

*Heaven
Sent*

Sneak peek

Chapter One

Summer had arrived, and love was in the air—although not for me. Definitely not for me.

The arrival of summer in America usually invokes visions of beach parties and bikini tops, summer barbecues and family softball games, sharing kisses with the one you love by the lake or by the light of a shimmery moon. The summertime grass is lush and green, thick like a shag carpet; the birds are singing happy songs, while wild flowers drip rainbows of color across a canvass of green.

Unfortunately, I live in the land known as Glendale Arizona, where grass and flowers give way to sand and sagebrush, where summertime temperatures can reach a scorchy one hundred and fifteen by mid-afternoon. A walk from the car parked in your driveway to your front door can have a girl's sneakers melting into the pavement as if she's walking on fresh-chewed bubble gum. That same girl will be sweating like a basketball player in the NBA finals before she gets her key in the door. And, by the way, summers in Glendale start around mid-May and can stretch into October. So much for summer fun.

Even more unfortunate than the summertime heat, however, is when your best friend is so madly in love with the cute guy she met at The Explosion, she doesn't seem to notice the blasted summertime heat. *That* can be more annoying than the heat itself.

"Hurry it up, Megan. We'll be late," called Maudrina. We were standing in her kitchen where she had just finished loading up a picnic basket with sandwiches, bags of chips, and fresh-baked cupcakes courtesy of Aunt Jaz. It was the last weekend before the final days of school. The prisoners were about to be sprung from the confining walls of Glendale

Union High and were throwing themselves a party to celebrate their summertime escape. Maudrina was wearing the cutest black bikini under a sheer cover-up for the occasion, both of which were going to get her lots of attention.

“Will you please chill, Maudrina. We’re early—half an hour early. Besides, it’s hot as a stove top out there, and I am not in a hurry for every boy we know to see me sweating like a pig in an overcoat.” I was standing by the table in Maudrina’s kitchen, fanning myself with the church lady fan she kept handy for days like these.

“It’s only ninety degrees this afternoon,” she said mashing down on the lid of the over-stuffed picnic basket, trying to get it to close securely.

“No sane person uses the words *only* and *ninety degrees* in the same sentence,” I responded, continuing to fan myself, although it was doing no good.

Maudrina and I were new to hanging out with the Poplarati. For most of our high school careers we’d been invisible to the popular crowd. Then the angel I was in love with saved the event of the year from sure disaster, catapulting us into the social stratosphere.

Maudrina gazed at me with an indulgent smile. “You need to get ready, Megan.” She opened the basket and removed a bag of Cheetos the size of a small car.

I was wearing the jeans and tee I’d worn over to her house. My one piece swim suit was still stuffed into my bag because I was debating if the dive-in movie at Splashtopia waterpark was truly for me. “I want to get ready, I really do, but I have a bad feeling about today,” I said, lowering my voice for dramatic effect.

Maudrina stopped what she was doing and gave me a long stare. “You have a bad feeling every time I try to get you to do something social.”

“No I don’t,” I said, my voice rising in false protest.

“You have to pick up the pieces, Sweetie.” She was staring at me with what I had begun to think of as *pity-eyes*.

“I’m not saying I’m not going. I’m just saying I’ve got a bad feeling is all. You can’t ignore a bad feeling. Not with all I’ve been through.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You need to get ready.” Whatever pity there may have been in her eyes a few moments earlier vanished along with my resolve. She again closed the basket lid and snapped the latch in place. “There,” she said, as if that was my cue to get moving.

Right then I came up with a simple plan—I’d agree to go to the Dive-In Movie at Splashtopia, pretend to be enjoying myself, fake a headache after an hour or so, and so as not to spoil anyone’s fun—take a cab home, where I could mope around the house in peace.

“All right, all right,” I squawked in response to Maudrina’s cue. “But if some demented demon rises up out of the pavement by the wave pool and attacks us, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I won’t. Now, get dressed.”

Maudrina was my best friend. She was only looking out for me. She knew I wouldn’t go anywhere if she didn’t drag me. It was hard for me to be social these days because I was in mourning. I’d been in mourning for the past eight weeks, ever since mid-March when the love of my life, Guy Matson, went away leaving behind a cryptic message implying he would not be coming back.

Many sit at his right hand
Two have fallen in the quest for man
Two have fallen, one will rise
The one to help you claim the prize
So even though your heart may yearn
Two have fallen, but only one shall return

The message stated my heart would yearn, meaning the one who returned would not be Guy. *Who else would my heart yearn for?* I guess the message wasn’t so cryptic after all.

I grabbed my bag off the counter and headed for the bathroom. I even smiled when I said “be right back” to let her know she’d won me over—NOT!

