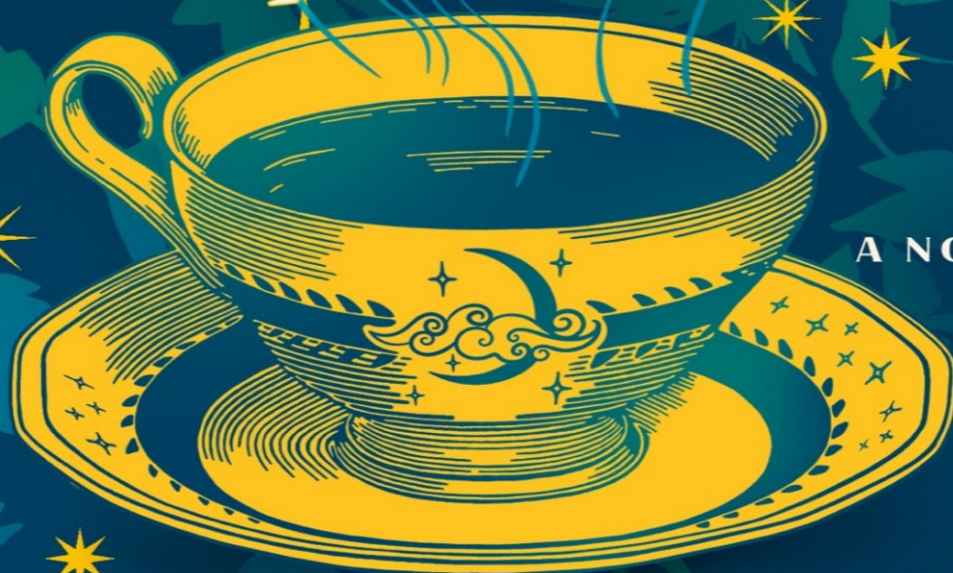


THE  
UNFORTUNATE  
SIDE EFFECTS  
OF  
HEARTBREAK  
AND  
MAGIC



A NOVEL

BREANNE RANDALL

The Unfortunate  
Side Effects of  
Heartbreak and  
Magic

◆ *A NOVEL* ◆

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alcove  
press

*For GG, who always believed in me*

*To mom, who still does*

*And for Evelyn, my little daydreamer*

THE SUN WAS COLD, the teakettle refused to boil, and the wretched scent of old memories burned from the logs as Sadie Revelare built up the fire. Even the grandfather clock, which never paid attention to time, warbled out ten sad magpie notes.

*A sign I must not miss.*

Sadie threw the tedious old clock a withering look and kicked it at the base. It swung its gold pendulum as though wagging its finger in warning. Irritated, but not one to mess with the sign, she crossed herself with a cinnamon stick and then crushed it under her boot heel on the front porch.

Back inside, the house echoed its silence like a gentle reproach. Gigi had already left for the day. Seth had been gone nearly a year. Not that she was counting the days. She wouldn't give her brother that satisfaction. She glanced at the toothbrush holder as she washed her face. One lone toothbrush.

Long ago, she let herself dream of her own house, a pair of toothbrushes, maybe even water spots on the mirror from a child brushing their teeth too close.

But her curse made that impossible, and she'd given up on romance too long ago for it to make a difference now. Some people needed flowers and pretty words. Sadie needed truth and kept promises. She finished getting ready, and on her way out the door, with coffee in hand, the clock chimed again.

"I took care of it!" she shouted back.

But on the short drive to work she had to swerve twice: once to avoid a snake in the road and another time to dodge the crow that nearly swooped into her windshield. She shivered. Portents of change and death, respectively. Still. She shrugged them off. Business didn't stop for bad omens. Actually, it thrived on them.

The winding canyon road was in its full autumnal force as Sadie rolled down the window, the chilly air kissing her face. She inhaled the smell of leaves and

mossy rocks and the promise of a sharp noon wind. But there was something else there too. River silt.

“No, no, no.” Her foot pushed harder against the pedal as she rounded the last sharp bend faster than she should, and Two Hands Bridge came into view.

