

Chapter 1

Clara

I can't deny that technology has done miraculous things for human beings in every aspect of our lives.

Living in the twenty-first century has given me an unimaginable advantage over my ancestors (with the small exception of getting on the property ladder without the assistance of my parents) and I accept that I live a life that my relatives, with their humble beginnings, would hardly believe.

But even as I start my day in my beautiful West Village apartment, I can't escape the bone-deep jealousy of those family members who never had to wake up to twelve different people texting them "Have you seen this?!" and four missed calls from their father.

It's a shock to the system that not even a cold plunge could achieve, and the twisted sense of terror that coiled in my gut when I saw three different social media platform links in my inbox lingers as I head into the boardroom at Davenport Innovation Creative headquarters.

Monday is my least favorite day for a work crisis, but a Monday crisis on only my second week back in my role? The stuff of nightmares.

I drop myself into a chair in the back corner of the room facing the window and place one of two coffee cups on the table in front of me and the second to my left. The overhead lights glare off the glass stretching from one side of the room to the other. My reflection sits to the right of the Empire State Building, the rest of the city lit up around it beneath the gloomy November sky.

At 7:58, all my colleagues who undoubtedly also had their morning

schedule ruined by this impromptu meeting pile into the room, taking their seats and muttering among themselves.

The floor shakes as an overstuffed Birkin lands in the empty space beside my pumps. I smile at Sahara as she sits in the chair next to me and practically lunges at the coffee I bought her on my way into the office. She takes a sip and sighs contently. "I love you, Clara Davenport."

"You love coffee," I respond, dodging her hand as she tries to playfully ruffle my hair. My dad finally enters with Roger, the VP of publicity, and takes his usual spot at the head of the table, which, thankfully, keeps me out of his eyeline.

After the world's fastest debrief, Roger clears his throat and draws attention to the buffering screen behind him. "Good morning, everyone," he says, his deep voice bellowing around the room with ease.

The face of an older woman appears behind him with a large play button covering her nose and lips, a face I've seen a dozen times this morning. Her blond hair is so icy it's practically silver; a wide, voluminous lock frames her face and sits behind her ear, the rest looks like it's tied up in a French twist.

I can't assign an age to her, not accurately, at least. Sixties, maybe? Her skin is white but lightly tanned, with a glow that speaks to a foreign vacation somewhere a hell of a lot hotter than here. Her eyes are bright behind thick brown cat-eye glasses; the telltale lines of time gather at the edges, in contrast to her suspiciously smooth and wrinkle-free forehead.

The play button hides the rest of her beauty, but I know from the amount of times I've seen her this morning that she is both radiant and mildly intimidating. She's a total natural in front of the camera.

Ultimately, I want to be her when I'm older.

"Most of you are already aware of this video that went viral over the weekend, but for the sake of everyone being on the same page, I'm going to play it now. We know that this has impacted the social teams already, and we anticipate that will continue."

Sahara's borderline-screaming voice note this morning said where they'd usually expect to see a problem hit its peak and then

start to calm down, this was still climbing.

She's the director of social media, and her department has just survived an outpour of anger after an AI-generated video of a Davenport toy exploding went viral. Everyone is still recovering from the extra work and really doesn't need this, hence the borderline screaming.

The boardroom lights are turned off and the video begins to play.

Hello. My name is Florence Girard, and I'm asking you to support my small town this holiday season after Davenport Innovation Creative stole from us.

It's an incredible hook, I have to give her that. Her American accent is diluted with something European better suited to an Old Hollywood movie than my For You page.

Three weeks ago, Davenport announced they were releasing the Evie doll in time for the holidays. Their doll is a direct copy of a product made here in Fraser Falls, the Holly doll. Last year, our doll gained popularity after a famous visitor to our prestigious Small Business Saturday event posted about her, and we were inundated with orders and visitors. Including Davenport themselves.

Holly is a community project and supports multiple independent businesses in our town. Every part of her is made right here in the United States from recyclable, nontoxic materials. Everyone involved is paid a living wage and every doll comes with her own unique certificate of authenticity.

I love Holly and everything she's done for our town. I love our community that comes together to make her a possibility. Most important, I love our customers, who choose us over the dozens of other options on the market.

The softness of her expression morphs into something harder. More jaded and tired. The smile lines at the corners of her mouth disappear as her lips straighten.

Davenport doesn't love you.

Several people in the room wince at the harshness of her tone.