“Maybe you’ll even meet somebody today.”

“Hey, wouldn’t that be nice,” I called in response. My back was to her so she couldn’t see the disgusted look on my face at the idea of *meeting somebody*.

Maudrina’s toy poodle, Piddles, danced around my feet as I walked. Both Piddles and her aging boxer, Sam, were gluttons for attention.

“Stop bothering Auntie, Megan,” called Maudrina.

There was a time I found it odd that Maudrina treated her pets as though they were her children. Now it felt normal.

“Auntie, Megan will be right out, Pids,” I said, scratching the top of Piddles’ head. “I need to get ready to *meet somebody*.” As I eased shut the bathroom door, Piddles shouted a few protesting barks from the other side before moving away. He didn’t want me meeting anyone, either.

I understood the value of having a pet now more than ever. Dogs were friends who would never desert you and could distract you when you needed distracting. I needed distracting—big time.

I unzipped my jeans and removed my swim suit from the bag. Thoughts of Guy began flooding in. That was the problem when dealing with a loss. You’d do something, or hear a song on the radio, or catch the smell of jasmine in the air, and the next thing you knew, you’d be transported back to the happy times, giving you a momentary feeling of elation as the happy thoughts washed over you, before reality returned leaving you ship-wrecked upon the rocky shores of now.

I’d never worn the swim suit before, and yet it reminded me of Guy.

The silky fabric against my fingers conjured up all the dreams I’d had back at the beginning of the year of sharing summer adventures with him—adventures that would never be shared.

Then there was the pink-and-gray friendship bracelet on my left wrist.

The bracelet was not only a constant reminder that Guy was gone. It was also a reminder of my role in his not being here. I fingered the braided bracelet. “Come back to me,” I whispered. As I sniffed back a tear, I realized this summer was going to be long and hot... and lonely.

Maudrina had said I needed to pick up the pieces. I'd tried. Well, not at first. The days right after Guy walked out of my life carrying Roxanne, a beautiful, dying angel who had helped me rescue him, I had attempted to ignore the cryptic message. Back then, I saw Guy everywhere—in the stairwell at school between classes, on the bottom step of the bleachers bathed in sunlight, only to arrive and discover it was someone else. It was *always* someone else.

As much as my heart ached in those early days, there was always an ember of hope illuminating a tiny corner, keeping it warm with thoughts of his return. After a month of seeing him everywhere yet finding him nowhere, I had sunk into a deep depression, and eventually the fire went out. *You have to pick up the pieces.*

It wasn't as easy as she made it seem. Every day I started out moving in the right direction, away from the storm cloud that hung over my life, yet at some point during the day I'd feel my energy dipping, hear the thunder claps catching up to me, and realize I had failed—again. I'd heard that time made the bad feelings go away. *When? When was the pain of my loss going to stop?*

"Are you all right in there?" Maudrina was outside the bathroom door. I hadn't heard her approach.

"Yeah, I'm getting dressed, remember?" I gave her a dose of my snarky tone.

"That must be one heckuva swim suit you got there. You've been putting it on for ten minutes."

Ten minutes already? Wow.

"Coming right out, Miss Official Timekeeper," I called, sarcastic yet playful.

"That's my job, and I plan on keepin' it," she called back. I could picture the smile blossoming on her face on the other side of the door. I was smiling, too. I was lucky to have a friend like Maudrina, even if at times she was a real pain in the behind. I guess when you're trying to get over the loss of a loved one, a well-meaning pain in the behind is exactly what you need.

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On Saturday evenings in May and June, before the weather got too hot (*yeah, right!*), Splashtopia hosted what

they called Dive-in Movie Nights. These are evenings where young people can come and enjoy the waterpark until sundown and afterwards enjoy a movie on the lawn by the wave pool.

The movie was usually a horror flick that most of us had already seen, but the movie wasn't the attraction. Arizona is a land-locked state. Dive-in Movie Nights are our version of *Beach Blanket Bingo*—for you trivia buffs, that's an old beach party movie starring Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello—and when you live in Arizona you don't get many shots at those.

When we had arrived at Splashtopia, the sun had not yet begun its descent into the mountains. Most of the guests were huddled under trees or beneath one of the colorful man-made shade structures to escape the beat-down the sun was handing out. As we pulled into the parking lot, Curtis pointed toward a stand of shade structures under which the Poplarati were starting to gather.

“There they are,” he said.

