseph Neddleton in the back of the leg. He leaned down, brushing at nothing before turning back to his cotton candy.

“I just meant that that’s how it is with my dad,” Sam continued. “If he has to tell me no, he always says why. To make it fair.”

“Good for you.”

“All right.” Kara hopped down off the wall, standing in front of Winston with her arms crossed. “What’s your problem, space cadet? You’ve been in a shitty mood all night.”

I’d noticed it, too. Usually, Winston’s snapping-turtle tendencies were laced with wry laughter and mischievous eye smiles. He liked to ride that line between biting wit and being a straight-up asshole, never choosing one side or the other unless he got mad.

Winston stared at Kara, his unique brand of unreadable anger out in full force. “I don’t have a problem.” He said it like a warning.

The music stopped. Feedback whining from a microphone pierced the air as Mayor Way tapped it and said, “Is this thing on?” His voice echoed through the speakers. “Excellent.”

Mayor Iero had claimed the center spot in the gazebo—the perfect angle for photo ops—and Rush Ballard, the *Haven Herald* photographer, squatted on the steps below, camera slung around his neck.

Both mayors had the same stocky build, same sallow skin, same thinning dark brown hair, and faces that resembled the other so much they could have been brothers. They were also Haven Legacy, like Kara's family, and people had been swearing scandal their entire lives.

A giant glass fishbowl filled with red half-slips of paper had been set up on a column in the gazebo.

The tension between Kara and Winston dragged on, neither one willing to back down, but the center had gotten quiet enough that people would hear anything else they said.

Sam stepped up. "I bribed Ms. Wendy with two hours of free babysitting for a last-minute entry."

Winston took the bait. "Aww, how cute and totally unexpected." His gaze rolled in her direction. To her credit, Sam didn't flinch when his war-stare landed on her. "I never would have pegged you as the Summer Queen-type. That's just so unlike you." He returned to focusing on lining up a new row of pebbles.

"It's a shock to us all," I said with a full smile to soften Winston's harsh teasing. "You'd be perfect, really. They'd waste no time getting your pictures on the website and printing new brochures. No one should be as photogenic as you are."

"They'll probably put you on the postcards, too," Kara said, jumping back onto the wall next to me.

"You think so?" Pretty as she was, Sam still needed me to say yes, because that was the way of things. So I did.

"Yeah. Absolutely."

"Better be careful what you wish for. The curse might get you," Winston warned. "Married at eighteen with a baby on the way? Yeah, your dad would love that."

As with all great things in Haven Central, the HSR came with a fantastical upside—or downside. The first HSR couple ended up dating, and later, getting married. So did the second. And the third.

After the fourth go-round, the people of Haven Central accepted what the universe clearly attempted to tell them. They'd struck divine matchmaking gold.

Side note: nobody talked about how the seventh go-round blew all the way up.

Mayor Way plunged his hand into the fishbowl. He took his time, shuffling and swirling the red strips of paper. Dramatic music kicked in—that was new and probably Shelley's doing to impress the Starlight crew.

"And so it begins." Kara laughed. She hated romance for herself, but could never resist a good somebody-else's love story.

I leaned toward Sam and whispered, "May the odds be ever in your favor," and got a sly grin in return.

Thing was, I could totally see it. Mayor Way would read the slip and nod in approval before passing it to Mayor Iero, who would shout Sam's name into the microphone because that would be just oh so necessary.

Sam would then look at me, mouthing, "Me?" for confirmation because that's what she always did. The clapping would start, followed by whoops and awes and more than a few disappointed death stares. Sam would blink away her surprise, hand Kara her ice cream, wipe her hands on her cut-off shorts, and bound toward the gazebo, hair bouncing in a metaphorical manifestation of her internal giddiness. Her strangely familiar amethyst sunflower earrings would catch the spotlights just right.

Winston would say something snarky. Kara would halfway agree but smooth it over somehow. Sam's bright smile would light up the night. And I would sit, split into warring parts—happy for Sam and ready to cause bodily harm to any inappropriate volunteers wishing to be paired with my sixteen-year-old cousin—and concealing it all under a blanket of *whatever, it's cool*.

Haven Central had a tendency to look the other way. I sure as hell didn't. Neither did Granny or Winston. We'd burn this place to the ground for Sam if anyone tried anything.

"Winnie Woodson?"

My head snapped toward the stage as the crowd began to turn. Searching for, and then finding, me.