

To my boys, Levi and Lucas, who remind  
me that laughter makes everything better.  
Even deadlines.



# Chapter One

A few years ago, if someone had told me I'd be driving a bright yellow food truck with a giant chicken riding shotgun, passionately butchering Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" in two languages, I would've laughed. But that was before Seth and I inherited our Aunt Dolly's truck and built a chicken empire.

Okay, maybe "empire" is a stretch, but Kluckin' Good is a household name in our small town of Clementine, California, just outside of San Francisco.

I hum along to the upbeat pop song blasting from the radio as I pull up to a stoplight, but Rylie—my copilot and best friend, who is currently wearing our truck's chicken costume—isn't content to hum. She rolls down her window and, in full mascot regalia, serenades the bewildered driver in the next lane with a wildly off-key Portuguese rendition.

I join in with dramatic backup vocals as Rylie points a chicken wing at the elderly gentleman.

"*Eu quero seu amor!*" she belts, shimmying in the passenger seat like this is her personal stage. The man blinks, mouth agape. The second the light turns green, he peels out like he's fleeing a poultry-themed curse.

## Carmela Dutra

I stifle a laugh. Whether it was the warbling vocals or the shock of being serenaded by a dancing chicken, he wanted no part of it. Rylie Cortes is one of the perks of taking over my aunt's business. Sure, I wish she could cook, but I knew what I was getting when I hired her.

"I don't understand why *she* gets to sit in the front seat when I called dibs first," Seth complains from the back. He's my twin brother, business partner, and a part-time lawyer who is *always* full of opinions.

"Because I won best two out of three at rock-paper-scissors," Rylie shoots back, spinning in her seat to glare at him through her chicken head.

"Why are you still wearing that ridiculous outfit? Our shift ended thirty minutes ago," Seth grumbles.

The chicken suit came with the truck and is now essential to Rylie's brand. She's become *one with the chicken* and wears the outfit to attract more customers. Not that we need help drawing customers. Competing on *The Food Truck Showdown* put Kluckin' Good on the proverbial food map. Sure, it involved two murders, one attempted murder, and my kidnapping—but business tripled after the finale aired.

"It's called branding, *meu amor*," Rylie says, using Seth's nickname that makes me gag every time.

Neither Seth nor I were ready to take over after Aunt Dolly's sudden death, but we've made it work—thanks to Rylie. She helps me with day-to-day operations while Seth splits his time between lawyering and food trucking.

And now she's dating Seth.

*Gag.*

I'm still adjusting to my best friend and my brother becoming a couple. Half the time, I laugh at their banter; the other half, I dry heave at their mushy nonsense. We really need to have a team meeting about workplace behavior.

"*Vire à esquerda!*" Rylie shouts at me to turn left.

## Hot Wings and Homicide

“Relax,” I say, turning onto my parents’ street. “Sugar and Spice Bakery doesn’t close until four. We can drop off the truck first.”

Sugar and Spice Bakery is a Clementine staple. It’s part cozy bakery, part cat café, and the owners, Chris and Helena Wynn, are fully committed to helping the local shelter find *forever* homes for its feline residents.

It’s more of a comfort stop now, reminding me of Saturday mornings with Aunt Dolly. Seth’s allergic to cats, so as a teen, she’d pick me up and we’d go to Sugar and Spice. I’d get a cupcake and pick a cat to cuddle while she sipped her hazelnut latte and caught up on small-town gossip.

I pull into my parents’ driveway carefully, avoiding my mom’s long-dead hydrangea bush.

One condition of parking our truck here is delivering leftovers to our dad twice a week. Another is steering clear of the hydrangeas. Those poor plants are victims of her “natural fertilizing” gone wrong. She insists they’ll revive with enough time and positive energy. I’m surprised the HOA hasn’t fined her yet.

I stash the wings and sliders in the fridge, stub my toe, and hobble toward the door—just as I hear the stairs creak. No way am I getting trapped in another “now that your brother’s found someone, it’s your turn” talk with my mom.

I limp-run down the driveway and gag at the sight of Seth and Rylie making out by her Jeep. “Seriously?” I choke. “Children play in these streets!”

“You need to grow up,” Seth says, stepping back.

“That was disgusting. Parents wouldn’t approve of you leaning your girlfriend over the hood like that.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Rylie grins, hopping into the driver’s seat.

I sulk into the back while Seth takes shotgun. “This is my life now—my best friend dates my brother, and I’m relegated to the back seat like unwanted baggage.”