Maudrina and Curtis were now officially dating. I'd been cautious of their relationship in the beginning. Curtis didn't go to G.U. He attended Jennings, a snooty private school for the sons and daughters of the valley's rich. At first I feared he might be slumming with Maudrina—looking for a quick hit before retreating to the safety of his own herd. But my fears proved to be unfounded. Curtis was a gentleman who worshiped the ground Maudrina walked on.

“Hey, Zim, let me carry the picnic basket for you. It feels heavy,” he said as he unloaded our gear from the rear deck of his Explorer.

“I got it, Professor Membrane. Besides, you're already carrying the cooler.”

They had chosen nick names for themselves from a Nickelodeon cartoon series they had fallen in love with and watched over and over. The new nick names were either incredibly cute, or up-chuck disgusting. I opted for the latter, although I kept my opinion to myself.

“Still, I'd feel better if you let me take it,” Curtis said gently easing the basket from Maudrina's hand.

She shot me a quick look, and I could tell that on the inside she was beaming with pride. Curtis was a hot, square-jawed sixteen year-old with dark coloring who reminded me of an old-time Hollywood movie star. He had gleaming white teeth and eyes that crinkled at the corners when he laughed. He liked to laugh.

When I looked at Curtis I thought of Guy. Guy was a gentleman just like Curtis was.

“This is going to be so fun,” chimed Maudrina.

“Yeah, right.” It was still close to ninety degrees out with just an hour or so of sunlight left. I had a feeling things weren’t going to cool much once the sun went down. I wondered how long I’d have to fake having fun before my headache flared up.

“Come on, Megan. It’s not so bad. Really. It’s a dry heat,” Maudrina said in response to my mood.

I jumped all over that one: “When people say it’s a dry heat, what they mean is instead of being hot like a steam bath, it’s hot like a sauna.”

Curtis burst into laughter. “That’s a good one, Megan. I’m gonna use that one. Count on it.”

“Be my guest.”

“I’m sure it’s going to be a great evening,” Maudrina said, still hoping to change my mood. “I’m so happy you’re here.” She nudged Curtis.

“Yeah, me too,” he said quickly.

“Me three,” I said, not exactly ecstatic over my *third person in the room* status. *It’ll be over soon*, I thought as we headed toward the group.

They were all there—the most popular kids at Glendale Union High. The Poplarati. Ashley Scott and Heather McNamara were in string bikinis that showed off their tanned bosoms and a whole lot more. Jeremy Bowen and Alonzo Briggs were shirtless, wearing colorful calf-length board shorts that accented their athletic torsos. They greeted us warmly, as if they’d hung with us all their lives, instead of only the past two months.

“How they hangin’, Barnett?” called Jeremy with a grin. “Ready for Kilimanjaro?”

“Yeah, right,” I replied, realizing I’d been saying *yeah right* a lot lately. “Slim chance I’ll be skyrocketing down Kilimanjaro today or any other day.”

Kilimanjaro was the incredibly high, free fall waterslide that every daredevil who visited Splashtopia had to try. All the guys chimed in about doing it right after they ate, as if that made them seem tougher.

Guy wouldn’t go on the Kilimanjaro slide. Not that he was afraid. On my trip to hell, I found Guy hanging a hundred feet in the air lashed to electrified spider webbing. Guy would have had nothing to prove riding Kilimanjaro.

“Don’t be a wuss,” Jeremy said with a smile that showed off his good looks. It was hard to believe that a year ago Jeremy wouldn’t speak to me. Now he was teasing me as if we were old pals. A lot can change in a year. A lot *had* changed in the past year.

A soft breeze had begun to blow. It wasn’t a cooling breeze, but rather one that felt like hot air from an open furnace. It would offer no relief from the heat.

“I want to go in the wave pool. Just to cool off a bit before the movie.” Maudrina was staring at me and Curtis with doe eyes.

“I could use a dip,” Curtis responded.

Their eyes were on me.

“You guys go. I’ll just chill over here in the shade,” I said. *I agreed to come to Spashtopia with them, I did not agree to go in the water.*

“Chill?” asked Maudrina with a raised eyebrow.

“Okay, bake. I’ll just bake over here in the shade.”

“Come on, Megan. It’ll be fun. You’ve been complaining about the heat all day. Now’s your chance to do something about it.”

She was looking at me with pity-eyes again—I swear, that girl could do a million things with her eyes—this time using them to guilt me into the pool.

“The lady’s got a point,” added Curtis. They really were a cute couple. I liked the way he backed her up every chance he got.

“Oh, all right,” I said, adding a loud exasperated sigh.

I didn't agree to join them in the wave pool because I wanted to cool off. Okay, I *did* want to cool off, but that's not why I agreed. And it wasn't the pity-guilt Maudrina was throwing my way, either. I agreed to join them because Ashley Scott was looking at me like she wanted to chat. A chat with Ashley was more like a cranial probe for information she could use against you whenever you got on her bad side. I'd had a few of those chats with her in the past. I wasn't in the mood for another.