And they don't love Holly, like they claimed to when they showed up here in January trying to get us to sign up for a predatory scheme purporting to help small businesses expand. They told us that they'd help us protect our design, and when we didn't sign up, they copied us.

Their copy, the Evie doll, is the antithesis of everything we're trying to achieve here in Fraser Falls. Holly comes with six adventure stories, brought to life by the Green Light bookstore and the Fraser Falls Art School. Evie's stories are credited to AI. Holly has wooden toys, each one made by hand at the longstanding town staple Harry's. The amount of work meant that during the summer apprentices could be employed, with money going into the pockets of the young people in our community.

Evie's toys are plastic, made by a machine.

Florence Girard continues listing all the ways in which the Holly doll is far superior to Davenport's Evie doll. I listen, quietly seething that this is happening at all. She's reaching the end of her dragging, and the worst part of the whole video.

Since Davenport's announcement, including their doll being half the price of ours, half our orders have been canceled, and we have seen a significant reduction in new orders over the past three weeks.

Companies like Davenport think they can do anything. Think they can get away with everything. I'm asking you to help me show them that they can't. Fraser Falls has so much to give, and we would love to welcome you this holiday season, whether you buy a Holly doll or not. This time of year is when our community is at its absolute best and we'd really love to show you. We have a number of holiday events planned, which will be listed at the end of the video.

So support local, hardworking businesses this year. Even if it isn't our town, there's a town near you being bullied by a large corporation, too, and they need your support.

The word *bullied* hangs in the air like an unwelcome smell. It's still heavy in the room when the lights come back on.

"'Cancel Davenport' is trending on every platform," Roger announces. "While Ms. Girard didn't call for a boycott in so many words, online ... activists, we'll call them, are running with it, trying to generate engagement where they can. They're unfortunately doing a great job. Sahara, can you expand?"

Sahara nods and puts her coffee cup back on the table. "It's generally the same handles we see over and over. Internally, we call them the drama vultures. They'll feast on anything so long as it's negative.

"They're offended by everything, which is amplified by bot activity. But they do move on as soon as complaints lose momentum, which allows incidents to peak and decline quickly. Unfortunately, this has spread outside of the normal online echo chamber and is reaching consumers who typically wouldn't engage with this type of content."

"Why do you think that is?" Dad asks, leaning forward to look down the table toward us.

"If we compare the situation to our last major social incident, which was the AI video, a large number of viewers were able to quickly identify that the video wasn't real without us saying anything," Sahara explains calmly. "We mobilized online messaging rapidly, which not only highlighted that the video wasn't real but gave advice on how to fact-check in the future. Our customers engaged with shares to point out it was fake, which reduced our workload and helped the message spread quicker."

"So why can't we do that here?" Dad asks.

Sahara doesn't answer immediately, most likely doing mental gymnastics trying to work out how to say the truth.

I lean forward so he can see me. "Because we can deny a video is real when it's AI generated. We can't say we didn't copy their design or impact their town when we did."

There's surprisingly little benefit to being the boss's daughter, but it does make it a little easier to say what needs to be said in these kinds of situations.

"The small business program is your initiative, Clara. How do you propose we resolve this?" Dad asks.

I'm waiting for someone to point out that I've been covering a long-term sick leave in an entirely different division of the company for the past year, and this mess has nothing to do with me, but it doesn't come.

I didn't try to onboard Fraser Falls. I didn't even know about it until my six accounts were handed back to me two weeks ago when I returned to my job in PR. Someone mentioned it when I talked about how hideous the Evie doll is, and that's the extent of my knowledge on the situation.

The small business program was born in a corporate social responsibility working group. I was told in my annual review that if I wanted to climb the ladder, I needed to implement something with a positive impact on the business.

My intention was to make our image as a monopoly more palatable by helping select independent companies that have a lot of potential to upscale. Creating a more competitive market and improving our reputation were the obvious wins, but given Davenport started as a small independent business fifty years ago, I pitched that it spoke to our core values and history.

It was signed off on immediately and I helped onboard six different businesses across the US—who have been *thriving*, might I add—before I unexpectedly moved to cover a more senior position in Distribution, another choice designed to give me the experience to get a promotion.

I don't know how they messed up with Fraser Falls so badly. My dad is still staring at me like I'm somehow going to magic up the perfect answer. How about *go back in time and don't rip off a small town relying on the income from their star product?*

I drag a hand through my hair; auburn waves tangle around my fingers. "We need to make a meaningful apology to the town.