Despite the lack of rain, it was flooded. Only a little. But enough. Sure as sunshine daisies, it was the third bad omen of the morning. There was no more ignoring it.

Even townsfolk who didn’t believe in magic knew what a flooding meant: someone was about to return.

She slowed down, her tires sluicing through the muddy water, her knuckles white against the steering wheel.

Cindy McGillicuddy, a neighbor from a few doors over, slowed down as she approached in her four-by-four truck, the back weighed down with a dozen bales of hay for the horses she kept. She rolled down her window and then pointed at the bridge.

“River flooded,” Cindy said knowingly. She was a no-nonsense kind of woman, her six-foot frame built with solid farmwork muscle. And even she was worried about the flooding.

“I know.” Sadie sighed.

“Maybe your brother is coming back, huh?” Cindy said hopefully. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Sadie forced herself to smile, even though it felt tight against her teeth. Sure. Nice.

“Maybe. Either way, I’m sure everything’ll be fine.”

Sadie drove away, knowing that Cindy would spread the news far and wide. She took her duties as the town’s resident busybody seriously. There wasn’t a pie that Cindy’s finger wasn’t in, and if you needed help or information, she was always the first stop. She was a meddler, but in the way of a good fairy who secretly dropped off food for families that needed it or brought firewood to the elderly who were too weak to chop it themselves.

*Everything is fine. It’ll be fine,* Sadie told herself again.

Sadie hated that word *fine*. It was a Band-Aid, a sugar-coated pill to mask the bitterness beneath. *Fine* was what you used when it was anything but. But fine was what she had to be because if it wasn’t, everything would unravel. Sadie so often walked the line between who people expected her to be and who she really was, the lines blurred until sometimes she forgot who she actually wanted to be. But the townsfolk had expectations. And she liked to exceed those as often as possible.

Still, her fingers tingled with fear. *Someone is returning.*

*Who, who, who?* The question echoed through her head as she arrived at A Peach in Thyme, the café she owned with her grandmother. The day was still waking up, but her mind was already caught on the hamster wheel. The single word was like a constant drop of water as she started mixing up three batches of carrot-cake cookies with cream cheese frosting. The ginger would humble the eater while the carrots would take them back to their roots.

Maybe she had her brother in mind; maybe she didn't. At any rate, she'd timed everything perfectly, as she always did. The kitchen was warm and comforting as a hug, the smell of the oven heating up reminding her that everything would be okay. She settled into the noise. The *shick* of the whisk against the metal bowl, the slide of the baking tray against the counter, the whip of the dish towel as she settled it over her shoulder. The repetition and ritual soothed the constant stream of persistent thoughts. The unwanted, obtrusive worries that only went away when she was lost in the rhythm of movements and measurements.

But when the first batch of cookies came out so spicy that she had to spit a mouthful out in the sink, a tingling began in her toes and worked its way up her body. She tried to brush it off by throwing a dash of ginger over her shoulder and dabbing lavender oil behind her ears, but it clung firm. The rituals weren't working. The images kept slithering in. The flooding river. The snake and the crow on the road.

"Rule number six," Sadie groaned. One of the more unfortunate rules her grandmother had pressed into her since childhood. Seven bad omens in a row meant a nightmare was around the corner. And she'd just reached bad omen number four.

Sadie had learned the rules of Revelare magic while growing up at her grandmother's feet, her grubby little toddler hands searching for earthworms as Gigi explained why mustard seed helped people talk about their feelings and how star anise could bond two people together. The sweet tang of tangerine rinds scented the air as her little fingernails were perpetually stained orange.

And always, Gigi warned her how their creations would speak to them. If you were in love, things tended to turn out too sweet. If dinner was bland, you needed some adventure. And if you burned a dessert—well, something wicked this way comes.

Sadie listened to those lessons among the bitter rutabagas and wild, climbing sweet peas, drinking in every word, and letting them take root in her heart. She

grew up comfortable with the knowledge that she was strange, weaving the magic around her like ribbons on a maypole.

