

Sometimes boys, friends,
and cooking are the
ingredients for drama . . .

you're bacon me crazy



suzanne nelson
author of *cake pop crush*
and *macarons at midnight*

wish

 SCHOLASTIC

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

For my bacon-crazed brothers,
Bobby, Clay, Brad, and Steve, with love.

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chapter one

I could practically taste my new creation already. Lightly toasted bread spread with goat cheese, topped with arugula and diced chicken, and sprinkled with bacon bits for a crunchy finish. My fingertips tingled impatiently. I was eager to start stacking my ingredients into the perfect sandwich. This was how I always got toward the end of the school day, when all I could think about was getting to Aunt Cleo's Tasty Truck.

Of course, I didn't see the last step on the hallway stairs. And of course, it was my best friend, Mei Kwan, who rescued

me. She grabbed my arm just before I fell head over heels into the throng of kids surging toward the door.

“Tessa!” Mei sighed and gave me the scolding smile she’s perfected over our ten years of friendship. “No daydreaming until we’re in the trample-free zone.”

I blinked, shaking my visions of sandwiches out of my head. “Sorry.” I shrugged, laughing. “You know I can’t interrupt inspiration. When the food muse strikes, I must obey.”

Together, Mei and I swept out the door into a cool mist tinged with sunlight. The sounds of the city — car horns and cable cars and the bustle of people — carried over to us on the wind. This time of year in San Francisco, the sun is constantly fighting with fog for attention. This afternoon, it seemed like the sun might stand a chance.

“You need to tell your food muse to stop talking to you during school,” Mei quipped, then stopped, glancing at my hair. “Hey, have you done a bobby-pin check lately? You’re still wearing three.”

“Oh no.” I touched the three rhinestone bobby pins in my curly black hair. Each pin stood for something important I

was supposed to remember. When I remembered to do the important thing, I took out the bobby pin. This morning I'd started out with three bobby pins. Now I still had three, and I couldn't even remember what they were supposed to *help* me remember!

I began ticking off things I had done right today. "I turned in all my homework, I remembered my gym sneakers. . . ." I gave Mei a *help me* look.

"What about for tomorrow?" Mei asked.

"My spelling list!" I smacked my forehead and a curl sprang from my ponytail. I spun on my heel and jogged toward the school doors, calling over my shoulder, "Be right back!"

My aunt Cleo says great cooking minds can't help forgetting things like homework when they're creating culinary masterpieces. Too bad my teachers and parents don't agree. Neither does Mei. My best friend is so organized she color-coordinates her nail polish with her outfits . . . *every day*.

Back outside, I held up the spelling list to Mei, smiling triumphantly. I slid a bobby pin out of my hair and into the front pocket of my overalls. "Bobby pin number one . . . gone!"

“Shhh.” Mei’s eyes were glued to something over my shoulder. “Check it out. Drama . . . stage right.”

I tried to remember which direction stage right was. Mei is in the Theater Club. She speaks Shakespeare; I speak sandwich. It’s a testimony to our friendship that we make it work.

I finally gave up and followed her gaze. Leaning against the low brick wall outside the entrance were three of Bayview Middle School’s “Beautiful People.”

You know the type: When they walked down the hallways, they parted the underling waters. The three we were looking at today were Tristan Maloney, Asher Rivers, and Karrie Lopes. Karrie, with her perfectly sleek, long brown hair, was a goddess with a dark side, striking awe and a certain level of fear into all the girls at Bayview. With one perfectly timed whisper, she could send anyone into social exile.

I didn’t know Tristan or Asher very well; they were both stars of the school baseball team. Tristan was blond and blue-eyed, and actually seemed pretty friendly. As for Asher . . . Well, last year he’d had his birthday party at a fancy hotel, complete with a live band, and I’d heard him call it “subpar.” If that wasn’t the

mark of an overprivileged, grade-A pretty boy, I didn't know what was. Still, he was gorgeous, no doubt about it. I'd never seen his cappuccino skin with so much as one zit, and his chocolate hair broke in wavy, swept-back curls that anyone would envy.

But right now, Asher's usually flawless cool was cratering into a look of surprised annoyance. Marching toward him, wearing a Burberry raincoat and a frighteningly volcanic expression, was his mom.

"Asher Rivers, you're grounded," Mrs. Rivers was barking at her son, "and that's only the beginning. . . ." She latched on to Asher's arm and steered him down the sidewalk toward her car, which was parked illegally, hazards blinking, blocking one entire lane of traffic. Over the blaring horns of unhappy commuters, Mrs. Rivers's voice could be heard launching into a tirade about how money doesn't just fall from the sky.

