

one

## A Date with Destiny

It's only 3:47 PM. How can that be? It feels like I've been here for hours, not just forty-seven minutes. If I've only been at work for forty-seven minutes, then that means I still have two hours and thirteen agonizing minutes to go before my shift ends.

I stare out the fogged-up window of Milk and Sugar, which is this quaint coffeehouse/eatery I've waitressed at all school year, and silently pray for Mother Nature to give me a break. But nothing happens. Raindrops continue to pelt the windows and the wind rattles the frame, reminding me how drafty this place is. I pull my cable-knit sweater tighter over my cream-colored apron.

"I doubt we'll get anyone in here this afternoon," Ryan says with a slight frown. His forehead wrinkles as well, which looks pretty funny with his shaved head. Ryan is my forty-something boss and the owner of Milk and Sugar, and aside from the two of us and Grady, the wiry twenty-year-old who

helps out in the kitchen, there's only one other person here, a customer named Susan who has been by several times this week. Susan told me she's vacationing here, which makes sense because I've never seen her before, and in our town, everyone knows everyone. But why she'd chosen a beach community like Cliffside for a little R&R in the off-season is beyond me.

"Today is supposed to be just like yesterday—heavy rain all afternoon and night," I tell Ryan as I aimlessly wipe the counter. I side-eye him hopefully. Maybe he'll close early!

It's not that I don't like working here. I love it—when we have customers. I just hate standing around doing nothing. Being bored is one of my biggest pet peeves, and I usually never feel that way when I'm at work. Milk and Sugar is Cliffside's version of Starbucks (which the town protested so one never opened here) and the place is usually packed. Our ambience has a lot to do with it. Instead of cheesy Formica counters and five-dollar cups of coffee, our shop has blue and burgundy-striped couches, worn-leather recliners and distressed white wood coffee tables. Hanging pendant lights give a soft glow over each eating area and the walls, which are covered with local artists' prints of the ocean. The one thing we do have in common with Starbucks is a soothing, bluesy soundtrack that drowns out the churn of the espresso machine (our lattes are only \$2.50). We have a full coffee service menu plus bagels, paninis, eggs, and salads. The place is so cool that even on my days off I hang out here with my friends.

"Maybe the forecast is wrong," Ryan says and my smile droops. "It wouldn't be the first time." Ryan looks around the

place. "In the meantime, why don't you do what you do best?" He smirks.

"Really?" I say excitedly.

Ryan nods. "As long as you promise to dance your way over to the pictures. They could use some dusting." He grabs my arm before I can take off. "But, Charlie? First see if our new regular needs a refill." He motions to Susan, who is sitting in the back texting instead of reading the latest Oprah book club pick she has lying on the table. "On the house."

As I walk over to her table, Susan picks her head up and smiles. She's had some variation of the same outfit on all week. Today it's a brown cashmere-looking sweater, cute jeans, and her BlackBerry glued to her short, polished fingernails.

"Hey, Susan. How's the book?" I ask as I start cleaning her table.

Susan laughs. "I'm taking a short break," she says, motioning to her BlackBerry. "But it might be Oprah's best pick yet." Susan pats the cover of the book that is sitting on the table. "I've got forty pages left. I can give it to you when I'm done if you want."

Since it's been raining practically all week, and Susan's been here every afternoon, we've had a lot of time to talk. I've told her all of my high school drama, which she soaked up like a good piece of biscotti dunked in coffee. And she's dished to me about how she's single—she told me yesterday that she's swearing off men for a few months after a brutal breakup with her last boyfriend—and she's a self-professed workaholic. She still hasn't told me what she does, though. Every time I bring it up, she changes the subject.

"How did your English midterm go?" Susan asks. Chatting up Susan makes me miss my sister, Isabella, who is away at college. Susan may be older—I think she's in her mid-thirties—but she's got it all together, just like Bella, both inside and out. Susan's super-skinny and has the most amazing blond highlights I've ever seen on a brunette. Her blue eyes, accented with perfectly applied eye makeup, stare up at me.

"I think I nailed the essay," I say proudly.

"How did Brooke do?" she asks with a sly smile.

Brooke is one of my best friends and I've told Susan all about her too. Brooke and I agonized over our notes all week, quizzing each other about *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Crucible*. Brooke is the perfect study partner. I swear she has a photographic memory. "She thinks she got an A-plus. I'll be happy with a B, though." I grab Susan's plate, littered with crumbs from her blueberry muffin, and spy her empty coffee cup. "Ready for a refill?" I ask.