Now, she made her living from selling that strange. A little dash of dreams in the batter and a small drop of hope in the dough. The magic had been in her veins for so long, sometimes she forgot who she was without it. Like layers of phyllo dough, they were nearly impossible to separate.

Gigi had arrived and was in the front, “pottering about” as she called it. Sadie could hear the crinkle of plastic wrap being taken off pitchers. The clink of jars bumping into each other. The common little noises that turned the café into a symphony. The cookies, perfectly spiced this time, were fresh out of the oven for the early customers, the sweet scent beckoning them in like a childhood memory. Mason jars filled with fresh lavender and wild buttercups dotted the tables, and the pot of crystalized ginger sugar was turned just so toward the pitcher of hazelnut-infused cream.

The glass case brimmed with orange-essence croissants sprinkled with candied zest, the card in front reading, “Will cause enthusiasm, encouragement, and success.” Its neighbor, the fruit and basil tartlets that glistened like a long-forgotten dream read, “Use for good wishes, love, and serious intent.” And the cinnamon streusel cake that some locals swore would turn your day lucky had a card that simply said, “Stability.” Generations ago, the townsfolk would have rebuked or shunned such blatant displays of magic. Now, even if they didn’t understand it, they welcomed it with relish and a rumbling stomach. It was part of a routine that had woven itself into the DNA of Sadie’s days. And it was about to begin again.

Sadie excelled at routine. The tiny town of Poppy Meadows, much like Sadie herself, ran like clockwork. All up and down Main Street lights were clicking on, tills were being counted, and “Closed” signs were rattling against the glass as they itched to be flipped. She settled into the rhythm, her shoulders relaxing as she scanned the wooden walkway connecting the hodge-podge of brick-front buildings. Her eyes traveled to the end of the street, where a nineteenth-century, steepled white church stood. Its stained-glass windows, which local legend claimed caught prayers in the wind, were casting jewels of light on the sidewalk, when a figure caught her eye. No. It couldn’t be—

“Sweetheart,” Gigi hollered in her foghorn voice.

“Coming!” Sadie called quickly, stomach churning as she shook herself out of the past and pushed through the double doors into the kitchen. Absolutely not. It was impossible. And much like everything else in her life, she shut the door on the



thought. The possibility of who it might be. She'd trained herself to take every thought captive, shoving them away where they were safe in darkness. Otherwise, they'd spiral out of control into full-blown anxiety. It didn't always work. Even now the tightness was squeezing her chest again.

"Sugar, if you don't move this honking bag of flour, one of us is going to trip and break our neck." With Gigi, someone was always going to break something, get a "crick," or "ruin their lovely hands."

"Maybe some necks deserve to be broken, Gigi," Sadie answered sweetly, hoisting the twenty-five-pound bag of flour and settling it against her hip.

"Stop that or I'll pop you one. I know when you're talking about Seth. You get that mean little gleam in your eye."

Before Sadie could answer, she tripped on the rubber mat that lined the floor and watched, as though in slow motion, as the flour cascaded against the ground and billowed into a cloud of white.

A mess in the kitchen was bad omen number five.

"You little pissant!" Gigi laughed with her deep smoker's rumble. Gigi—a nickname that made her grandmother sound much more French and much less feisty than she actually was—shook her head. Her short hair was a cotton-candy puff, perfectly curled as always and a peculiar shade just between rust and copper.

"I know, I know. *'Disaster follows me around like stupidity follows a drunk,*" Sadie quoted, gritting her teeth as she secured the top of the flour.

"Says who?" Gigi demanded, rounding on Sadie with a hand on her hip and a look that threatened trouble.

Sadie shrugged.

"That brother of yours isn't too old to have his mouth washed out with soap." Gigi sighed.

"But he'd have to actually be here in order for you to do that." Her voice went flat as oat cakes as she absentmindedly smoothed her apron.

"Don't go down that road, sugar," Gigi said as Sadie's eyes slid into the past. "Whoever digs a pit'll fall right into it. It wasn't your fault."

"I'm sure he'd say differently," Sadie said with pursed lips.