I felt a tickle of curiosity as I watched Mrs. Rivers all but shove Asher into the car. And I noticed Asher throw a wink at Tristan and Karrie over his shoulder, as if none of this was a big deal.

There was a single beat of silence as Asher's car disappeared into the stream of traffic, then Tristan laughed out a low "Busted," and everyone else burst into excited whispers.

"Wow," Mei said. "I'm glad you forgot your spelling list. It was worth waiting to see that."

"Did you see that smug look on his face?" I shook my head. "Whatever he did, he didn't seem to care."

"He lives in a penthouse suite in the Presidio and has a country estate in Napa," Mei said. "How bad can his punishment be?" She sighed. "I want his life."

"I don't," I said sincerely. "It might mean trading in my spatula for stilettos. Ugh."

Mei laughed, then checked her watch. "Ooh, we should get going," she said. "I really want to stop by Vanity's."

She was already a step ahead of me on the sidewalk, weaving through the groups of still-lingering kids. Some of them waited to catch a ride home on the Powell/Hyde cable cars, and others got picked up by parents. Mei and I both lived only about three blocks away, but it had taken years for our parents to agree to let

us walk instead of picking us up. We finally got the go-ahead last fall, and now we walk whenever we can.

As we turned onto Hyde Street, the bay, dotted with tiny white boats, stretched out before us in brilliant blue. Russian Hill is one of the oldest neighborhoods in San Francisco, and even though it's only one of the forty-four hills in the sprawling city, I think it's the best. Pastel-colored town houses stand shoulder-to-shoulder with bodegas, restaurants, and boutiques, giving every street a feeling of happy chaos. Far below us, down the street's steep hill, I could make out the Tasty Truck sitting at the corner of Lombard, shining silver in the sunlight. Just the sight of it made me smile.

We made a quick stop at Vanity's, Mei's favorite clothing store, so that she could scour the clearance rack. While she shopped, I texted Cleo my new sandwich idea. As soon as the salesclerk handed Mei her shopping bag, I was out the door, itching to get to the truck.

Mei, in the meantime, clutched her shopping bag over her heart, practically squealing with delight. I knew she was dying

for me to ask, so I did what any best friend would do, and said, “So . . . show me what you got.”

She lifted a pink, petally skirt out of the bag and held it up under her chin. “Don’t you just love it? It’s so Debbie Reynolds in *Singin’ in the Rain!*” Mei is obsessed with movie musicals; she’s streamed them all on her mom’s iPad.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Another pink skirt? Really? Your entire wardrobe is pink.”

She sniffed indignantly. “My wardrobe isn’t simply ‘pink.’ It’s fuchsia, rose, champagne, bubble gum . . .”

“Pink, pink, pink,” I sang, until she playfully slapped my arm.

“Speaking of pink skirts,” she said, “where is the one I got *you* for Christmas?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

Mei’s dark eyes flashed. “Don’t tell me you lost it already.”

“It’s not lost. I think it just . . . took a vacation.” This meant the skirt was buried in the pile of sweet, eyeletty clothing Mei kept giving me in the hopes that I’d transform into a girly fashionista. So far, the bottom of my closet looked adorable.

I shrugged as we waved to the tourists snapping photos from

a passing cable car. “Come on, Mei, you know I had to wear my lucky overalls on the first day back from winter break.”

“Overalls.” Mei tried her best to look stern, but she couldn’t keep it up. “And what about your New Year’s resolution to get contacts?”

“Um, I believe that was *your* New Year’s resolution to *convince* me to get contacts.” I gave my lime-green-framed glasses an affectionate tap. “You keep trying extreme makeovers, and I keep saying no.”

“You’re hopeless, Tessa Kostas!” Mei giggled, but there was a determined look in her eyes. I hoped she wouldn’t launch into her patented *learn-to-love-lip-gloss* lecture. “And don’t give me that excuse about fashion and food not mixing. Look at your aunt.”

She pointed toward the Tasty Truck, which was only a few feet away. Sure enough, there was Cleo, leaning out the window. She wore a blue-and-green-printed romper, hoop earrings, and a batik scarf tied around her chestnut hair. My aunt *did* dress cooler than me, but I was okay with that, because Cleo’s never really fit neatly into the whole “aunt” package. She’s my dad’s

sister, but she's half my dad's age. At twenty-three, she's only ten years older than me. So even though she's an aunt, she feels like the closest I'll ever get to a big sister.

