

MISS FORTUNE

by Brandi Dougherty



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CHAPTER ONE

Maybe this was a mistake.

It's too late. It's already happening.

Okay, this was totally a mistake.

Zoe Coulter could feel the quick thrum of her pulse in her throat. Her heart was beating faster than she'd ever felt. Her hands were clenched so tightly she could feel her fingernails digging into her palms. Her stomach sank into her shoes as the sense of foreboding grew. She stole a quick glance at Noah, still not believing he was right beside her.

And then she screamed wildly as the car of their roller coaster tottered on the edge of the highest peak of the ride for a few painful seconds before plunging toward the ground and then whipping them back into the air with a quick turn. Now Zoe

couldn't help but laugh out loud as they spun one last time through the maze of metal before coming to an abrupt stop at the bottom. She *loved* scary carnival rides!

"That was awesome," Noah said as they stumbled down the ramp toward their waiting friends.

All Zoe could do was nod and smile. The roller-coaster ride hadn't been the first time that night she'd felt such an adrenaline rush. Her heart had begun to race the second she saw Noah walking toward her at the entrance to the carnival. Somehow, he had looked even cuter than usual in his dark jeans and the green T-shirt that matched his eyes.

Zoe stole a quick peek at Noah again now. The light Portland breeze had caught his dark brown hair and pushed it into his face. As Noah casually flipped his hair away with his hand, Zoe felt her heart flip as well.

"How was it?" Zoe's friend Tomo asked.

"Yeah, it looked *so* scary!" Makenna chimed in.

Tomo was standing next to Andrew and Zack, while Makenna stood slightly behind them whispering intensely with Zoe's best friend, Mia. Tomo and Makenna had known each other the longest out of the group. They had lived just a few houses apart

their whole lives and were still really close friends. Tomo had always been a bit of a tomboy and often preferred a game of football to a gossip session. Makenna, on the other hand, often preferred a good gossip session to anything else.

“It was good,” Zoe said awkwardly, darting her hazel eyes toward the ground. She could feel Mia and Makenna studying her carefully. Ever since Zoe had met Noah at Tomo’s house earlier that spring playing board games, she had thought he was really cute. And when Noah loaned Zoe fifty Monopoly dollars so she could get out of jail, Zoe had decided that he was more than just cute — he was one hundred percent crushworthy. Zoe’s friends had all suspected that Noah had a crush on her, too, and they knew that tonight was the night they were going to find out.

“We were just talking about riding the Kamikaze next,” Andrew jumped in, clueless to the girl drama going on around him.

“Yeah, let’s go!” Tomo added.

Zoe smiled at Noah as they headed toward the ride. She was relieved that Andrew and Tomo had set the group in motion. She didn’t want everyone standing around watching her every move with

Noah. Noah fell in step next to Zoe, and her stomach did another roller-coaster dive.

As they approached the line for the Kamikaze, Mia slowed her pace to a stop. Zoe instantly recognized the look in Mia's soft, dark brown eyes. She was scared to ride the Kamikaze. Zoe followed Mia's wide-eyed stare and looked up at the ride. Two massive metal arms each held a passenger cage precariously at one end. The arms swung in opposite directions like giant pendulums, building momentum and speed until they spun all the way around in a circle.

"Mia, this one isn't even that scary," Zoe said lightly as she put her arm around Mia's shoulder. "It looks *way* worse than it is. I promise."

Sometimes Zoe felt like she knew Mia better than Mia knew herself. After all, they had been best friends since fourth grade, when Zoe saved Mia from an overly competitive game of dodgeball. Mia was often hesitant to try new things, but as soon as she did, she was always eager to try them again. Like ballet, for example. It had been Zoe who had dragged Mia to her first class. But after five minutes in a tutu and those weird little slippers, Zoe knew

ballet wasn't her thing. Mia, on the other hand, was totally hooked.

Mia was still eying the ride warily.

"It's like ballet, Mia," Zoe reminded her friend. "You just have to give it a chance."