"That boy has got his own demons to fight," Gigi said. "And he will. Now, I'll get this cleaned up before we open while you go wipe that mess off yourself."

At the bathroom sink, Sadie rinsed her mouth and tried to finger-comb the flour out of her long auburn hair. She hoped for the best, refusing to glance in the mirror, as that was only to be done at dawn, midday, or dusk, for fear of what else might appear in the reflection. It was one of the many oddities that were as sure as

sunshine in the Revelare family, like burying found pennies in the garden at midnight, always wearing green in some form or another, and never whistling indoors. These were truths that Gigi had taught Sadie from the cradle.

The bell tinkled merrily as Sadie opened the front door and stood there a moment, letting the last of the morning chill clear her mind. She could smell waffle cones from the ice-cream parlor a few stores down on the right, and bacon wafting across the street from the diner. The half wine barrel full of marigolds on the sidewalk swayed in a sleepy morning hello. The streetlamps winked out, one in particular blinking a few times, as though sending her Morse code. Her shoulders loosened. Even without magic, this would still be the most perfect place on earth to her.

Just as she flipped the sign to “Open,” Bill Johnson stood at the threshold, his kind face lined and worn with a smile that fell into place like it was meant to be there. He was a little younger than Gigi and held a special place in Sadie’s heart for the simple fact that he was secretly in love with her grandmother. His flannel shirt, fresh and clean as always, hung loosely on his lanky frame. His shaggy, grayed hair gleamed smooth in the morning light but failed to hide his large ears that stuck out like jug handles.

“Morning, Sadie,” he said, ducking his head.

“Good morning, Bill. What’ll it be for you this morning?” Sadie asked warmly, walking behind the counter while making sure her apron was tied securely in place.

“What’s Gigi Marie recommend?” he asked, staring behind the counter, as though his eyes could drill a hole through to the kitchen.

“She recommends you mind your own taste buds, you big galoot,” Gigi called from the back.

“Surprise me, then,” he said with an indulgent smile.

Sadie, her back straight and shoulders squared, poured his coffee: black with two sugars, because that part of his order never changed. Then she cut him a slice of peach mascarpone pie and put it in a to-go container.

“And what does this do?”

“If anything has been ailing you, you’ll feel right as rain today.” Sadie grinned. “And it might just give you a bit of extra energy, to boot.”

“I could use it.” Bill raised his eyes to the heavens.

“Old Bailer?” Sadie guessed, and Bill nodded. The restoration of the local landmark had been experiencing some unexpected setbacks.

“That place is twelve thousand square feet of trouble,” he said right before his eyes swiveled to Gigi like a magnet. Her grandmother stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. He cleared his throat and bid them both a good morning before leaving, but not before Sadie saw the flush that colored his cheeks.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Sadie demanded with a grin. “Poor Bill has been sweet on you for ages. Why can’t you be nicer to him?”

“Hush,” Gigi barked with harsh laughter, “Nobody’s after a dodderly old fool like me. And don’t you pretend like half the young men in this town aren’t pining away for you, Revelare name or no. Why do you think that boy proposed to you?”

Just then, they both shivered as the back of their necks grew warm. They looked up to see Ryan Wharton walking by. As he caught Sadie’s eye, he gave her a sad smile and a half wave before trudging on. He was the temptation Sadie had almost given into. Not out of love—nothing like it. But comfort. Companionship. Someone to hold her hand or listen to the story of her day. In the end, though, it wasn’t fair to him. He deserved more than lukewarm affection, especially since he’d been in love with Sadie since they were in grade school. Her need to do the right thing was greater than her desire for the relationship. She’d wished, more than once, that she could do something for herself, no matter the consequence of injustice. But the guilt always ate at her before she could follow through.

“Speak of the devil.” Gigi laughed with indulgence. “None of the boys around here are good enough for you. Because that’s what they are—boys.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not in the market, then,” Sadie said drily, pouring herself another cup of coffee. She added a blend of cinnamon and sweetened German cocoa and swirled the spoon around thoughtfully.

“I’ve told you a hundred times. Love is more important than magic, sugar.” And Gigi, who was never prone to displays of physical affection, laid a gentle hand on Sadie’s cheek for the briefest of moments.