Susan grabs her Hermès bag, which I'm pretty sure is the real deal, but I put my hand up to stop her. "It's on the house," I tell her. "It's the least we can do after torturing you with my singing all week and my blabbing on and on about my crush."

Susan smiles. "I like hearing your little soap opera. And as for the singing, your Britney impersonation is dead-on."

"Thanks." I blush. "I don't normally do that in front of customers."

"Except this one, because I've been here so much I kind of blend into the walls," Susan jokes. "You've certainly kept me entertained this week, Charlie. Your Gwen on Monday was

impeccable, and the SNL spoof you did with Ryan was hysterical. You have a real spark.”

“You’re just saying that because I slip you extra sugar cookies every day,” I point out. “But thanks. I don’t normally sing at work, but it helps pass the time.”

I’ve been singing and dancing my way around Milk and Sugar for weeks because business has been so slow. Cliffside has been flirting with spring, but we’re still having some cold, wet, rainy days. Until they finally disappear, our sleepy beach town will stay a ghost town. In the meantime, I pretend I’m auditioning for Simon, Ellen, Randy, and Kara, even though singing is not something I see in my future. I just like doing impersonations.

I gather Susan’s cup, walk back over to the counter, and make her another no-fat soy milk latte with an extra shot of espresso. I place two sugar cookies on the plate as well and bring it back over. She sees the cookies and groans.

“I’m going to need a diet after this vacation,” she complains, even though she takes a bite of the cookie right away. “So tell me—when do I get to meet these friends of yours who I’ve heard so much about?”

I glance at the clock. “It’s been raining so hard they might not stop by.” I can’t help but grin. “Although Brooke is dying to wear her new rain boots so she may drag everyone here.”

“I hope she does,” says Susan, and she blows on her latte. “If she’s anything like you, I think I’m going to like her.”

Ryan thinks it’s bizarre how into my little high school world Susan has been, but I think she’s just bored and probably regrets blowing into town in the first place. Either way,

she's out of here tomorrow. "I'll keep you posted," I tell her. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a date with Beyoncé that I can't miss."

"Of course." Susan winks. "Divas don't like to be kept waiting."

I cue up Ryan's iPod that is sitting in the Bose dock, grab a mop, and begin to clean along to the beat. It's only a matter of seconds before I break out my song and dance moves. I belt out "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" at the top of my lungs, using the mop as a microphone. I'm so into Sasha Fierce mode that I barely hear the bell on the front door.

Three girls come dashing in out of the rain, holding their jackets over their heads. None of them have umbrellas and their clothes are soaked. But I don't care that they're soggy. I run over and hug them anyway. That's what you do when best friends show up at the perfect moment.

"I'm just about at the chorus," I tell them. "Want to sing backup?"

"I never do backup," Brooke Eastman says, looking like a Greek goddess with her long, fiery red hair and a scowl on her face that quickly turns into a smile. As I expected, she's got her Burberry rain boots on. Water drips off her favorite black shirt, a BCBG she got at the Tanger outlets on clearance, not that anyone other than us three is supposed to know that.

"But I do do hot chocolate," Brooke tells me. "Make me a big one, pronto." Brooke is the most, shall we say, direct in our group. She says whatever is on her mind—whether it stings or not. She's been that way since she started eating

lunch with Hallie, Keiran, and me in first grade, the year she moved here from Chicago. Her parents wanted to fulfill their lifelong dream to run a farm, a fact that Brooke hates and pretty much pretends isn't true. But as long as you don't mention cow manure, Brooke is a blast. She always has her friends' backs too. Last year, when Tom Stamos turned me down for the homecoming dance, Brooke toilet-papered his locker.

"Could you make me one too?" asks Hallie Stevens as she shakes out her long, curly brown hair. She pulls out a mirror and examines her look with a frown. I find her frown amusing considering the fact that Hallie could never look bad, even drenched from head to toe. With gorgeous hair, tan skin, and a smile that makes both local guys and visitors swoon, she is every guy at Cliffside's fantasy, not that she seems to notice ("You're exaggerating!" she always says when some poor dude trips and falls straining to look at her walk by). Hallie gives her lips a swipe of gloss before she plops down on the nearest couch. I watch Ryan wince. The couch is going to be soaked.