## Carmela Dutra

“You wouldn’t *be* in the back seat if you’d ditch that clunker you call a car,” Seth says.

“Don’t insult Audrey!” I punch his arm. “She’s a *lady*.”

“That lady wheezes worse than a chain smoker,” Rylie quips, taking a sharp left onto Maple Avenue.

“Pedro said she just needs a little TLC,” I counter.

I wouldn’t care if it were just the usual check engine light that’s been on since I bought Audrey, my beloved red Volkswagen Rabbit. But two weeks ago, she started making a loud rattle that was worse than normal. So I took her to Rylie’s cousin’s dad’s shop. “There’s good news!” I say too brightly. “It’s a simple fuel line repair, *and* it won’t cost me a dime because it’s a recall notice . . .”

“I’m sensing a but.” Rylie speeds through a yellow light.

“But . . . Pedro found a bad oxygen sensor. He thinks that’s why she idles rough and the light’s always on.”

“Did my cousin say when he’ll be done?” she asks.

“Soon . . . ish.” I avoid her gaze in the rearview mirror. “The parts are back ordered. It’s going to be at least another week and there’s still no rentals.”

Seth twists in his seat to glare at me.

“Looks like both of you are my chauffeurs a little longer.” I smile sweetly.

“*Serriamente*, Beth,” Rylie complains, pulling into the Sugar and Spice parking lot. “Put that car out of her misery.”

“Never.”

Rylie parks, and Seth jumps out to help her down from the Jeep. Not that she needs help—it’s her car—but my teddy bear of a twin is grossly in love.

The bell over the door jingles as we step inside. The smell of cupcakes and coffee wraps around me like a sugary hug.

“Well, well, well,” Helena Wynn calls from behind the counter. “If it isn’t my competition and favorite chicken girl.”

“Hardly competition,” I grin. “You’ve got the trifecta: coffee, cupcakes, and cats.”

## Hot Wings and Homicide

Seth sneezes. “And allergies,” he whines, popping a pink pill from a blister pack.

Seth’s immune system rejects anything with fur. We learned that when we adopted Mr. Muffins when we were eight. A gorgeous, fluffy, gray and white tabby, and the feline overlord of air biscuits. I was smitten. Seth lasted three days before turning into a sneezy, wheezy mess. Dad rehomed Mr. Muffins to a coworker, and I was devastated. I still haven’t totally forgiven Seth for being allergic to joy.

Dad tried other animals. Dogs, rabbits, even hamsters. Same problem. Fish were the only pets that didn’t trigger a sneezing fit—but try cuddling a goldfish bowl. Not the same.

Helena beams from behind the counter like she’s got a secret. It’s probably just caffeine and cat hair. She’s become a solid friend since I took over Aunt Dolly’s food truck. Helena understands the hustle of the business. She and her husband, Chris, started in a food truck before opening this charming little café, now home to espresso, flaky croissants, and twelve rescue cats who judge you for ordering decaf.

Basically, it’s everything I aspire to—minus the litter boxes and the arrogant orange tabby who once slapped a scone out of my hand.

“Can I get a flat white with soy? Are those Chris’s homemade chocolate s’mores cupcakes?” I ask, eyeing the display case.

Helena nods.

“I’ll take two.”

“Two?” Seth sneezes again.

“Cupcakes are the lunch of champions.”

“Sure, *spinster* champions.”

I elbow him in the stomach, eliciting a satisfying “Oof.” “Seth will take anything covered in fur.”

“Rylie already ordered his food through the app,” Helena says. “It’ll be out soon.”

Of course she did. They’re one of those gross in-love couples who order for each other. I’m happy for them—in a barfy kind of way.

## Carmela Dutra

“Thanks, Helena,” Seth says, recovering from my “abuse.” “Tell Chris I looked at the papers. It all checks out. Stop by the office for the official sign-off.”

Seth practices law part-time at Buford and Myers, one of two law firms in Clementine. People constantly ask him legal advice. And I’m happy to volunteer him if it gets me free food.

On my way to where Rylie is sitting, I scratch a silky black cat snoozing in a sunbeam. She opens one eye, purrs, then goes back to sleep like I’m invisible.

“You would’ve loved Mr. Muffins,” I whisper, giving her one last stroke.

Seth sits beside Rylie and kisses her temple. *Yuck.*

“I get enough spinster comments from Mom.” I glare at Seth, taking the seat across from them. “You didn’t need to call me one too. And Rylie, why didn’t you order my food? You know what I like.”