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have a curse that’ll take yours away,” Sadie said, sliding an arm around her grandmother.

“Honey, I’ve got curses coming out my ears.”

“You do?” Sadie asked, startled.

“Never you mind.” Gigi pulled her in for a hug and patted her waist. “Now, get back there and finish those cookies before I sugar ’em to death.”

Sadie hurried to her dough, checking the timer as she did and wondering what kind of curses Gigi was talking about and what had brought on the physical display of affection. With eight minutes left, she gave the frosting a contemplative stir.

Heartbreak for Sadie wasn't a passing folly, to be recovered from with time and chocolate and tears. Because of her curse, it could take everything from her. Which made falling in love a risk that wasn't worth taking.

Something drew her to the oven despite the six minutes left on the timer. Peering in, panic scorched down her body like chili flakes when she saw the cookies were starting to burn at the edges. The message was clear as cold ice: "*Something wicked this way comes.*"

"No, no, no," she whispered, hastily grabbing the nearest dishtowel. But the pan burned her hand through the fabric.

She yelped and dropped it on the stovetop with a reverberating clang. Someone, or *something*, had turned the oven up to five hundred degrees. She waved the dishtowel frantically, trying to fan away any scent of the evidence, because if Gigi caught so much as a whiff, she'd banish Sadie from the kitchen for the day.

She hurriedly scraped the burned cookies into the sink and turned on the garbage disposal. A familiar fire was burning along her veins, and her fist ached to hit something. The sixth bad omen. The sachet of lavender and buckbean she kept in her apron pocket was doing little to keep her calm the way it was supposed to.

In front of her, peppered on the countertop and the long wall shelves, she eyed her canisters. Each one had a label, written by Gigi. There was no cinnamon, basil, clove, or marjoram. Instead, "Youth" sat next to "Friendship," while "Love," "Kindness," and "Forgetfulness" were relegated to their own section. "Stability," "Health," and "Fertility" kept "Good Wishes" company, while "Misfortune" was pushed to the back like a dark secret.

Sadie reached for the glass jars labeled "Traditions" and "Protection." She inhaled the scent of freshly ground cinnamon before sprinkling some into the dough. Traditions—would this do the trick?

With careful fingers, she grabbed a pinch of salt and whispered a quick blessing over it before dashing it into the bowl, hoping it would keep whatever was coming at bay.

Sadie stirred the ingredients in with her wooden spoon, carved by hand from the white oak tree in the forest behind Gigi's backyard. Her grandfather had loved wood carving in his spare time. He had passed away when the twins were six, and she didn't remember much about him other than his famous pastrami sandwiches and the little wood figurines he'd sculpt for her. He had traveled a lot for work as a technician and would always bring Gigi a small collector spoon from whatever state he'd visited. Sadie had loved those little spoons, tracing her finger over the

intricate filigree or studying the resin design. She hadn't thought of those spoons in years.

*"Querido amado."* A high, musical voice barged into her sanctuary just as she slid the baking tray into the oven. "Did a tornado hit in here?"

Sadie turned and frowned at the raven-haired woman. Raquel, her best friend since childhood, scanned the room with wide, expressive eyes. Even when she was still, she somehow seemed to be in motion. Fingers or foot always tapping, eyes so thoughtful you could practically hear her talking even when she was silent.

"I thought I banned you from coming in here if you couldn't say anything nice," Sadie retorted, holding up her wooden spoon like a sword.

"I'm not worried until I see the fire in your eyes." Raquel laughed. "That's when I know we've really got a problem."

Sadie hugged her best friend and then pinched her on the arm.

"Ow!" Raquel cried, her face drawn into a frown.

"Pinching is my love language." Sadie shrugged, checking the timer.

"What's wrong?" Raquel demanded, leaning against the counter and eyeing her best friend, waiting.

Sadie's lips pursed. She never could hide anything from Raquel and found it rather inconvenient the way best friends could see into you even when you refused to look yourself.

"Hello!" Raquel snapped her fingers. "You in there?"