"Three, please," says the third girl, quieter than the rest. Keiran Harper is my oldest friend—she's lived down the road from me since we were both three—and everyone at school thinks she's impossibly shy. But she's not. If Keiran is quiet, it's only because she uses school to get a few hours of peace. When she isn't there, she's babysitting either her three younger siblings or for local families to save money for college. Keiran grabs a few napkins and dries off her shoulder-length blond hair before she sits down next to the others. Even though Hallie is

the one guys notice, and Brooke is the one people are equally in awe and fear of, I've always thought Keiran was the prettiest of all of us. She is the only one who never wears makeup. Her freckled face and green eyes are all the enhancing she needs, and her tiny frame looks good no matter what she wears, even if it's covered in baby spit-up and Crayola marker. Me, on the other hand—I'm a different story. I keep praying I'm a late bloomer. My dark brown, almost black, medium-length hair isn't bad, and I like my wide set eyes, but my longish nose drives me nuts. Brooke says it makes me look regal. I think that's just a polite way of saying I need a nose job.

My mom jokes that the four of us could be a new version of Charlie's Angels. We fit the movie profile. We're all thin enough to wear tankinis, which is surprising to me considering how many bagels I eat at Milk and Sugar, and we get so dark in the summer that our tans don't fade till November. We're a great team, but that's where the similarities end. Keiran is the quiet blond, Brooke the feisty redhead, Hallie the unknowingly beautiful brunette, and me the raven-haired "ringleader," as Hallie jokes. I can't help it if I like making plans and keeping us busy on the weekends. I'm a tad Type A, as my mother likes to say.

"Are you going to sing 'If I Were a Boy' today?" Hallie asks. "I like when you get all souful."

"Too depressing for today," I tell her. "I'm thinking I should switch it up with some 'Amy' or go vintage Britney and do 'I'm a Slave 4 U.'" I pretend to use the map like I'm going to pole dance. Hey, Miley Cyrus has done it. "You interested?"

"Woohoo! Go for it," Brooke says with a laugh.

I glance at Ryan. "Two more songs," he says with a sigh.

He's trying to look annoyed that I'm performing with customers around, but my friends aren't really customers. He heads into the kitchen shaking his head and I can't help but smirk. Ryan can be such a pushover. That's how I got hired. He never hires any of the kids from Cliffside as waiters, plus I'm only sixteen, which he thought was too young, but I wouldn't take no for an answer. I wore him down after I volunteered to wait tables for a week for free. "Why don't you get the girls something to drink on the house?" Ryan added.

"Thanks, Ryan." I hurry behind the long coffee counter to make four hot cocoas.

"It wouldn't kill you to throw in a bagel," Brooke yells, her loud voice sounding even louder in the empty room.

Keiran swats her, giggling. "Nice."

"Don't pretend you don't want one too," Brooke points out. "I could barely swallow one bite of Wednesday's meatball hero surprise."

Hallie groans. "That might have been the worst cafeteria special they ever had. I heard Sylvie Morton got sick in the bathroom and then Karla Platt was walking in behind her and got sick because she saw Sylvie get sick."

"Eww!" the others screech.

I pour the steaming two-percent milk into four red ceramic mugs and add cocoa and whipped cream. Then I balance the four cups on a round tray and carry them out to the girls, being careful not to let the cocoa slosh over the sides.

"Don't trip again," Hallie teases as I come dangerously close to losing my balance. I've been waitressing almost a year. I didn't say I was good at it.

"I'd like to see Charlie sing, dance, and waitress at the same time," Keiran comments.

"I think Charlie needs to do a cafeteria exposé," Brooke says as I slowly put the tray down on the coffee table. The girls grab their cups and Brooke looks at me. "Are you out of bagels?"

I should have known Brooke was being serious. I hurry back around the counter and grab four bagels and bring them over to the couch. "Thank you," she says gratefully. "Do you have cream cheese?" I roll my eyes at her and run over to the fridge.

"Brooke's totally right, Charlie. You should do an article on bad cafeteria food," Hallie says. "It's an epidemic. Remember last week's green chocolate cake?"

"Or last month's pink chicken scare?" Keiran reminds us.

"Something like this could finally give you the front-page story you so deserve," Brooke insists. "I can see it now—Cafeteria Killers by Charlotte 'Charlie' Reed. 'How your life is threatened by your Caesar salad.'" Hallie giggles.

"I've got a better idea," Keiran suggests. "Forget food and do an editorial on the rich, private school kids who live in Cliffside and act as if the rest of us townies don't exist. I saw Marleyna Garrison the other day at the Associated and she pretended to be so into picking out grapes she couldn't look at me. And this is a girl who was my best friend in preschool."