"Can't I at least work up to the bigger rides?" Mia argued, pulling nervously on a piece of her long, black hair. Mia was Chinese with small, delicate features, and hair that was perfectly straight and super-dark. "I can't just jump on a roller coaster first thing like you can, Zoe."

Zoe sighed. She wanted Mia to have fun at the carnival, too.

"Okay, okay," Zoe agreed. "We'll work our way up to that one."

The friends headed to the carousel, then the bumper cars, and finally to the teacups before Zack convinced them to stop for some greasy carnival food.

Zoe devoured her corn dog as quickly as she could. She wanted to make sure they had time for all the rides. As soon as she was done with her last bit of meat on a stick, she jumped up from the table, crumbs flying everywhere.

“Okay, time for the Kamikaze!” she shouted.

“Zoe, we just ate!” Mia protested. She was still daintily picking at the last few bites of her sugar-coated, sticky funnel cake, but Zoe knew her friend was stalling.

“How about a few games first?” Noah suggested. He was always the quiet peacemaker among his friends. Zoe remembered the day they played board games at Tomo’s. Noah brokered a deal to keep Zack in the game by setting up a complex loan system for him, and Zack had ended up winning!

“Okay.” Zoe smiled at Noah. “But we *will* ride the Kamikaze tonight.” Zoe winked at Mia, and Mia stuck out her tongue in response.

They wandered through the rows of games for a few minutes before Noah decided to try the ringtoss. Zack and Makenna joined in and lost out pretty quickly, but Noah was a whiz. Everyone cheered as he ringed bottle after bottle. By the end, he had his pick of every stuffed animal on the stand. Noah pointed to a bright purple stuffed bear and then handed the prize to Zoe.

“Here, it’s for you,” he said shyly.

“Thanks!” Zoe beamed. She was so excited she could hardly stand still. Zoe could see that Makenna

was having a hard time playing it cool as well — she wasn't usually one to keep quiet. Mia, on the other hand, just gave Zoe a subtle but excited thumbs-up when Noah wasn't looking. Zoe knew exactly what her friends were thinking — Noah totally had a crush on her!

After a few more games, a trip through the fun house, and a quick walk around the petting zoo, Zoe cleared her throat dramatically.

"Okay, guys, it's time." Zoe gave Mia a meaningful look.

"Time for what?" Andrew asked.

"The Kamikaze!" she shouted. Zoe noticed Mia's shoulders slump.

"Let's do it!" everyone else agreed.

Zoe walked over to Mia and put her arm around her shoulder again. "You can do it, Wang," she coached her friend. "It's going to be so fun, I promise. Don't be scared. Nothing bad will happen. There are straps everywhere holding you in. It's probably safer than getting in a car."

Mia sighed. "Fine," she agreed reluctantly. "Just hurry up before I change my mind."

Zoe hooted and grabbed Mia's hand, dragging her toward the monster ride.

A few minutes later, the girls pushed their way through the ride's exit gate.

"Let's go again!" Mia cried. Zoe couldn't help but laugh.

"See!" Zoe gloated. "I knew you'd like it! It really *was* just like ballet."

Mia hung her head in mock shame. "I know, I know," she admitted. "You were right. I loved it! Now can we *please* ride again?"

Zoe laughed as she and Mia linked arms and dashed toward the entrance gate. Their friends quickly followed.

After two more turns on the Kamikaze, Noah asked Zoe to go on the Ferris wheel. At Mia's urging, the rest of the gang decided to go through the fun house one last time instead.

"I'm really glad you came," Zoe said as their car circled in the warm night air.

"Me too," Noah replied.

Zoe felt her face getting hot. She couldn't believe how nervous she was. She was usually so take-charge of every situation, but this was different. Her mouth felt like it was full of cotton balls. She didn't know what else to say, and even if she had,

she wasn't sure she would be able to get the words out.

"So, Andrew told me you're a filmmaker," Noah said, breaking the silence. "I'd like to see some of your stuff."