"I'm thinking."

"You're always thinking. Sometimes it's healthy to just say what's on your mind, you little control freak."

Sadie laughed.

"I'm just—you know, just wallowing in a bit of self-pity. Freaking out about being alone for the rest of my life. I had a minor panic attack over toothbrushes this morning. So, you know, the usual."

"Were the toothbrushes on fire? Did they insult you?"

"More the fact that there was only one."

"Exactly how many toothbrushes do you need?" Raquel demanded, arching a perfectly lined eyebrow.

"I'll only ever have one. You know, because I'll always be brushing alone." Sadie dragged a finger along the countertop, trying and failing to stop the ache that bloomed in her chest.

"Do you want me to brush my teeth with you? All you have to do is ask, you know."

“Shut up.” Sadie laughed again. “It’s just the curse,” she started.

“The curse, the curse,” Raquel chattered. “When are you going to let that go? Listen, you’re not alone. Nobody is abandoning you. Your brother is going to come back. Gigi’s not going anywhere. Neither am I. You run a successful business. You’re loved. We’re all here to support you.” The words came out in a rush, like they’d been rehearsed. For all Sadie knew, maybe they had. She wondered when she’d become the friend who had to be talked off a ledge so often that Raquel had a speech for it.

Sadie took a deep breath and let the words wash over her. Reassure her. But for some reason, they couldn’t pierce completely through her armor. Because the truth of the matter was that Seth *wasn’t* back, and even if he did return, there was no guarantee he wouldn’t vanish again. Gigi wouldn’t be around forever. They’d both leave. Just like her mother. Just like Jake.

“And now that I’ve buttered you up ...” Raquel started.

“Oh no.” Sadie groaned, again folding the thoughts in half and tucking them away. “What are you roping me into this time?”

“Let me start off with the good news.” Raquel was practically beaming. “They said yes!”

“Did you propose to someone I should I know about?”

“Hilarious. And no. You’re the only one for me. But the school board said yes to *Carrie!*” she squealed. “I had to sign an agreement swearing I’d personally clean the blood off the stage, but it’s totally worth it.”

Sadie laughed. Raquel was the local high school music teacher and always directed the musicals. Sadie had been cornered into her fair share of sitting through hours of long auditions and backstage teenage meltdowns.

“What do you need me for?” she asked with resignation.

“You’re an angel, you know that? I was wondering if you and Gigi could help with the gym costumes. You know, the toga-like ones?”

“Your parents own literally the only costume store in town! They don’t have anything?”

“Um, excuse me. The Mad Hatter is a costume and *tux rental* store. We also do prom dresses. And no, they don’t have what I need. I was also thinking maybe you’d want to host a bake sale or something to raise funds?” Raquel smiled obscenely.

“Okay, okay,” Sadie said, laughing. “Done.”

“Now I just need someone to help me with the lighting. It needs some strong design. Know of anyone who could help?”

Before Sadie could answer, the air in the kitchen suddenly pulsed with an energy that felt like endless summer nights where anything was possible, or of first frost on Christmas morning. It was anticipation, pure and clean.

Sadie nervously wiped her hands on her apron again, her stomach dropping to her feet. The “Traditions” and “Protection” hadn’t had time to bake through yet.

“No, no, no,” Sadie moaned with a hand over her mouth. The noise of the world faded to a hum. It buzzed in her chest like a painful memory. The kitchen went eerily quiet, even the popping and creaking of the hot oven gone silent.

Beyond the double doors, something pulled her. Something warm that smelled like sweet summer peaches.

Pushing the door open a sliver, she peered out the front window. The hum turned into a roar, and her ears burned hot as she saw him.

The omens. The flooded river. That quiet voice in her head snickering and whispering.

Jacob McNealy.

He stood on the sidewalk like a living, walking daydream. Her mouth went desert dry, and it was like she’d been thirsty for years and hadn’t realized it. Looking at him was like stretching your limbs after a long nap.

The first heartbreak that had sparked her curse to life.

And seeing old sorrow before noon was the seventh bad omen. A nightmare was on its way.