Through investment or publicity, or both. We need to take the image of us robbing someone's grandma and replace it with something easier to swallow. A sorry company looks better than one that steals money from the pockets of hardworking Americans."

"Apologizing makes it look like we did something wrong." The voice is like nails on a chalkboard. It takes everything in me not to flinch. Mindful of the room full of people, I do my best not to scowl at Daryl Littler. He looks every inch the smug asshole he was twelve months ago when I last had the displeasure of seeing him. "I disagree that it's the right call."

Being on a different floor works miracles when it comes to avoiding people you hate. I remind myself that in eight short weeks, Daryl will be retiring, and center myself. At first I don't know why he's in here in a marketing and publicity crisis meeting, but I quickly realize that his team worked on the Evie doll.

Daryl is the director of innovation and his department is supposed to focus on introducing innovative technologies to our brand. When your core audience moves on quickly and generally has a short attention span, it's vital to always be one step ahead.

So far, all he's done is replace real human creativity with artificial intelligence and cut corners. My dad thinks he's brilliant because he runs the most cost-effective department, but in reality, he's the opposite of everything the company is supposed to be about.

Aside from the fact that he's morally bankrupt in every way a person can be, I've never heard him give his team credit for anything. The ideas that he doesn't steal from small towns are taken from his own staff, and I think it'd be impossible for me to hate him more than I do.

Knowing he was going to be retiring in the near future, I've focused all my effort on doing enough to take over when he's gone. Everyone knows I'm gunning for his job and my passion is in the creative side of the business, not bouncing from problem to problem like I do now, but I still haven't managed to convince my dad to let me replace Daryl.

I'm kind of certain he's going to give it to my brother, but that

feels like a worry for another day. I shoot Daryl a tight smile. “I appreciate your input but pretending we’ve done nothing wrong isn’t an effective recovery strategy. Someone needs to reach out to Ms. Girard to talk to her about her grievance directly and what we can do to make it disappear. In the meantime, we need to provide the brick-and-mortar teams an approved statement in case they’re confronted in stores.”

Roger is nodding as I talk, which gives me a tiny amount of relief. He’s my boss’s boss, and she’s currently on vacation in Cancún, making me the most senior member of my team until she’s back Friday.

“I agree,” Roger says. “Clara, you reach out to Ms. Girard to establish her mindset now that she’s getting the attention she wanted. There will be something we can give her or do for her that fixes this problem. Sahara, you ...”

I zone out while Roger dishes out tasks to people in the room. Potential press release options, social media responses, in-store answers. A whole day’s work for a room full of people because Daryl was too lazy to green-light an original idea.

I really cannot wait for him to go.

Chapter 2

Clara

“The thing nobody tells you about nepotism is anybody can be a victim when you’re not the favorite child.”

“I—” Honor says before the line goes quiet. My eyes dart from the sparsely leaved trees lining the highway to my phone screen to check the call is still connected. I hold the phone to the window like *somehow* that’ll fix the problem.

“Hon? Did I lose reception?” After several seconds of silence, I finally hear a sigh that sounds like it came from the depths of Honor’s soul.

“Is everyone in the Davenport family allergic to critical thinking or do you catch it from your dad when you see him at work?” A surprised laugh chokes its way out of me so brutally that my driver, who hasn’t said one word since he picked me up, checks on me through the rearview mirror. “Don’t answer that, I know the answer.”

Having a grounded and straight-talking best friend is great until you want to have your ungrounded thoughts and feelings justified. “You can’t just humor me a teensy-weensy bit?”

“No,” she says. “I won’t be responsible for making you worse. You’re capable of doing that all on your own.”

“You’re mean today. I’m not saying I don’t deserve it, but I definitely don’t like it.”

I hear her fail to hold back a yawn. She’s getting ready for another night shift in the emergency room. “Yeah, well, someone vomited on my feet last night, and there’s a very high chance that will also happen tonight.”

“So what I’m hearing is we both hate our jobs ... and we should quit?” It’s an idea one of us has floated at least once a month since we were old enough to have jobs. Playfully, *most* of the time. Being a nurse like her mom has always been Honor’s dream.

“You don’t hate your job, Clara. You hate that your dad is probably going to give your brother the position you’ve been busting your ass to get. You need to quit your job and work for someone who appreciates you.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Ouch.”

