



CHAPTER ONE



Just to be clear, I did not intend to set our new apartment on fire.

“Mom, there’s smoke coming out of the oven!”

My mother bolted upright in bed. She sat there with her dark brown hair needling out all over her head for a full three seconds before ripping off her I’M A DIVA sleep mask and blinking at me with Where-Am-I Eyes.

“You look really hilarious right now,” I told her.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“That you look hilarious? It’s because of your—oh, you mean before that. Uh, the kitchen is kind of on fire. A little.”

“What?” She shoved the colorful quilt aside,

launching herself off the bed and tripping over one of the five moving boxes piled next to it.

“I couldn’t get it open!” I called as she yanked at the oven door.

Mom started frantically pushing buttons on the panel behind the stove until one of them squawked. She jerked on the handle and the oven door finally burst open, letting out a giant belch of smoke. “This is actually worse than I thought it was,” I sputtered, waving my hands in front of my face to clear the black cloud.

Then the smoke alarm wailed. “What happened?” Mom screeched, shouting to be heard over the sound.

“I was trying to heat up dinner while you got some rest.” We’d spent all day moving and unpacking boxes and Mom was super tired. So when she went to take a little nap, I decided I’d just heat up the rotisserie chicken we had picked up at the grocery store, something I have done at least twenty times before. Then I’d make a little salad, and we’d call it dinner. “I wanted to surprise you!”

“Mission accomplished.” Mom pointed to the self-clean button. “Did you push this?”

“Don’t we *want* it to self-clean?” I asked. “I thought that was cool—it can clean itself after it cooks?”

“Mackenzie, that heats the oven up to nine hundred degrees!” She held her hands over her ears and squinted up at the shrieking alarm on the ceiling.

“What?”

“Open the window!” Mom yelled. “Not the one in the living room, Mackenzie! This window right here! Where did we put the oven mitts?”

“No clue!”

Side note: You don’t need oven mitts to put a chicken into an oven, and I thought I’d have at least twenty minutes to look for them.

Mom ran to the moving box marked BATH and pulled out a fluffy towel. Then she used that to pull out the chicken, which looked like a smoking meteorite that had just crashed to Earth and landed on a sheet pan. “Can you shut off that alarm?” Her hair was falling out of its ponytail as she dumped the mess into the sink.

“I can’t reach it,” I pointed out as Mom threw the towel over the chicken. “Mom, your nice towel!”

Someone started pounding on the door. “I can get that!” I hurried to the front door and peeked through the spyhole. A man who appeared to be mostly nose was standing on the other side.

“Who is it?” Mom was right behind me.

“Some guy,” I said. I shut one eye and peered more closely with the other.

“Don’t open it,” she whispered. Not that anyone could hear us over the high-pitched beeping of the alarm.

“Are you okay in there?” he called through the wood separating us. “I saw the smoke coming out of your window!” The giant nose in the peephole adjusted and became a giant eye.

“We’re fine!” my mom called. “Everything’s great in here! We’re just”—she waved away some smoke that had found its way into the front room—“fine. Um, how are you?”

“The fire department will be here any minute!”

“What?” Mom stepped in front of me and yanked open the door.

The man’s nose wasn’t nearly as large as it had

seemed through the spyhole. He was tall, about four inches taller than my mom, and had black eyes with lots of eyelashes. And he looked about the same age as my mom. *Hmm*, I thought, *Mom boyfriend material?*

Because, you know, even when the house is burning down, it's good to keep an eye out.

On the other hand, his black hair looked like he had styled it with a ceiling fan, and he was wearing pajama pants and a vintage concert T-shirt. At least, I assumed it was a concert T-shirt. What's Rush? Maybe it's a kind of soda? I wasn't sure I wanted my mom dating a guy who wears his pajamas all day and drinks a lot of soda. I mean, I have *standards*.

"Hi—uh, hi," my mother said. I could tell she was trying to sound casual. "Uh, things are totally fine here. Just a—uh—small problem with the stove. No need to call 911." She laughed nervously and tugged at her disheveled ponytail.

"I already called," he said.

"I think I can hear the siren," I said, just as a deep horn began to blare.

He lifted his chin and smiled, showing a dimple in his right cheek. "I'm Zane. I live next door."

"Allison," my mom said. "And this is my daughter, Mackenzie."

"We just moved in this morning," I told him.

"Keeping things exciting, I see," Zane said.

A late summer breeze pushed my unruly brown hair into my face and I shoved it back. "Not on purpose."

Zane turned his head to look over his shoulder. "Oh, here they come." He took a step backward on the porch so that Mom and I could poke our heads out and watch the fire truck arrive.

We had just moved into one side of a duplex, which is basically a giant house cut exactly in half, with two front doors. Two men in heavy firefighting gear were clomping up the walkway toward us. My mother looked mortified.

"Someone called 911?" asked one of the men. He had blue eyes, light skin with pink cheeks, and a silver moustache, and the other one had dark skin and little round glasses, like he was a former professor and maybe liked to save books from flames. Both

checked off the boxes “pretty decent looking” and “employed,” I noted with some approval. Neither was wearing pajamas or drinking soda.

“Hi!” I said brightly.

Mom knocked me with a subtle *be quiet* elbow. “Yes, uh, we called but everything is fine now,” she said. “It was just my secret chicken recipe!” Then she laughed her nervous laugh that—quite honestly—makes her sound bananas.

Nobody else even cracked a smile.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to take a look,” said Professor Firefighter.

“Don’t mind the mess,” I said, opening the door wider. “My mom is actually very tidy, usually, but we just moved in. She’s also a pretty good cook—pay no attention to that chicken! That was me!”

Mom looked at me with wide eyes and gave her head a little shake.

“Not that my mother leaves me unsupervised!” I babbled on. Really, sometimes when my mouth gets warmed up, it’s kind of hard to turn off.

“Please step aside,” said Moustache Firefighter.
“Any pets in the apartment?”

“No,” Mom said as she and I shuffled out of the way. “No pets.”

“But we’re open to getting pets,” I chimed in. “If you like pets.” Then I spotted a third firefighter heading our way. This one had long blond hair that peeked out from his helmet. Surfer Firefighter! “My mom loves animals!” I called as he passed us and entered the apartment. The nasty smell of burned chicken flowed out onto the front porch. “And she’s getting rid of that couch!” I added. “She actually has much better taste than that!”

Zane folded his arms across his chest and looked at my mom with an amused smile. “Does Mackenzie handle all your public relations?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Mom looked at her watch. “I hope this doesn’t take too long. It looks like we’ll need to cook something else tonight.”

“Would you like to have dinner at my place?” Zane asked. He looked surprised by his own suggestion but then kept talking. “I ate with my parents last night, and

my mother gave me an enormous amount of leftovers. She's a great cook. Do you like Indian food?"

"Yes!" I said quickly.

Mom glared at me. "Oh, no, we couldn't."

"What? Mom!" I tugged her elbow and hissed, "Homemade Indian food!"

Zane's dimple reappeared. "Homemade," he agreed, lifting his eyebrows.

"We don't even have any decent food in the house now that I set the chicken on fire," I pointed out.

"Mackenzie Ann, there are eggs and cold cuts and some crackers—"

When Mom calls me Mackenzie Ann, I know I'm circling the drain in terms of her patience level, but I just couldn't leave it alone. "Mom, that isn't dinner. That's like a snack on an airplane. Besides, we don't want to eat in our apartment when it smells like a tire fire." I turned to Zane. "Please save us."

"You'd be doing me a favor, honestly," Zane said. "My mother always gives me absolute piles of food. I'd hate to have to throw it away."