

# Chapter One

Audrey Holbrook balanced a tray laden with steaming bowls. The Chowder House in Halibut Cove, Maine, was bustling tonight. Audrey had been on her feet for hours, and every muscle in her body ached. She loved the familiar hum of the diner, the clatter of dishes, and the low murmur of conversations, but tonight felt endless.

Her phone buzzed on the counter near the register. A glance at the screen revealed a familiar name: Nana. With a resigned sigh, Audrey snagged the phone and pressed it to her ear, propping the tray on her hip.

“Hi, Nana,” she said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Audrey, darling, I hope you haven’t forgotten about Sunday dinner tonight,” Maggie Holbrook’s voice came through, as sharp and determined as ever. “I’ve been baking your favorite dessert all afternoon. Bread pudding with vanilla sauce.”

Audrey closed her eyes briefly. “I didn’t forget, but I’m working a double today, Nana. Ethel’s out sick, and someone has to close up. I might be too wiped out to make it.”

“Nonsense,” Maggie cut her off. “You’re young. You’ll find the energy. You don’t want to disappoint your old grandmother, do you?”

Audrey could practically see Maggie’s raised eyebrow through the phone.

“Of course not,” Audrey said with a smile, conceding

defeat. “I’ll be there.”

“Good girl. Dinner’s at six. Don’t be late.” Maggie hung up without waiting for a response, leaving Audrey shaking her head with a fond smile.

As she resumed her rounds, her thoughts drifted to Maggie and the life she and Wes, Audrey’s late grandfather, had built. Halibut Cove was a small picturesque fishing village, nestled along the rugged coast of Downeast Maine. Colorful boats bobbed in the harbor, and wooden boardwalks crisscrossed the shore. The Holbrook home sat perched on a cliffside, overlooking the Atlantic. Its sprawling land, dotted with wildflowers and framed by golden autumn leaves, was as much a part of the Holbrook legacy as the seafood and real estate empire Maggie and Wes had built together. Audrey’s childhood was filled with days spent playing in those fields and evenings watching the light shimmer across the cove with her grandparents.

Her phone buzzed again, this time with a text from her best friend and coworker Isabella. Audrey glanced at the message.

**SOS. Jimmy incoming.**

Audrey smirked and looked up just in time to see Jimmy Beckett, the busboy in his late teens, shuffling toward her, red-faced and avoiding eye contact.

“Hey, Jimmy,” she greeted, setting down her tray.  
“Everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Jimmy stammered, his voice cracking slightly. “I was just wondering if maybe you—”

Her phone buzzed again. Her eyes flicked to the screen. Audrey held up her phone. “Sorry, Jimmy, I have to take this.” She dashed into the kitchen, where Isabella was grinning mischievously.

“You looked like you needed rescuing,” Isabella said, leaning against the counter with a smirk.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Audrey replied, setting her phone down. “Poor kid’s got it bad.”

“Too bad he’s not your type,” Isabella teased. “But let me guess—you’re still hung up on older guys. Like Mason Dooley.”

Audrey blushed furiously. “Come on, he works with my mom. I’d never go there.”

Isabella laughed, tossing her curls. “I’m sure that’s the only thing stopping you.”

Before Audrey could retort, the bell above the door jingled again, and Isabella groaned. “Ugh, closing time. Guess who’s here.” She peeked out into the dining room and sighed. “Yup. Chips Hogan. Right on schedule.”

Audrey chuckled. Chips was a regular, always arriving minutes before closing to order his nightly bowl of clam chowder. He was grouchy and obstinate, claiming he was too busy to come earlier, though everyone knew he just liked the quiet of the empty diner and the undivided attention of the staff.

Audrey grabbed a fresh bowl and filled it with steaming soup.

She was about to carry it out to him when she stopped.

“Wait, he likes extra oyster crackers. Where are they?”

“We’re out of the homemade ones, but maybe there’s a box of store-bought in the pantry.”

Audrey set the soup down on the counter, and she and Isabella headed into the pantry in search of crackers.

There was one half-empty box stuffed in the corner of the top shelf.

Audrey turned to Isabella. “Do you think he’ll notice the difference?”

“Of course he will. Gird your loins. He’s not going to be happy tonight.”

“When is he ever?” Isabella snorted.

They emerged from the pantry, and Audrey sprinkled a few on top of the chowder, pouring some more into a small bowl to serve on the side since she anticipated him wanting more.

She carried both bowls out to Chips’s usual table with a smile. “Here you go, Chips. Just in time.”

Isabella trailed behind her, unable to resist chiming in. “You know, you could make it easier on yourself and come in an hour earlier. Just a thought.”

Chips scowled but didn’t argue. “I’m a busy man,” he grumbled, though they both knew better.

Audrey smiled politely and turned to clean up as Isabella locked the front door behind Jimmy, who had just clocked out.

“These oyster crackers taste stale. How long ago did Ethel make these?”

“She had a little help tonight. From Nabisco,” Isabella cracked.

Chips mumbled something unintelligible and then shrugged and slurped his soup.

As Audrey wiped down the counter, her gaze lingered on Chips for a moment. Something about him seemed different tonight, but she chalked it up to his usual cantankerous mood.

It wasn't until much later, as the lights of the diner dimmed and the quiet of the night settled over Halibut Cove, that she would recall this meal as his last. For now, she simply finished her shift, blissfully unaware of the storm that was about to brew.