“Greetings, school-goers!” Cleo called to me and Mei. “Come see the new menu!” she added excitedly, jumping out of the truck. Cleo's boyfriend, Gabe, who runs the truck with her, was sliding a colorful menu into a slot on the truck's side.

As I read, a smile spread across my face:

bacon me crazy blt

Crisp seasoned bacon, roasted tomatoes, baby romaine
& Cleo's special sauce on toasted eight-grain bread

fan me bánh mì

Spicy grilled chicken, cucumber, cilantro, pickled carrots
& hot chili sauce on a baguette

grilled brieze

Smoked brie, avocado & herb bouquet
on grilled pumpernickel

gobble me up

Cajun-fried turkey, cran-apple rémoulade
& stuffing on corn bread

the greatest gatsby

Shredded masala beef, sweet potato fries
& mango chutney on French bread

the chic greek

Smashed chickpeas, kalamata olives, red onion, cherry
tomatoes & feta cheese on pita bread

desserts

Almond cupcake
Carrot-cake donut

“You used the sandwich names I came up with!” I hugged Cleo, beaming. I’d been brainstorming for the menu revamp over the holiday break, and now the names were up on the board for the world to see.

“It looks great!” Mei said. “*And* it makes me hungry.”

“Then it’s already working!” Cleo said. “And I like the new sandwich recipe you texted me, Tessa. You’ll have to help me come up with a few more, now that we’re going to” — Gabe did a drumroll on the side of the truck, and Cleo flung her arms wide and cried — “Flavorfest!”

I whooped as my aunt did a celebratory dance. “You mean we actually got invited?” I asked, feeling a surge of joy.

Cleo waved a letter at me. “I just got it today!” She grinned like a cat who’d swallowed a whole flock of canaries.

Flavorfest is the food-truck competition that the city holds every year, but it’s by invitation only. Hundreds of people, along with San Fran’s top food critics, come to the fair to sample the city’s best food-truck cuisine. A bad showing at the fair could end the life of a food truck, but a great one could secure it a permanent place on the map. Signor Antonio, the owner of Gelatta Love, the gelato truck parked one block down from us, is at Flavorfest every year. As a result, his gelato is so famous that people come from all over the country just to taste it.

It had taken three long years without invites, but now, finally, the Tasty Truck had made the cut. “When’s the fair?” I asked.

“February eighth,” Cleo said. “And that’s not all. The Bacon Me Crazy BLT is one of the nominees for the Flavorfest Best Award.”

“Yum!” Mei said. “That’s always been my favorite sandwich.”

“Mine, too, and it’s all in Cleo’s special sauce,” Gabe said, giving Cleo a sweet peck on the cheek.

It was true. Cleo kept the ingredients for her BLT sauce so secret that no one knew what was in it, not even Gabe and me. When I bit into one of her BLTs, I tasted faint whispers of avocado and mayo, and a hint of mustard, but I could never figure out the rest. Whatever it was, the sauce was a mouthwatering masterpiece. It was my dream that someday I’d be able to cook up something as special as that sauce, too. That someday, I might be as good a cook as Cleo.

Cleo rubbed her hands together. “We only have about a month to get ready, so we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Suddenly, I felt a flash of inspiration. “Hey!” I cried, grabbing Cleo’s arm. “Maybe we could do a line of bacon desserts and bacon sides, to complement the BLT. Maybe bacon-bits brownies, or bacon fudge?”

“Talk about bacon overload.” Mei giggled.

“There’s no such thing,” I said indignantly. “Even if you don’t eat bacon, you want what it gives you. That cozy, home-cooked,

warm-blanket feeling. We cook that feeling into food, and nobody can get enough of it.”

“Well, considering how much Tessa daydreams about food, I think she’s got you covered in the new-recipe department,” Mei said to Cleo. “She almost broke her neck thinking up that sandwich she texted you about.”

Cleo laughed. “Were you thinking about sandwiches this morning, too? You left your lunch on the front stoop on your way to school.”

“I was wondering what happened to it! Bobby pin number two,” I said, sliding another one into my pocket.

Suddenly, I spotted a wave of customers — including a bunch of kids from Bayview — heading down the hill, straight for our truck. We always had a crazy post-school rush at this hour, and it was time to get to work.