It didn’t occur to me to be worried about Max, my younger brother by one year, getting Daryl’s job over me until four months ago. After finishing business school, he took an eighteen-month contract at a company out of Boston. A year passed by quickly, and it was at a Fourth of July barbecue that Dad first casually dropped a comment about Max joining the family business at the end of his contract—which is now next month, perfectly in sync with Daryl’s retirement date.

Max’s contract expiration has been hanging over my head like a metaphorical rain cloud since summer, but I can’t work out a way to bring it up. We’ve been competing against each other our whole lives, for attention (where Max usually won), in challenges Grandpa created to keep us busy (where I usually won), and academically (where Max *always* kicked my ass).

It was a relief when we hit our teens and I didn’t have to compete with him at work. When I was spending my weekends at Davenport Toy Emporium, our flagship toy store in the city, hauling boxes and dealing with sticky children, Max was at the movies watching *Star Wars* marathons with his friends.

I spent my college summer breaks at Davenport headquarters, fetching coffee and learning as much as I could about how each department functions. Max spent his in places like Japan, playing real-life *Mario Kart* through the streets of Tokyo, or in California, learning to surf.

I graduated, started as close to the bottom as being the CEO’s daughter would allow, and have spent the last decade working my

way up. He graduated, immediately started working for Silicon Valley tech bros until he decided he wanted to get his MBA, and has shown zero interest in Davenport.

It's not that I think Max shouldn't work with us; it's our family business after all. I just don't want him to get the job I want. The one I've worked for.

I lean my forehead against the window, the quick stream of traffic blurring into the darkening sky. Honor's daughter shouts something unintelligible in the background of the call. "Is he late picking her up?" I ask.

"Of course he is. He's a lot of things that I can't say out loud right now." I hear the strain in Honor's voice. It happens when she talks about her daughter's dad. "I'm changing the subject. How far away are you?"

I tilt my head toward the center of the car. The console screen is lit up with a map. "Twenty minutes."

"You nervous?"

"Not really. I'm annoyed that I couldn't get this woman to take my call and now I have to show up in person." Twenty-four hours of attempting to reach Florence Girard amounted to nothing but her mailbox being full of my annoying customer service voice asking her to return my call. "But the town looks cute and a change of scenery for the night is fun, I guess."

Honor sighs. "All this over two dolls."

I mean, it's a little more than that. Corporate greed, creative theft, reputational downturn, et cetera, but essentially, yeah. All this over two dolls.

Dolls have existed in different forms for thousands of years. Something about this specific doll from Fraser Falls has caught the attention of parents and kids across America. Like most people, I can't put my finger on why *her* versus all the other products available on the market.

Problems seem to multiply when something holds a special kind of magic that people can't explain. People want to re-create the magic for themselves, even when they can't work out what the magic is.

It's the beauty and misery of virality in the digital age. Everything is so amplified it becomes inescapable, and in certain circumstances, it can bring unfathomable, life-changing levels of success. But how is anybody supposed to re-create it when nobody knows how it happened in the first place?

How are you as the person benefiting from the attention supposed to cling to it when everyone is trying to replace you at the top? When companies like Davenport have more money and more resources and, likely, less shame?

But there's no manual on how to re-create it, as much as people hawking online courses would love for you to believe them when they say that there is. Most of the time it's lots of different things aligning at once, plus a dash of something that can't actually be bottled.

We all know this. We talk about it at work all the time, and yet they decided to try anyway and thought undercutting a small business wouldn't backfire on them. My grandpa would be *seething* if he were still here.

"Dad's worried it's going to drag on and hurt sales or overshadow the Clara party," I say. "He's determined to break the donation record, hence the goodwill tour."

I can just picture Honor's face. She's never liked my dad. "If he's so concerned he should go himself. And that's another cursed doll, add her to the list."

My hand covers my mouth to smother my laugh. Twenty years ago, Davenport debuted the Clara doll. She's eighteen inches tall, with soft auburn curls that brush her shoulders and a neat center part tucked back with two velvet ribbon barrettes.

Her eyes are hazel, more green than brown in the right light, and framed by the perfect amount of dark lashes. She wears a thoughtful expression, and a sensible oatmeal-colored cardigan layered over a crisp Peter Pan-collared blouse and a wool pleated tartan skirt. On her feet are brown leather Mary Janes.

Each doll comes with a miniature canvas satchel embroidered with the letter C; tucked inside are tiny paper books, a pencil stub,

and a coin purse. Unlike all the other dolls that were popular at the time, Clara wasn't bright or flashy. She didn't have glittery outfits or fancy accessories. She was a good friend, a role model, and our most popular toy for a long, long time. Her success put Davenport on the map and funded our growth.