“Last week was iced coffee. Before that, macchiatos,” she says, ticking off my obsessions. “Two days ago, you switched to matcha for ‘health reasons.’ How was I supposed to know today’s craving?”

“You could’ve asked.” I sulk.

“Or I could get your favorite table.”

She’s right. This is my favorite table, under the hanging pothos. The open window is a perfect spot to be with cats like Mrs. Whiskerton, who is currently napping in a cat house.

“Thanks,” I drone. “Now, what about Mom?”

“Mom? I thought this was about work?” Seth snuffles.

“We’ll get to that.” I wave him off. “First, you need to get Mom off my back about dating. She started again last week when I dropped off leftovers for Dad.”

“Why me?” He rubs his nose.

“You started dating Rylie, now Mom thinks I need a partner too.”

“To be fair, she’s always thought that,” Seth says as our orders arrive.

## Hot Wings and Homicide

“It’s worse,” I hiss, spooking the teen holding our food. Mumbling an apology, I grab the plates. “She’s setting me up on blind dates.”

“Here’s a thought: don’t go,” Seth says, biting into his sandwich.

“Can’t be worse than that maniac you dated,” Rylie says, digging into her spinach soufflé.

“*Kleptomaniac*,” I correct her. When our bowling date ended, my lipstick, hand lotion, and glasses case were missing from my purse. When I went to swap my rented shoes for my flats, I caught him red-handed, trying to tuck my left shoe into his messenger bag.

“Or that guy who kissed like a . . . what did you call him?” She snaps her fingers. “A wet fish?”

“Sloppy. James kissed like a sloppy fish,” I say, reliving my trauma. “It was wet too. His teeth gnawed on my bottom lip while his tongue waged an unwanted war against mine.” Propping my elbow on the table, I point at Rylie. “I was the unlucky victim of too much tongue and not enough common sense.”

“I don’t want to hear this.” Seth throws his hands up as a fluffy Maine Coon brushes up against his leg. He freezes. “Oh, no.”

The cat winds around his ankle, purring loudly. Seth twists away, sniffing and waving a hand in a weak attempt to push the cat off.

“Shoo!” he says—only it comes out all nasally, like “Shnuh!”

“*Pare com isso*,” Rylie swats him. “Be nice to your sister. She’s going through a rough patch.”

“Sure, if you call ‘life’ a rough patch.” Seth dabs at his nose with tissue, sounding like a congested cartoon character.

“If you’d take allergy shots you wouldn’t be miserable,” I sip my drink and Seth grumbles. Blowing his nose into a napkin.

“Ignore him,” Rylie says. “Are you considering one of your mom’s matches?”

“Already did.” I recount my most recent disaster. “His name was Larry”—I look around, then lower my voice—“K-U-N-T-Z.”

Seth nearly chokes on his coffee, and Rylie groans.

## Carmela Dutra

“How is that pronounced?” she asks.

“It’s gotta be a long U, right?” Seth says.

“I don’t know!”

“Wasn’t the name a red flag?” Seth laughs.

“We don’t judge people by their names!” I defend. “I just wanted Mom off my back. How was I supposed to know Larry’s mom would join us with their prom photos?”

“You mean *his* prom photos?” Rylie asks, hopefully.

I shake my head. “Theirs. Larry was homeschooled.”

Seth’s laugh becomes a sneeze attack. Serves him right.

“I had Rylie fake a call so I could leave.”

“What did you tell them?” Seth’s tone is suspicious.

“That you were in the ER with explosive diarrhea,” I say.

“You what?” Seth yells, startling a few customers. And cats.  
“That’s why Mom keeps sending me gut health articles!”

“Yeah, wehh,” I say around a mouth full of cupcake. “She won’t stop aching when I’m gonna see Larry again.” I swallow. “What do I do?”

“Don’t see him,” Seth says flatly.

“I wish it were that simple.” Between Mom’s meddling and the repair costs for my car, life feels overwhelming. At least I have a silver lining. “Let’s talk about Flavors of the Bay.”

Flavors of the Bay is the unofficial start of summer—three and a half days of food, music, and family fun under the trees at Green Family Farm.

There’s a main stage with live music and a (mildly chaotic) amateur talent show on Saturday evening with a grand prize of \$1,000. There’s a shaded picnic zone and more food vendors than you could possibly sample in one weekend. Our truck has a coveted vendor spot, and I’m determined to make the most of it.

