

Chapter One

Usually, when my first alarm clock goes off at six a.m., I ignore it. It's all part of my wake-up plan, my perfect recipe for a chill and stress-free morning.

First alarm: "Here Comes the Sun" by The Beatles. It's quirky and sweet, and it never fails to put a smile on my face. And not just because it's my dad's favorite song.

My second alarm clock goes off exactly ninety seconds after the first song ends. It's carefully timed: just enough silence to allow my brain to slowly wake up, but not enough to do what it really wants to do, which is go back to sleep.

Alarm number two is another happy-go-lucky, classic song—“Daydream Believer” by The Monkees—but it’s definitely more upbeat, and impossible to sleep through.

The third alarm is the local Top 40 station. Knowing the DJ’s obnoxious voice will blare out at me after “Daydream Believer” is usually enough incentive to make sure I’m up out of bed and shutting it off. Particularly since that alarm clock is on the other side of the room.

But this morning, like every morning for the past week, my system falls apart. I do wake up calmly to The Beatles, but as soon as the song’s over, I switch off The Monkees alarm. Then I dash out of bed to where the Top 40 alarm rests on my desk, shut *that* off, grab my phone, and jump back into bed.

It goes against all my rules, and as a result, I’ve been cranky and late to school all week. But I can’t help it.

I slide under my heavy duvet, turn on my phone, and tap the weather app.

Please, please, please, I beg the universe as I wait for the

app to show the ten-day forecast. I even have a ritual for this part. I squeeze my eyes shut and count to five while picturing piles and piles of fluffy snow.

Maybe—

I open my eyes.

Nope.

Zero percent chance of snow over the next ten days.

My heart sinks.

I open the six other weather apps that are taking up my phone's memory. I check them all, even the ones I know aren't terribly reliable.

Except, there's still no snow in the forecast on any of the apps.

And no snow in the forecast means . . .

"Mia, are you awake?"

It's really quite amazing how my mom is able to project her voice up the stairs and yet never seems to be yelling. Unlike me. Half the time my best friend, Lark, says I sound like I'm yelling when I'm trying to talk softly into the phone.

I jump out of bed. I might not have noticed the cold when I darted out to grab my phone, but now that I'm not distracted by my prayers for snow, it's all I notice. I shiver in my pajamas.

If it's not going to snow, couldn't it at least be warm?

"Mia?" There's a note of irritation in Mom's voice, and I try not to let it bother me. We're all stressed out. "Alice isn't coming in until later, so I need to be at the front desk now."

I breathe in and out a few times. I love living in the little cottage behind the Rocking Horse Inn. My great-grandparents originally ran the inn as a boardinghouse, but by the time my grandparents took over, it had already been transformed into an inn. The building, which is well over a hundred and fifty years old, is a large, redbrick Craftsman-style structure that houses twenty rooms; a dining area; a kitchen that's run by my stepdad, Thierry; and a study filled with old books. It also has a fantastic wraparound porch that is the best place to read six months out of the year.

Normally, in the winter, the whole inn looks like a movie set, with the twinkling lights we hang across the porch and fresh white snow blanketing the roof. But when there's no snow? It looks and feels cold and desolate. Kind of like an old building with poor heating and well-worn wood accents.

“Mia Buchanan!” Mom calls.

But the major problem with living on the inn's property? There's no division between home and work. Mom and Thierry are constantly running between our small house and the inn across the garden. It can get a little crazy, especially in the high season.

“I'll be ready in a couple of minutes!” I promise. “I'll meet you at the front desk.”

A couple of minutes is probably a lowball estimate, but if I told my mom I'd spent the last fifteen minutes trying to find a weather app that might suggest the possibility that there could be some snow in the next ten days, there'd be more than a hint of irritation in her voice.

I grab the first pair of striped tights I find in my drawer—brown-and-turquoise, one of my favorites—and fling on a jean skirt, a black T-shirt, and a thick, dark purple sweater. They don't really go together, but I'm too late to be mixing and matching outfits. I quickly go through my bathroom routines, grab my backpack, and pull on my coat and boots. Then I make my way across the freezing tundra between our house and the inn, trying to walk and French braid my long brown hair at the same time. I resist the urge to grab my phone out of my coat pocket and check the weather apps *again*, just in case they might have changed since I woke up. I know. I'm obsessed.

Though, to be fair, these days, everyone in my town of Flurry, Vermont, is similarly obsessed. The “will it snow or won't it snow?” discussion seems to be the *only* topic of conversation. We all want to know whether the snow will come in time to save Flurry's Winter Festival.

Every year since 1855, the town of Flurry has held the Winter Festival the weekend before Christmas. Part

pre-holiday party and part craft fair, the festival takes over our downtown area as thousands of people descend on our little town from all across the country. To people who've never been to the Winter Festival, it doesn't sound like one of *the* main events in the state of Vermont. But something special happens that weekend. No one can put their finger on what it is exactly, but everybody who comes to the festival leaves in high spirits. It's almost . . . magical.

That, and it's responsible for a good chunk of the money the entire town economy depends on.

And while the festival may be a ton of work, it's also a ton of fun. There's a cross-country ski event for kids under five (I won that race when I was all of three years old) and a cross-country skiing marathon that is every bit as exciting as the New York City Marathon (so I've been told). I first learned to build a snowman at the festival when I was four. And I've always, *always*, participated in our attempts to break the world record for the "Most People Participating in a Snowball Fight" snowball fight. Even the year I had the flu. *And* the

year I broke my arm the day before the festival began (that's why you have two arms, I insisted). In my family, the festival is bigger than Christmas and the Fourth of July put together.

And while I love the festival every year, *this* year is extra special.