It's as fun sharing a name with a toy now as it was when I was fourteen. When the bitchy teens at my school would tease me about it, Honor was the first person to tell me not to worry. The doll was named after me, obviously. Not because my dad thought it would be a sweet nod to his only daughter, but in recognition of the fact I came up with her during one of my grandpa's challenges when I was ten.

Dad wanted to call her something else; it was Grandpa who insisted she have my name.

This year, our annual charity Christmas party is also a celebration of two decades of Clara. In fact, the reason Daryl's department was able to get the Evie doll green-lit is they pitched her as Clara's modern sister for her anniversary year.

"I have to go, Hon. It's my job."

Would I prefer not to be visiting the businesses signed up to our program? Of course.

I'm still finding my feet after being away for a year. The last thing I want to do is spend my week being the human equivalent of the Energizer Bunny running from company to company. Since Florence Girard mentioned the small business program in her video, I need to fly out to check in on every company signed up.

They all admitted they'd looked over their contracts after hearing about the video but didn't find anything suspicious. Two put me off until January because they're busy, but the other four happily accepted a free business outing.

Thankfully, the two that turned me down are on the West Coast. One's in Maine, another in Pennsylvania; the other two sit within a few hours' drive of each other in Illinois. So assuming everything goes according to plan, I'll be back in the city by Friday late afternoon.

"Speaking of jobs, he just pulled up so I'm gonna head to mine." How Honor keeps this calm when her ex almost makes her late every

single time it's his turn for custody amazes me. "Stay safe and let me know how it goes. You're gonna win them over, I just know it."

"Love you."

"Love you too. Paloma, come say love you to Auntie Cla—she's gone. Never mind, she does love you. Bye."

The map says five minutes when I put my phone back into my purse and slip my headphones back into their case. I'm booked into a charming bed-and-breakfast less than five minutes' walk from the bakery and café that Ms. Girard runs.

My research tells me that the dolls are handled by Harry's, a handmade furniture store opposite Ms. Girard's businesses. Tomorrow, I'm going to Bliss Café and finding a table to observe at. Then I'll approach her after the morning rush has cleared. After I've gauged how she's feeling, I'll head across the street to introduce myself to Harry.

Hopefully, smoothing this over will be quick and easy and I can get to Maine early for the second stop on my tour. And if it isn't quick and easy, at least I'll be eating lobster for dinner.

My plan tonight is to grab something to eat from a nearby bar that has great reviews and make it an early night. The roads have been getting narrower for the last five minutes and now we're moving steadily down a quiet lane bordered by fields. I stare out of the passenger-side window; the orange hues of sunset that were cascading a warmth between the trees have now melted into the deepening blue of the night sky.

A "Welcome to Fraser Falls" sign is erected in the grass, the thick white letters illuminated by two lights shining from the bottom of the frame, making each word stand out against the forest-greenstained wood.

"Nearly there," my driver calls from the front of the car. "This is Main Street."

Everywhere is bathed in a golden glow from the tiny lights decorating the town as far as I can see. There are dozens of fairy light strings draped above the sidewalk between the buildings and the trees and lampposts lining the pavement. Small, glowing snowflakes

dangle from the string, giving a floating effect that feels magical. Each trunk and post is wrapped in an evenly spaced spiral of tiny bulbs leading up to a thick red ribbon.

It feels like something from a holiday card.

I'm so distracted by the lights I forget to look out for the café, but from what I can see, most of the stores are closed or closing.

The car slows as it approaches a stop sign, and directly in front of us is a beautiful white gazebo at the start of a U-shaped grassy field. Lights drop from the center of the roof and drape outward; they're softer and more delicate than the other lights on Main Street. The wide entrance at its front is split into stairs and a ramp; the same muted lights weave between the spindles of the handrail up to a seating area.

I want to sit and look at everything in this picture-perfect town.

Fraser Falls feels like an amalgamation of every cheesy holiday movie I watched growing up in the best way. It makes me understand why the Hallmark single city girl chose the small town. Its clean streets and easy roads are worlds away from Manhattan, from most places I know actually.

The one strange thing that I can't quite shake as I climb out of the car in front of Maggie's B & B is I haven't seen anyone. Ms. Girard asked people in her video to visit to support her town this holiday season and now I understand why.