

# Maybe This Time

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# Chapter 1

The cafeteria had been transformed into a red-and-pink extravaganza. Like Hello Kitty herself had decorated for the occasion. The flowers, my contribution to the party, sat in the center of each table.

I walked around one centerpiece, trying to pinpoint why it looked off—aside from the vase, which was wrapped in metallic cellophane and adorned with pink hearts that I wished would disappear. The thick stems of tulips were my favorite, and a bit more green would have been good for the aesthetic, but it wasn't up to me. My boss had decided on the cellophane. As if the red confetti hearts sprinkled on the tablecloths or the pink and red balloon hearts tied to the chairs weren't enough. But as Caroline always said when I tried to give suggestions: *You're preachin' to the choir, honey. This is for the clients.*

She was right; the clients would love this. And, honestly, I didn't care enough to fight it. Working for the town florist was never my dream job. But money was money, and I needed it if I wanted to go to design school in New York. And I did. With all my soul.

“There.” I spotted a pink tulip that was throwing off the balance of the arrangement. I pulled it out and traded it with the red one next to it. “Much better.” Looking at the flowers, an image sprang to mind of girls in brightly colored sundresses marching through a field of tulips.

“Sophie,” Caroline said as she came into the cafeteria with another bundle of balloons. “The flowers look great.”

I blinked, and the girls in dresses disappeared. “Thanks.”

Every Occasion was mainly a flower shop. But in a town as small as ours, Caroline took on the role of party planner as well. People would come into the shop for centerpieces and walk out with a minute-by-minute itinerary for their event. She could sell honey to bees, Caroline always said.

“Were you just at the van?” Caroline asked me.

“No, I’ve been in here for a while.”

“Can you check and see if I left the gift bags in there? They’re in two cardboard boxes.”

“Sure.” I wiped my hands on my apron and gathered the buckets and supplies to put away.

Outside, I opened the back doors of the van and swung the buckets inside. I untied my apron and tucked it into a bin. I didn’t see the gift bags Caroline was talking about. What I did see was my backpack, with my design journal—its leather cords barely holding its bursting pages closed—sitting on top. I’d pulled the journal out earlier in a bout of inspiration but Caroline had called me away in the middle of a sketch.

I picked up the journal and untied the cords, flipping past drawings and material samples and pressed leaves to the sketch of a blouse I'd been working on. A scowl came over my face. Where had I been going with this? The lines were rushed and sloppy. As always, I wished I had more time to devote to this journal. I was hoping to use its contents to convince schools they wanted me. Especially since I had no design experience.

“Sophie!”

I turned to see Micah, my best friend, rushing out of the retirement home.

I smiled, then tucked my notebook back into my bag and faced her. “Hey! When did you get here?”

“Holy crap you cut your hair!”

I reached up and pulled on the ends. I'd cut my long dark hair to a choppy shoulder-length style the day before and was still getting used to it. “I told you I was going to.”

“I know, I just didn't think you would.”

She didn't think I would? “So you hate it?”

“What? No! It's awesome. It makes your eyes look huge.”

“Thanks.”

Micah wore her cater waiter outfit—black pants and a white collared shirt. She tugged at the collar, which was obviously bothering her neck.

“You know, if you let me alter that shirt a little, it would feel a million times better.” I pinched a section near her waist. “And while I was fixing the neck, I could take it in here . . .”

“Yeah, yeah.” She pushed my hands away. “I’m sure my dad would love you messing with his uniforms.” Her dad was a caterer, the only one in this small town. Micah pointed at her tight black curls, which I could tell at one point had been gathered on top of her head but now spilled every which way. “Speaking of uniforms, my hair tie broke.”

“It looks cute. Leave it.”

“Because hair in food is so appetizing.”

“I’m sure you have another hair tie in your *just-in-case*.” That’s what I liked to call Micah’s plastic case of sectioned squares that she kept in the trunk of her car. Her *just-in-case* mainly covered hair, makeup, and clothing emergencies, because the bin wasn’t big enough to include things like road flares or neck braces.

“You mock me, but that case has saved your butt on multiple occasions,” she said.

“So true.” I followed her to her car, where she removed the case from her trunk. “I wonder what the makers of your squares actually intended them for,” I mused. “Tools, maybe? Nuts and bolts?”

“This, Sophie. This.” She smiled, then pulled out a hair tie. “Do you need anything?”

I surveyed the selection—earrings, nail polish, Q-tips, Band-Aids, lip gloss—all in their own little spaces. It was the perfect representation of how Micah liked to live her life, everything in its proper place. “I’m good.” I nodded back toward the van. “I’m supposed to be getting gift bags.”

“Is that why you were sketching?”

“I was not sketching!” I cleared my throat. “I was looking at something I’d sketched earlier.”

“Uh-huh.” She shut her trunk and we walked back to the flower van together. “How did your date with Kyle go last night, by the way?”

My stomach flipped at the mention of Kyle. “Not great,” I admitted. “Gunnar hid in the back seat of Kyle’s car as we were driving off to get dinner, and he jumped out after five minutes to scare us.” I frowned, remembering my little brother’s antics. “Kyle nearly wrecked his brand-new Mustang. And then he talked about nothing else the rest of the night.”

Micah cringed. “First dates are always weird. You need to give him a second chance.”

“I don’t know that he’ll give *me* a second chance.” I sighed. “My brother nearly ruined his baby. Or so I heard . . . all night.” I scanned the back of the van again and finally spotted a couple of cardboard boxes behind the passenger seat.

“I would give you another chance,” Micah said. “Besides, Gunnar is adorable.”

That reminded me. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and sent my brother a text: *Is your homework done?*

*Yes. Wanna see a spider? I found a spider under the cupboard.*

*Yuck. No.*

“So that’s it?” Micah asked.

“What?” I turned toward her. She was giving me her impatient eyes.

“You’re done with Kyle after one date? You can’t be done. I gave you a compatibility quiz. He was your match.” After Kyle had asked me out last week, Micah had made me take some online quiz she’d found and we’d laughed over every question.

I rolled my eyes. “Really? You’re going to claim that as gospel now?”

“Whatever it takes.” Micah thought I had a habit of not giving guys a chance. She wasn’t wrong. But Kyle was different. I’d been crushing on him for a couple of months now. So despite having to sit through his detailed descriptions of what a V8, 435-horsepower engine could do, I was willing to agree with her that first dates could be aberrations.

“Fine, one more date.”

She smiled. “Good. Will he be here tonight?”

“Could you see his band playing at this thing? The old people would riot.”

“I meant with his grandma. Doesn’t his grandma live here at Willow Falls now?”

“Does she? She wasn’t at last year’s event. But maybe. I can tell you who doesn’t live here: his car. I know everything about his car.”

“I got that.” Micah tugged on the hair tie to make sure the curly bun on top of her head was secure. “Okay. Better get back to work, love.”

She kissed the air by my cheek, then headed toward the building. I walked around to the side door of the van and slid it open.



“Oh!” Micah turned and walked backward for a few steps.  
“I have to tell you something later! Something really big!”

“What do you need to tell . . . ?” Before I finished my question, she was through the door and it swung shut behind her.

Something big? Good big or bad big? Why did she do that to me? She knew I couldn't sit with information like that.