Brooke shrugs. "Maybe she didn't see you."

Keiran gives her a look. "She saw me. I'm sure of it."

"She said hi to me a few weeks ago," Brooke says casually, not looking up from her mug. "I said hi first, but still."

Hallie groans. "Brooke! You need to quit sucking up to those people."

Brooke feigns innocence. We all know she's obsessed with Marleya Garrison and the lives of the rich and fabulous in our neighborhood, but she won't admit it. "I'm not!" she insists.

"They won't cover either topic," I say, changing the subject before it gets heated. "I'm going to be stuck covering arts and entertainment—which basically means zip—for the rest of my high school career."

"You're never going to become the next Diane Sawyer if you keep letting those blockheads at the paper tell you what to write," Brooke tells me. "Whatever happened to free speech? You're a better writer than half the people they have on staff. I've seen your English papers. I should know."

"Charlie needs something exciting to write about," Keiran agrees.

"Ooh! Let's make something up," Brooke suggests, making me laugh. "We can say we found an alien baby near the Sound, or start a rumor that Brangelina and the kids are renting a house here this summer!"

"Who is going to believe that Brangelina would settle here?" Hallie wants to know.

Brooke takes another bite of her bagel and flashes us a mischievous smile. "Leave it to me, darling. If I say it, people will believe it. It's all in the details."

"It's a nice thought, Brooke," I tell her, "but I think my writing career would be over before it started if people found out I was creating my own news."

"The Enquirer does it all the time," Brooke says innocently. I shake my head.

“Okay, so lack of news is a problem in Charlie getting a front-page story.” Keiran steers us back on track and smears her bagel with cream cheese. “What are we going to do about it though? Aside from March’s wine and cheese dinner at that new vineyard, and the fact that Cliffside Cinemas finally got rocking stadium seats, there hasn’t been much news in town.”

“You can say that again,” Brooke grumbles, her mood darkening. She blows on her hot cocoa, sending whipped cream over the side of the cup. “Cliffside should be wiped off the map.”

We hate when Brooke talks like this. It’s not like I want to stay in Cliffside forever; I want out of here for college too. But at the very least, I do like it here, even if every store in town closes by seven PM. I could definitely see myself someday spending summers here with my rugrats.

“I’ve never heard you complain about Cliffside during tourist season,” Hallie sniffs.

“That’s because at least then we have the beach to keep us busy, and your parents’ dock for a little entertainment,” Brooke says.

Hallie’s parents own a dockside restaurant in Greenport, just a few towns over on the North Fork (or NOFO as it’s sometimes called. Brooke says it stands for “NO Fun On this side of the island.”). For actual five-star eateries and celeb sightings you have to go to the South Fork and the Hamptons. The Crab Shack is the name of Hallie’s parents’ place, and it’s always hopping with tourists and wealthy locals driving over on their boats. Hallie’s parents do so well from the dock boat parking fees and their summer café of fresh seafood and salads that

they're able to be off all winter (except for the dockings, which run through the fall and spring). They reopen for business next week.

"You're going to miss this place someday, Brooke," Keiran says quietly. "You're going to miss us."

"You're all coming with me," Brooke insists. "Especially you, Kiki—you need to get away from all those screaming kids."

"It's not that bad," Keiran says, sounding unsure of herself.

"It so is," agrees Hallie. "When I called your house last night, Joseph answered and started babbling and then dropped the phone on the floor and I had to listen to Stevie screaming for milk and Hannah begging you to put on *The Backyardigans*. Then Joseph came back on and started babbling some more before he hung up on me!"

"I thought I heard the phone ring," Keiran says sheepishly.

"Would you please start leaving your cell phone on?" Brooke begs.

Keiran takes a bite of her bagel. "I keep forgetting. Mom and Dad were out late at dinner and I was trying to get the kids' baths done. We can't all have fun jobs like you, Hallie."

"My job's not so great," Hallie says without a hint of irony. We all groan.

"You get to work at the café on the dock where all the hot guys are, including the ones that go to the Ross School, you get paid for getting a tan, and you get half the year off since the place is closed in the winter!" Brooke sounds indignant.

"I can't help it if there are cute boys," Hallie grins.

"Who all want to date you," I remind her.

"Not that you ever notice until they're sending you flowers." Keiran giggles.