The wave pool was half filled with bathers who were enjoying the cooling dip, some sitting on float tubes, others standing and jumping over the gentle waves as they rode through.

I had stripped down to my one piece and was feeling practically naked. My only solace was that Maudrina in her black bikini actually *was* practically naked.

"Hey Barnett, how come you never give me any play?" someone called as we arrived at the edge of the pool.

Jack Parson, a jerk from school, had said the exact same words to me one day in French class early in the semester, before Ashley Scott had shut him down. I turned. Jack Parson was now standing a few feet from me, ogling my breasts.

"Hi Jack." A knot began forming in my gut. Jack's pale flesh was highlighted by a tattoo of a cobra that snaked its way up his left forearm and into his feeble bicep—the beginnings of a sleeve. I folded my arms across my chest, hoping he'd get the hint and avert his gaze. No such luck.

"Now that your ex is out of the picture, I think it's time you got with a real man." There was a self-satisfied smirk on his lips. His leering eyes were blood shot, and I realized where his extra dose of confidence was coming from. He had been drinking—from the look of him, all afternoon.

"Ooh look, they just turned up the wave pool," Maudrina called. There was little-girl excitement in her voice. "Come on."

The soft swells in the pool had grown since we arrived poolside.

"Don't be scared," said Jack in a leering tone that made my skin crawl. "I got you."

An unfamiliar churning bubbled up in the pit of my stomach. Anger mingled with fear, blending into a dull ache. The anger was spreading quickly like a brush fire in dry weeds, moving too fast for me to tamp down. The fear was there because the anger was spinning me out of control, and this lack of control was a new feeling for me. I didn't know where it would lead.

Then Jack opened his mouth to speak again, and something told me the outcome of this encounter was not going to be good.

Chapter two

“Come on, Megan, I see you moping around school like a kid who’s lost his dog. It’s time you moved on. Guy was ai’ight. But he wasn’t all that.” A smirk edged its way onto Jack’s lips.

The party-line on Guy was that his parents had split up and he’d opted to live with his father who moved to Anchorage.

“He *was* all that!” My voice was a soft growl.

Images of Guy flooded in: Guy holding my hand as we sat on my couch; Guy staring into my eyes with laughter dancing in his; Guy planting sweet kisses on my lips as we sat on the bottom of the bleachers. With each new image I could feel my anger mounting.

“The pool!” someone screamed.

The waves in the pool had increased dramatically, swells rising up ten feet into the air and then smacking into one another before sloshing down over innocent bathers. Someone screamed as the bathers in the pool struggled to make their way back to shore, but their escape had been stifled. They were at the mercy of the raging water, being tossed like rubber toys in a bathtub.

“The wave pool’s gone wild,” someone else yelled.

Gawkers began swarming to the edge of the pool to get a better look.

“The wave machine must be broken,” Jack said, his eyes finally off my breasts and on the increasingly turbulent water. He was trying to act as though he wasn’t frightened, but I saw him inching backward, away from the edge of the pool.

“I’m ready,” I said.

“For what?” His eyes opened wide.

More people were starting to scream.

“I’m ready to go in. You got me, right?” I dipped my toe into the swirling water, looked into his sorry face with come-hither eyes.

“Megan!” Maudrina called in a scolding tone.

You crazy,” said Jack, as he continued backing away. “You got a death wish, don’t you?”

“It’s just a little harmless water. Come on, Jack. I betcha Guy wouldn’t have been afraid.” I stepped into the pool. “Come on. You got me, right?” I held out my hand to him. He didn’t take it. Instead he continued backing away, eyes wide with fear.

A huge wave swept up out of nowhere and corralled me into its watery arms, yanking me from the shallow edge of the pool. The wave dragged me out toward the center.

“Megan!” I heard Maudrina scream.

Looking back toward shore, I saw horror strewn across Jack’s face.

“You’re not half the man Guy is,” I hollered before the wave tossed me into the air. Splashing down, I was immediately engulfed in another wave and went under.

As I hung suspended under the water, I wasn’t afraid. I felt good, so good. The quiet calmness beneath the storm on the surface excited me. The good feeling was not only because of the look on Jack Parson’s face—oh, but that was precious. I was enjoying the looks on *all* of their faces. The fear in the eyes of *all* the bathers delighted me.

The churning in my belly congealed into a warm, sticky deliciousness. *I did this*, I thought. As crazy as it seemed, I believed it was true. *I did this*.