Mei gave me a quick hug and said she’d be window-shopping right nearby. I turned and entered the delicious-smelling interior of the truck with Cleo and Gabe. Then I pulled on my apron, and we each took our positions at our stations. I was

manning orders, Gabe was dicing and stocking fresh veggies, and Cleo was putting together the sandwiches. We'd switch off positions throughout the afternoon, depending on how busy things got.

Nick Lee, who I knew from math class, came up to the truck window and ordered a Grilled Brieze. His girlfriend, Liz Abbott, wanted a Gobble Me Up. Next in line was another classmate of mine, Ben Warner, who always ordered the BLT.

"Here you go." I handed Ben the wrapped sandwich through the window. "With extra sauce."

Ben's freckled face lit up. "Thanks, Tessa. You always remember." He craned his neck, looking suddenly sheepish. "Hey . . . is Mei around? We were supposed to meet here after school."

They were? Before I could ask Ben to clarify, Mei appeared, her cheeks blazing pink. "I'm here!" she blurted.

I stared at her for a second, wondering exactly what was going on. Mei and I had known Ben since elementary school, and usually Mei was busy faux-gagging at Ben's gross armpit squelches, or slapping his hand away when he tried to snag one of her mom's

homemade dumplings from her during lunch. I'd never seen her blush around him before.

“Um, we're going to go,” Mei said haltingly to me. “I promised Mom I'd babysit the twins tonight so she could go to Dad's cello concert, and Ben said he'd help.” She snuck an under-the-eyelashes glance at Ben, and they both smiled.

“Oh,” I said, which was just about the only syllable I could eke out in my shock. Ben was going to help Mei *babysit*? That wasn't just odd; that was epic. Now it was my turn to blush, because suddenly I felt awkward, like I was throwing everyone off balance just by being there. “Okay,” I finally managed, “well, I'll call you later.”

“Sure,” Mei said, but it was more like an afterthought, because she was already walking away with Ben, ducking her head in a shy way that looked suspiciously like flirting.

My eyes lingered on Mei and Ben as I tried to puzzle through what had just happened. But a group of camera-wielding tourists had lined up at the window, and I had to focus on work.

Cleo suggested we switch positions, so this time she shouted the orders back to me while I made sandwiches. My fingers flew,

slicing bread, dipping into the containers of diced chicken and avocado slices, watching my ingredients stack higher and higher.

The Tasty Truck is basically my happy place. From the first time I stepped inside three years ago, I fell in love. The steel counters, cabinets, and cooktops are sleek and shiny, and the fridge is always stocked. Some people get claustrophobic in food trucks. But to me, it's a cozy nest filled with mouthwatering food, buzzing energy, and inspiration.

Before Cleo and Gabe opened the truck, most days I came home from school to a nanny. Mom and Dad both work in finance, and sometimes it feels like they're away more than they're home. Dad was in Zurich last month, and now they're both in Rome. Neither my parents nor the nannies cared much for my "kitchen experiments," which is what I called my cooking when I was younger. But then Cleo moved into the upstairs "nanny quarters" of our town house. My dad made a deal with her that she could stay there while she got her truck business up and running, as long as she helped keep an eye on me, too. Cleo and I got busy turning the rooftop of our house into an amazing organic garden, where she gets all the fresh veggies and

herbs for the truck. Cleo never scolded me for messes in the kitchen. Instead, she helped me make them. And suddenly, life didn't seem quite so lonely. Especially on a day like today, when the Tasty Truck was hopping with customers and Cleo, Gabe, and I were in our groove.

The line finally tapered off around 4:45, which was perfect, because we usually close around five. We were counting the register and locking the food away in the storage cabinets when I heard a little cough outside the truck.

I spun around and glanced out the window, startled to spot Mrs. Rivers standing there, still in her Burberry raincoat. I'd never seen Asher's mom at the truck before!

"Um, would you like to order a sandwich?" I asked clumsily.

"No, thank you," she said politely. She gave me a small smile, then added, "Tessa Kostas, right?" I nodded, surprised that she knew my name; she must have remembered me from Asher's birthday bash last year. "May I please speak to the owner of the truck?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, feeling a little nervous as I turned to summon Cleo. I wondered if there was some sort of complaint coming.

Cleo hurried over to the window, and I pretended to be wiping off the counter while I eavesdropped.