"Okay, fine, my job is cool," Hallie admits. "But at least I work." Hallie glances at Brooke and Brooke glares at her in return. This is a dance the two of them do all the time.

"I would never work you-know-where." Brooke says the phrase fast, like it's on fire.

"Whenever Brooke says it like that, I feel like she's talking about Voldemort or something really awful," I quip and Keiran and Hallie can't help but snort. "When in reality she's just talking about the—"

"Don't say it." Brooke puts her hands up wildly, trying to cover my mouth.

"You are so touchy." I laugh when she starts to tickle me. "What's so wrong with owning a—"

"Don't!" Brooke begs and now I can see she's getting upset. "Just sing. You promised us some Britney and if I'm going to get soaked in my gorgeous new boots you better deliver."

"Okay," I tell her. The others applaud as I stand up and go reclaim my mop-turned-mic. Grady and Ryan, hearing the commotion, step into the kitchen doorway and whistle. Grady's beloved All-American Rejects shirt is covered in chocolate, since he's just made another batch of his homemade double chocolate Tropic Thunder cookies (Grady is a movie junkie who likes to name all his creations after his favorite films). I run behind the counter and punch up the tune. "I can't deny my public." Then I break into full Britney mode, remembering some of the dance steps we used for the talent show a few years

back and singing to the mop at the top of my lungs. When I'm done, I'm met with loud cheers. I bow.

"Ryan, when are you going to let her perform like this for real one night?" Brooke demands. "Charlie would bring the house down."

"I would not," I say with a laugh. "I only do this sort of thing when no one is here, or it's just you guys. You know I have a terrible voice. I couldn't do it, like, for real."

"I think you should try out for the school play," suggests Hallie. "You can act."

Before I can tell Hallie how crazy she is, I hear more clapping and turn around. Susan is applauding. I guess I forgot she was here. "That might have been your best performance yet," she says and walks over with her oversized Milk and Sugar coffee mug in hand. I notice she's wearing super-high heels. She strides gracefully over to the table—unlike I would in those shoes.

"Susan, I want to introduce you to my best friends—Keiran, Brooke, and Hallie." The girls all shake her hand and look at me curiously. "Susan has been my number-one customer all week—or should I say my only customer. She's here on vacation."

Brooke gasps. "I'm so sorry for you. Did Priceline.com do this to you? I hear they pick the most rinky-dink places sometimes, which would explain how you wound up here."

Susan laughs. "Charlie said you were funny, Brooke."

The girls look at me again. "I've been bragging about you guys," I explain. "I've been giving Susan a little background on my Cliffside existence."

"And you haven't left town yet?" Brooke deadpans. I swipe her with my cleaning rag. "EWW! Charlie, stop!"

"Do you want to sit?" Keiran asks Susan politely.

"I'd love to," Susan says, before I can protest. I'm sure Susan wants to finish her book but doesn't want to be rude. "I was hoping to meet you three all week."

"You really are bored," Hallie says, and I glare at her. "I'm just saying."

"Are you writing a book about small-town girls?" Keiran asks seriously. Hallie laughs so hard, she almost spits her drink out.

"Who are you calling small-town?" Brooke pouts.

Susan holds up her hands in peace and then clutches her stomach, laughing. "You four are funny together." She studies us carefully. "And each one of you is more beautiful than the last. It's amazing." She stares at us, not saying anything, and I find myself getting uncomfortable. "And this town"—Susan glances out the window and around the room—"is the cutest thing I have ever seen."

"It's dead," Brooke deadpans, "if you haven't noticed."

"What she means is, come back in the summer," Hallie interrupts. "The wineries are awesome and the antiquing can't be beat."

"When have you ever gone antiquing?" Brooke wants to know.

Hallie blushes. "I haven't, but I've heard it's good."

"Have you all lived here a long time?" Susan asks.

"Yeah," Keiran says and I'm surprised to hear her speak to a stranger. "My dad is a fisherman, Hallie's parents own a dock and restaurant, Charlie's dad is a ferryboat captain, and Brooke's is..."

"A local native too," Brooke finishes with a bright smile. She can't stop staring at Susan's shoes. Are they Gucci?

Susan smiles. "Well, I think this town is anything but dead, and believe me, I've seen a lot of towns and a lot of girls. Especially lately." She frowns. "I think Cliffside is picturesque and completely charming, just like you four. Not that I'm surprised. Charlie talks very highly of the three of you and I already adore her."