By the time I bubbled up to the surface, the surging water had begun to calm. Lifeguards were wading in, rescuing the most hysterical. I smiled to myself, and the deliciousness increased. *I don’t need rescuing. I may never need rescuing ever again.*

Someone had turned off the wave machine.

As quickly as it arrived, the deliciousness in my belly began fading away. It was gone in no time. My belly calmed. The waters calmed. The surface of the water in the wave pool was now smooth like a glass table top. I walked to shore.

Agitated bathers were all around me. I was as calm as the waters of the wave pool.

When I got to shore, Jack Parson was nowhere to be found—but Maudrina was. She was staring at me with wild eyes. Curtis rushed to my side.

“Good God. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t know the water was going to be so rough, but I’m fine.”

“That was a dumb thing to do. You could have drowned in there.”

“No. Not really.” I looked at Maudrina. She was still staring at me.

“The wave machine must have gone wacko,” Curtis said, handing me a dry towel. “Splashtopia is about to get hit with a big lawsuit. Trust me on that.”

I again glanced at Maudrina.

“I think we should go,” she said in a clipped tone.

“Yeah, I agree,” said Curtis. “I’ll get our things. Maybe we can beat the crush of cars getting out of the parking lot.” He dashed off to retrieve our gear.

Maudrina and I were alone. She continued to stare. I couldn’t read what was stirring up behind her eyes, but I didn’t like the look of it.

“That was weird,” I said matter-of-factly. I looked away.

“Very.” Her tone was low, guarded. “What do you suppose happened?”

I looked back, holding her gaze for a long moment before responding. “I don’t know. I... guess the wave machine broke. Right?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she continued to stare.

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All the way home, Curtis chattered a mile a minute about the happenings at Splashtopia.

“Best end of school year event ever. *Ever!* Ladies, we are part of history. We’ll be talking about this one all summer.”

I sat silently in the back seat staring out the window. Yes, I had planned for my afternoon at Splashtopia to end early. But I hadn’t anticipated anything like this.

“And, Megan, wow. You were in it. You actually went in,” Curtis continued.

“It was dumb of me,” I said. “That boy got me so mad. I was just trying to get away from him.”

“It seems suspicious.” Maudrina was finally breaking her silence.

“You mean like someone turned up the wave machine on purpose?” asked Curtis.

“Something like that.”

“You’ve got a wild imagination there, Zim,” he responded with a chuckle.

“I don’t know. What do you think, Megan?”

I wasn’t sure before that moment, but now I was. Maudrina believed what I believed--that I had caused the near calamity.

I suddenly felt tired, as if sacks of cement were hanging from my shoulders, weighing me down. “What do you want me to say, Maudrina?” there was a hint of unintended annoyance in my voice.

After a moment’s silence: “Nothing,” she replied in a flat tone.

“Did I miss something?” asked Curtis. “Is something going on with you two?”

“Of course not,” I replied quickly. His eyes were on the road, and not on me squirming in my seat.

“Now whose imagination is working overtime?” added Maudrina with a laugh.

“All right, all right, you got me,” he said, backing away from his statement.

He was right, of course. There *was* something going on between us. I had told Maudrina everything about my trip to hell to rescue Guy. During my trip a she wolf had attacked me. When it looked as though she was going to retrieve *The Book of Calls* that I had brought along to trade for Guy’s life, a lightning bolt shot from my hand, knocking the book from her lips. Later, the angel, Roxanne, had told me that during my battle with Satan a few months ago, some of his power had rubbed off on me. *The abilities will reveal themselves to you in time*, she had said.

Now I was seated in the backseat of Curtis’ car wondering about the extent of my new abilities and wondering if what happened today was, in fact, the abilities revealing

themselves. I was sure Maudrina, seated on the front seat next to Curtis, was wondering the same thing.

I was grateful that Curtis dropped me off at home first. He wanted some alone time with Maudrina that he would get once I was out of the car. *Perfect*, I thought. The last thing I wanted right now was to be confronted by Maudrina. *What would I say?*

“You sure you’re okay?” Curtis asked as I climbed from the car. “That could have turned out really bad.”

“I know. But it didn’t. I’m good,” I said.

As I eased shut the door, I turned to Maudrina who was rolling her window down, letting in the heat. “See you at school Monday morning,” I said, breaking eye contact and heading up the walk toward the house.

“Let’s talk later,” she called as I moved away. It was meant to come off as quick and matter-of-fact for Curtis’ sake. I knew better.

“Okay,” I hollered back without turning. What happened at Splashtopia was the last thing I wanted to talk about. What had happened at Splashtopia needed to stay at Splashtopia.