“I have a bit of an odd request,” I heard Mrs. Rivers say after she and Cleo had introduced themselves. “I wanted to talk to you about my son, Asher. He and Tessa go to school together.” She paused, as if the next words were difficult to say. “He needs an after-school job, and I thought this would be a good place for him to work. I was wondering if you needed help.”

“Asher wants to work at *our* truck?” I blurted, before I could stop myself. Cleo and Mrs. Rivers both glanced at me, surprised.

Then Mrs. Rivers shook her head. “Not exactly, but he doesn’t have a choice. It’s part of a punishment I’m giving him, a lesson in learning to appreciate things a bit more.”

Suddenly, I remembered how Mrs. Rivers had scolded Asher outside the school earlier that afternoon. Having Asher work here was probably the fallout from that. But there was no way Cleo was going to hire Asher. The truck was a tight fit for three people, let alone four.

But then, Cleo shocked me by saying, “Actually, Gabe and I were just talking about hiring more help for the next few months.”

They were? I swallowed, and my heart hammered.

“This will work out perfectly,” Cleo continued. “When can Asher start?”

“After school tomorrow,” Mrs. Rivers said. She extended a hand to Cleo. “Thank you so much. Asher’s had a rough year, and I think this will be a wonderful change, and challenge, for him.”

Gabe nodded. “We’ll be glad to have him.”

Mrs. Rivers nodded once more, gratefully, and then hurried off toward her parked car.

The second she was gone, I spun to Cleo, a steady dread simmering in my veins. “But . . . but Asher can’t work here!” I sputtered. I quickly painted a picture of his personality for my aunt, hoping the birthday-party story would discourage her. Then I added, “There’s not enough room in the truck for four of us, and I’m sure he doesn’t know a thing about cooking or food, and we have so much to do to get ready for Flavorfest already. . . .” *And he’ll ruin everything*, I almost said, but didn’t.

Cleo smiled. “It’ll be fine,” she said as she finished buckling the veggie containers into their seat belts for the ride home. “Like

I told Mrs. Rivers, Gabe and I were talking about hiring some extra help anyway.”

Gabe nodded while he locked the cabinets so nothing would fly open. “I’m going to be busy working on my grad thesis for the next couple of months, and there’s an evening horticulture class Cleo wants to take at Berkeley.”

“Besides,” Cleo added, “having Asher around will give us *more* time to work on our Flavorfest menu.”

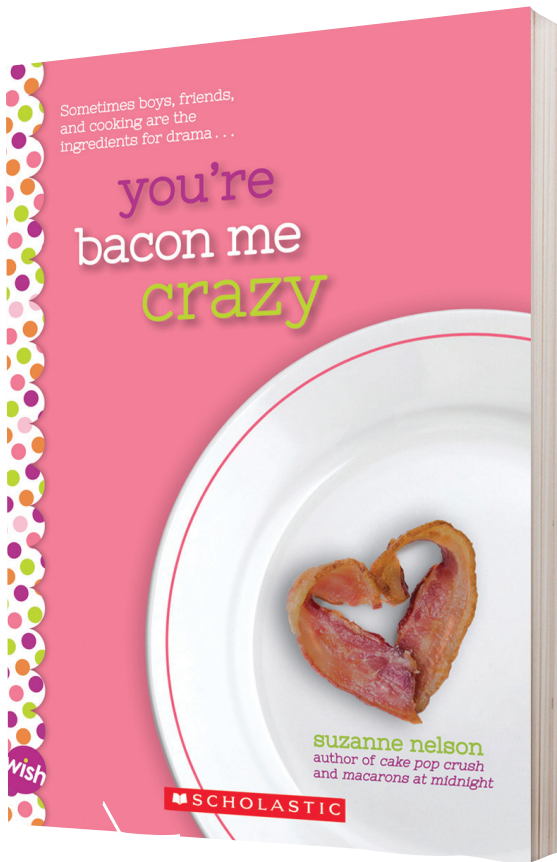
Doubt must have been all over my face, because Cleo laughed and tweaked my nose playfully. “Come on, Tessa. Just cut him some slack, and I’m sure your cooking instincts will rub off on him in no time. Okay?”

I sighed, but because I love Cleo and didn’t want to argue with her, I reluctantly bit into the inevitable. “Okay,” I said. “But if he gives all of our customers botulism, don’t blame me.”

Cleo laughed so hard she snorted, which is one of the things I love best about her. “Done,” she finally said.

Cleo’s reassurance didn’t help, though. I was sure of one thing: There were about to be *way* too many cooks in the Tasty Truck kitchen.

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