Seth’s face scrunches. “Ah . . . ahh . . . achoo! Achoo! A-achoo!” He groans. “Why is it always three?”

“Your Benadryl’s wearing off,” I say as the doorbell jingles.

## Hot Wings and Homicide

Right on cue, a plump calico with a clipped ear hops up onto our table like she got a personal invitation.

“Hi, sweet girl,” I coo.

“*Gata bonita*,” Rylie says, stroking her back. “Isn’t she the cutest?”

Seth stiffens as the calico vaults into his lap.

“No, no, no! Get off,” he tries to lift her. “This is not mutual!”

He’s touching her like a ticking bomb, but she chirps, stretches, and settles in.

“Achoo! ACHOO!”

The third sneeze launches the calico like she’s been shot from a cannon. She flies off his lap, bolting across the room, her tail puffed up like a bottle brush.

“I’ll be back,” Seth groans, rubbing his eyes and stumbles to the bathroom.

“Do you know which vendors will be there?” Rylie asks, watching me devour a cupcake.

I gesture toward the bathroom with my half-eaten s’mores cupcake. “Not even a flicker of concern for your sneezing soulmate?”

Rylie shrugs, totally unbothered. “I suggested he get allergy shots. He said, and I quote, ‘I will not be injected in the butt for a cat.’”

“Honestly,” I pause, licking frosting off my thumb, “that sounds exactly like something he’d say.”

Before Rylie responds, a familiar voice cuts through the café, freezing us in place.

“We’ll head to the farm and get the lay of the land,” the voice says. “I want you to film me exploring.”

My lungs seize. *That voice.*

“Maybe it’s not him?” I whisper.

“Oh, *meu Deus*,” Rylie pales, her eyes fixed behind me. “Beth, don’t turn around.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” I say, more for my benefit than hers. “It’s not him, it’s a doppelgänger with the same voice.”

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“And matching height and hair?”

“It’s not him,” I insist.

“Beth,” she says urgently.

I look and instantly regret it. “I *told* you not to turn around,” Rylie says.

Heat floods my skin as I whip back around in my seat, every nerve buzzing. Those eyes—warm brown, deceptively kind—are burned into my memory like I saw them yesterday, not three years ago. Three years since he dumped me during karaoke . . . for his step-cousin. They sang “Secret Love Song” as a duet while my heart shattered into tiny, off-key pieces. Peeking over my shoulder again, I curse and my heart pounds.

My ex-boyfriend, Brad Dawson, is standing ten feet away with another woman.

I duck low and hiss to Rylie, “I can’t believe he has the audacity to be within a one-hundred-mile radius of here! Sugar and Spice is mine!”

Okay, technically, Sugar and Spice belongs to the Wynns. But it’s always been my comfort spot. The place when I need quiet solace or a cupcake the size of my face. Plus, the memories of Aunt Dolly bringing me here. I’d sit by the bay window, sketching cats as they napped in sunbeams or tried to steal sips of unattended coffee. I still have a drawing of a chonky Manx trying to squeeze into a teacup. His name was Cinnamon. He had no shame.

Aunt Dolly even threw our high school graduation brunch here when Seth and I graduated. There were cat-shaped pancakes, personalized mugs, and a glitter banner that read “Paws-itively Proud of You!”

Seth broke out in hives before the pancakes arrived. His face puffed up like a marshmallow Peep, and a cat mistook his duffel bag for a litter box. In Aunt Dolly’s defense, she didn’t know the severity of Seth’s allergies.

After that, Seth admitted defeat and started carrying allergy pills everywhere, like a Victorian woman with smelling salts.

## Hot Wings and Homicide

This place isn't just coffee and cupcakes. It's memories, fur and warmth. Brad knows what this bakery means to me, we came here weekly when dating. He doesn't belong here. He's the guilty one. The heartbreaking, dream-crushing, soul-stabbing devil.

"Give me your keys." I slink lower in my chair. "I can't face him. Not when I look like this." I gesture at my grease-stained shirt.

"You mean like a confident queen who doesn't care how she dresses?" Rylie digs in her purse.

"Where's Seth?" I scan the room, panicking. "I can't get up and walk out. Brad will see me." My eyes drop to the floor. "I could army crawl out of here."

"Yeah, that's subtle."

"But I'm not leaving this." I stuff the rest of my cupcake in my mouth and stand—right onto Mrs. Whiskerton's tail. Her yowl makes everyone look at me.

Everyone including Brad.