On our living room wall, there's a series of photographs, each with one person smiling and waving from a horse-drawn sleigh. The first picture features my grandfather, the next my grandmother, and after that, my mom.

Each of them, the year they were in seventh grade, had the coveted honor of being the junior coordinator of the Flurry Winter Festival. The junior coordinator gets to ride through town at the end of the festival in a horse-drawn sleigh while the entire town watches and cheers.

The junior coordinator is always the head of the seventh-grade student council, who, this year, is me. As long as everything goes right, in less than two weeks, there should be a fourth picture in the lineup, with me on that glorious sleigh ride.

Except, if there's no snow, there's no festival. And if there's no festival, there's no need for a junior coordinator, which means no sleigh ride and no photograph. It's not like I can try for the position next year: This is the only year. And it's what I've been dreaming of since I can remember.

There needs to be snow, I think as I let myself into the inn. There needs to be a Winter Festival. And I really, really need that sleigh ride.

“Mia, the school called yesterday and said that it would be a problem if you had another unexplained late start,” Mom says from behind the antique table that functions as our front desk.

Even this early in the morning, my mom is the picture of elegance. Not in an obnoxious way. She doesn't flaunt expensive clothing or look falsely made-up. It's more how she holds herself, calm and collected, her dark hair swept into a small bun at the nape of her neck, a soft burnt-orange sweater tucked into a pair of chocolate-brown pants. People always say Mom and I look alike—same brown hair; same

lanky frame; same pale, freckled skin. The only difference is, Mom has brown eyes, and mine are blue. Also, I don't think I quite inherited her beauty or poise.

"I'll be on time," I tell Mom, carefully picking an apple out of the giant glass bowl that sits on her desk. I've become quite the expert in removing fruit from that bowl without getting my fingerprints on the glass.

"Honey, you need a more substantial breakfast. Go ask Thierry for something with protein," Mom tells me as the phone rings. I watch as she steels herself, puts a smile on her face, and answers the telephone like it's her favorite task.

The person calling can't see how tired she is, how she pinches her mouth together as she listens.

I know what's happening. It's what's been happening all week.

"Unfortunately, we really don't know when the snow will come, Mr. McAllistair," Mom says, and I sigh. "The town has yet to make a decision about what will happen should there not be any snow, but I promise you, we'll call all of our

guests as soon as we know. However, if you'd prefer to cancel your room, I would understand. That said, we do have a waiting list, so it's unlikely that we'd be able to reinstate your reservation should you change your mind . . .”

I slip away before she finishes the call. I don't wait to find out what Mr. McAllistair's decision will be. Chances are, he'll keep his booking until the last possible minute before canceling it. Guests usually do, since it's so difficult to get a reservation in the first place. We've actually taken to publicizing the date we start taking general reservations for the Winter Festival months in advance. If we don't book up the day reservations open, we're always booked by the next day. This year, though, it seems like all those reservations might turn into cancelations, if the snow doesn't show up.

Stuffing the apple into my book bag, I walk into the big, airy kitchen. While the inn's foyer is neat and perfectly decorated—not unlike my mom—the kitchen is a warm chaos of smells and tastes. Just the way my stepdad likes it.

“Good morning, Mia!” Thierry calls from where he

stands at the stove. Thierry's lived in America since he and his family came over when he was in high school, but the warm timbre of his voice still reflects his childhood in Haiti.

"Morning, Tee," I reply with a smile, making my way toward him.

My stepdad is big and strong, with a shaved head, dark skin, and sparkling eyes. He's one of the most comforting people in the world. His body is built up from lifting massive quantities of food all the time, carting huge pots of soup and oversize pans of oven-roasted chicken. I remember once offering to help him carry something from one end of the kitchen to the other, and I quickly learned that what he makes look easy is difficult for most ordinary mortals.

"Strength doesn't come from here, *chérie*," he told me once, pointing to his bicep. Then he'd placed his hand over his heart. "When you have the love of your family, you can lift anything."

Now Thierry smiles at me. "I have an egg and cheese burrito ready for you. It's even all wrapped up so you can eat

it on your way to school.” He winks, and I roll my eyes. Thierry and I might not share the same DNA, but we do have the same propensity for “not being good at time management” as Mom likes to say.

I give him a quick hug, accepting the burrito in its tinfoil wrapper. It smells delicious, but I’m distracted.

“Tee,” I whisper, “are people really canceling reservations because they think there might not be snow?”

He frowns and shrugs one shoulder. “I think people are worried,” he allows, but he doesn’t really meet my eyes. “For many families, coming to Flurry for the festival is their big trip during the winter. Since the festival is so dependent on snow for all the activities, I think some people might wonder if they should skip making the trip this year.”

My stomach clenches, and now it’s my turn not to meet his eyes. I was hoping Thierry would say something reassuring. I thank him for the burrito, wave good-bye, and head out the kitchen’s back door to the main road.

It’s not that Thierry told me something I don’t know. All

the activities that make the Winter Festival unique completely revolve around snow.

As I walk to school, munching on my breakfast burrito, I run through the list in my head:

- (1) Cross-Country Ski Marathon
- (2) Snowshoe Race
- (3) World's Biggest Snowball Fight
- (4) Snowman Building
- (5) Sled Building
- (6) Competitive Igloo Making

They all need snow, and more than just a dusting.

My breath comes out in puffs as I cross the street. Sure, it's cold enough to still skate on the pond, or even go ice fishing. The artists and artisans will be able to set up their craft booths, and the food trucks and snack stands will be open, hawking hot cocoa and roasted chestnuts. But that's not really the festival.

The festival is an old-fashioned celebration of snow. It's what Flurry, Vermont, is known for, why people choose to come here, why our family's inn has stayed in business for so many years.

So what Thierry said is true.

If there's no snow, why bother coming to Flurry at all?