Brooke elbows me. "Aww. Thanks, Charlie."

"There's something I wanted to talk to you all about now that I have you together," Susan adds and pulls something from her pocket. It's a business card holder.

She hands a card to each of us and I read the card carefully.  
SUSAN STROM, FIRE AND ICE NETWORK. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF  
CREATIVE PROGRAMMING.

So this is what Susan does for a living? Why didn't she tell me? Her job must be beyond cool. Fire and Ice is like the new MTV. We just started getting the network on cable out here. They air more videos than MTV and also have a mix of reality and game show programming during prime time.

"You work for Fire and Ice? That's so cool," Hallie says in awe.

"I love Peggy Pierce," gushes Brooke. Peggy is the host of their video countdown show and Brooke so wants to be her. "She's like my idol."

"I can introduce you," says Susan. "She'll be at a party we're throwing next weekend in the Hamptons. Next Saturday night. Would you girls like to come? As long as your parents approve, of course. They can come too. I'd love to meet them."

Meet our parents? Go to a major party? I thought Susan just said she didn't know the area. If that's true, then why is she having a party out here? I guess it is on the other fork, but still. My amateur journalist mind is spinning.

"Us?" Brooke shrieks. "A Fire and Ice Party? We're so there."

"I can't," Keiran says meekly. "I have to babysit."

"Kiki, cancel!" begs Hallie. "How often do you get the chance to go to a party with Peggy Pierce?"

"She's right, Keiran," says Susan. "You don't want to miss this. If you give me your numbers, I'll even call your parents personally."

"Um, geez, you're nice." Hallie looks at her strangely. "Want to drive us there too?"

Susan smiles. "I'll admit, I have an ulterior motive. Can I tell you girls a secret?"

"Yes," says Brooke, her breath short, but her answer quick.

"I kind of lied before," Susan admits and looks at me. "Especially to Charlie. I do know this area. I've vacationed here before, and I'm actually in town scouting a new TV show. I've been all over the country doing it and I've been let down everywhere I've gone." She looks at me. "Except here."

"What kind of show?" I want to know.

"A reality show about regular everyday teens. Nothing flashy and overdone, just as real as it can get," Susan explains. "I've been looking for my next stars and having a tough time."

"Shut up!" says Brooke and Keiran nudges her. "Tell us more."

"It gets better," Susan adds, pulling her umbrella out of her bag. I notice it is Louis Vuitton. She pulls a twenty from her

wallet and hands it to me as a tip. I try to protest but she waves me off. "I think I've found my star."

"Who is it?" Hallie wants to know.

"You've got to tell us," says Brooke, leaning across the table anxiously. "Is it Marleyna Garrison?" Hallie groans. "We know every teen in this town and we can tell you if you've made a huge mistake."

Susan looks at me. "It's Charlie."

I audibly gasp. Hallie squeals. Keiran just looks stunned.

"Charlie on her own TV show?" Brooke practically stutters and looks at me in shock. "That's...I mean, wow, Charlie! How cool!"

"Me?" I feel dizzy. "You're joking, right?"

Susan shakes her head and smiles. "You're exactly what I've been looking for, Charlie. You're vibrant and real and sweet and you have great friends." She looks at the girls. "With them at your side, I think you could have an amazing show and hit home with our viewers."

Brooke practically cries. "You want us too?" The color flushes back to Brooke's face. "You want all of us?"

Susan nods. "Charlie's Angels."

"That's what Charlie's mom calls us," Keiran marvels.

"I always thought it should be Brooke's Angels, but it doesn't have the same ring," Brooke says with a smile.

Susan laughs. "I want you all. Obviously there's a lot to discuss together and with your parents. So if my proposal sounds at all interesting, maybe we can meet before the party to chat. Lunch on me?" We're all still too stunned to respond. "Anyway, I'll talk to you, Charlie. Call me tomorrow and I'll

have invitations messengered over.” Susan looks at me. Brooke nudges me and I finally manage a nod. “I know this is a lot to process,” Susan says. “I’m going to give you guys some space to think about things. I really hope we can make this work. This is an opportunity you don’t want to pass up.”

Susan gets up and gathers her coat, Hermés bag, and umbrella. The rest of us can barely move, let alone squeak out a goodbye. Is this woman for real? Does she really want me to be the star of a show on the Fire and Ice Network?

The bell on the door jingles and snaps me out of my fog. I look up and Susan’s already gone, leaving the four of us behind, our mouths hanging on the floor.