Zoe smiled shyly. She willed herself to speak. "I wouldn't say filmmaker, exactly," she said softly. "But I do like making movies and stuff."

"He said you showed one of your movies in English class last year and Mrs. Wentz couldn't stop talking about how good it was."

"I guess . . . I don't know," Zoe mumbled, blushing.

"And you went to that film camp at the Portland Art Institute this summer, right?" Noah continued.

"Yeah." Zoe was secretly pleased that he knew so much about her hobby. He must have asked Andrew and Tomo a lot of questions!

It was true; Zoe loved film and making movies. She had played around with her dad's video camera for as long as she could remember, filming scenes around the house and driving her older brother, Conner, crazy. The summer before sixth grade, Zoe's dad had taken her to a one-day film seminar at the

community college. After that, Zoe was hooked. Now she had her own video camera and had even made her first short film at film camp earlier that summer.

“Maybe I can have your number so we can hang out sometime.” Noah’s voice was barely audible. “You could show me your videos. You know, if you want to.”

“Sure!” Zoe responded enthusiastically. “That would be cool.”

Noah took out his cell phone and entered Zoe’s number. Their car began to slow as they neared the bottom of the wheel. Zoe’s heartbeat sped up. *Oh no!* she thought. *The ride’s almost over and I’ve barely been able to say a thing!*

“Thanks for the stuffed animal,” she managed to choke out as she patted the huge purple bear in her lap.

“You don’t have to keep it or anything,” Noah said with a shrug.

“No, I like it,” Zoe answered quickly. She gave the bear an awkward hug, and Noah laughed nervously.

“Okay, good,” Noah said. Then he touched Zoe’s hand lightly just as their car jerked to a stop. The

ride operator tipped the car forward and opened the latch. Zoe had to catch herself so she didn't fall out onto her face.

"Let's go, lovebirds," the man barked.

Zoe's face flushed again as she struggled out of the car. She looked up and realized that all of their friends were waiting for them.

"Hey, Noah," Zack shouted. "My brother's here."

"Well." Noah turned toward Zoe. "I'll call you, then."

"Okay," Zoe said, fearing her face might burst into flames at any moment.

Noah waved toward Makenna, Tomo, and Mia. "Bye!"

"Bye, Noah!" they called. As soon as the boys were out of earshot, the girls turned toward Zoe expectantly.

"Well?" Mia asked eagerly.

Zoe buried her face in her hands. "You guys, I can't believe how nervous I was!"

"I *knew* he had a crush on you!" Makenna squealed. "He's so cute! And I can't believe he won you that bear. That was totally adorable!"

"Tell us what happened," Mia said, pulling on the sleeve of Zoe's hoodie.

“He asked for my number and said he wants to hang out,” Zoe said with a shrug. She was trying hard to play it cool.

“Zoe! That’s perfect!” Tomo exclaimed.

“Totally perfect!” Makenna added. “You guys will make the cutest couple ever and — ” Makenna was interrupted by her own blaring cell phone. “Shoot,” she said as she glanced at her phone. “Tomo, we’ve gotta run. My mom’s calling already. We’ll def talk more about it soon, ’kay? Oooo, I’m so excited for you, Zoe! And promise you’ll call me the minute anything else happens, okay?” Makenna talked in a steady stream.

“Of course,” Zoe laughed.

“Okay, bye, Mia, bye, Zoe!”

“Bye!” Mia and Zoe said in unison, laughing as Tomo shook her head and waved a silent good-bye.

Zoe checked the time on her cell phone and gave Mia a sly smile. “Let’s ride the Kamikaze one more time!” She wanted one more rush of excitement before the night was over.

“I don’t know,” Mia replied cautiously as she nibbled at the green polish on her fingernail. “Won’t your dad be waiting?”

“Come on!” Zoe pleaded. “We totally have time. My dad won’t be here for another fifteen minutes. *Pleeaase?*”

Mia laughed at Zoe’s pleading expression. “All right, fine. Let’s go.”