

THE
Baker's Man



A NOVEL

JENNIFER MOORMAN

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Novels and Short Stories by Jennifer Moorman

The Baker's Man

Little Blackbird

Honeysuckle Hollow

Full Moon June

The Legend of James Grey

Average April

Wednesday's Child

Finding May

Starry Sky July

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A Novel

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For Tracey, Jenna, and Sherry,
whose encouragement helped shape this ball of dough into a story.

Prologue

The older generation of townspeople still talked about that night in late July when the southbound train carrying sugar cane and cotton was late because the on-duty conductor had eloped instead of going into work. Two hours passed before anyone realized the train hadn't pulled out of the station, and it took another two hours before a substitute conductor could be found.

So four hours later than usual, the train barreled through Mystic Water, blasting its horn at every crossing and waking everyone from a deep sleep. The train brought with it an intense summer wind that swept over the town, uprooting half the willows along Jordan Pond. It plucked sunflower petals and created twirling yellow tornados. It caused the sleeping birds such anxiety that they erupted into twilight birdsong and didn't stop until about the time Bea's Bakery opened for business.

Nobody slept that night, not with the train and the wind and the birds. More than half the town showed up at the bakery in desperate need of a cup of Bea's Give-Me-a-Jolt Java, and that's when they saw him—Joe O'Brien—looking like a man who'd climbed out of an Irish novel, broad-shouldered, red-haired, and green-eyed. He helped Beatrice behind the counter like he'd been born to be her partner.

Some said he'd jumped from the southbound train. Others said he'd appeared like magic. Everyone agreed they'd never seen a man look more in love with any woman than Joe was with Beatrice.

1

Peanut Brittle

Bea's Bakery offered cure-alls in the form of pastries, chocolates, cookies, cupcakes, and specialty drinks. Everyone in Mystic Water depended on Beatrice O'Brien to soothe their pains, give wings to their hopes, and spark their passions. Bea's Bakery supported the town's needs like columns supported the Parthenon. Her doors were always open no matter what time of day. Delilah Gill swore that one midnight, Beatrice brought over a batch of sea salt caramels that changed her life forever. Delilah never revealed how she was altered, but Mystic Water had their suspicions, especially after Delilah moved out of her mother's basement, finished her law degree, and became the judge of the local court.

Beatrice offered love and happiness to the whole town until she was eighty-five. One Saturday morning rainstorm clouds, smeared gray and gloomy, gathered in the sky, refusing to pour. Mystic Water suffocated beneath a humid, summer haze that clung to the skin like syrup. When the doors to the bakery refused to open, the townspeople gathered around outside, confused and unsure of how to go about their day without treats or coffee or the famous Saturday morning brownies. Beatrice's son finally opened the doors with slumped shoulders and defeat in his eyes like a messenger of doom.

For three weeks after Beatrice's death, no one in Mystic Water could even look at chocolate without feeling the drag of sorrow. Coffee tasted bitter on the tongue. Shoppers in the grocery store glared at pastries. Then news of Bea's granddaughter blew through the town like a honeysuckle wind, sweet and nostalgic. Anna O'Brien would be reopening the bakery and following in her grandma's footsteps.

Opinions divided the town. Half refused to even test her creations when the time came because they felt the disappointment would be too great to bear. The other half hoped the ability to create delectable treats ran in the blood. Within days, Anna quieted the doubters and uplifted the buoyant with her grandma's recipes. Within a month,

she'd charmed them with her own creations, and Bea's Bakery was once again the wellspring of the town.



When people ate what Anna O'Brien baked, they smiled wider, laughed louder, and left the bakery she'd inherited with more confidence than when they'd first arrived. Her chocolate chip cookies made Dennis Hillman propose to Julie Farmer on their fourth date. Her Oreo brownies caused Roger Jackson to think he could dance the Charleston like he did in the '40s. One sip of her Saturday morning hot chocolate made everyone a good neighbor. People in town swore Anna could make anything better than the original, and they were right. It was a skill she inherited from her grandma Beatrice.

The late October afternoon sun eased its way toward the horizon and turned the sky outside Bea's Bakery the shade of caramelized sugar. Anna leaned her hip against the counter, watching the last of the Tuesday shoppers flitter down Main Street on the way to their cars. Evening customers shuffled into Mackie's Café, beckoned in by the scents of flank steak marinated in a Merlot reduction and rosemary mashed potatoes that melt in the mouth. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled at the calendar tacked to the wall. The red heart she'd drawn around today's date marked the two years she'd spent loving Baron Barker.

Her cell phone vibrated in her apron pocket. She fished it out and accepted the call with a smile. Before she could even say hello, her best friend, Lily Matthews, burst into a conversation as though they'd already been talking long before the phone rang.

"I know you love surprises, but I also know you love to plan, and guess what Jakob just told me about Baron? They were having lunch, and Baron said he'd been offered the architectural job at the firm in Napa Valley—"

"He got the job?"

"We always knew he would get it, and Baron told Jakob he'll be leaving soon, but he has a surprise for you. A surprise he's going to tell you tonight. This is it, Anna. He's going to propose, I just know it."

Anna's free hand flew to her heart, and her eyes darted to the clock on the wall. There were only ten minutes left before the bakery officially closed. She passed through the wide, arching doorway that led to the kitchen. The aroma of crushed garlic, fresh tomatoes, and bubbling parmesan cheese and béchamel sauce filled the room. Anna was baking an authentic Lasagna Bolognese—Baron's favorite—for tonight. The prepared garlic bread sat on the counter, waiting to be toasted beneath the broiler. She'd even carefully wrapped a vintage bottle of their favorite wine. *This is it.*

"Anna, are you there?" Lily asked.

"Yes," Anna said. She lowered her hand and rested it against the cool stainless steel countertop.

Her cell phone beeped in her ear, notifying another call was coming in. She glanced at the screen and smiled. "Baron's calling," Anna said. "I'll call you back tonight—unless we get carried away with all the excitement." Anna swapped calls.

"Hello?" Anna tried to inhale deeply but found the breath being pulled from her lungs like taffy stretched between two fingers.

"Hey, Anna-Banana," Baron said. "What time are you coming over?"

Anna's heart pounded a *rata-tat-tat* against her ribs. "As soon as the bakery closes?"

"Perfect. I have a surprise for you."

"See you soon," Anna said, and Baron disconnected. She danced a jig around the kitchen and shoved on a pair of oven mitts. She tapped a mittened, happy rhythm on the countertop and then opened the oven. Melted cheese oozed and bubbled, and she breathed it in. "Baron, you're going to love this."

Anna slid the lasagna into an oven-safe bag and covered the garlic bread with aluminum foil. She'd broil it at Baron's townhouse. She grabbed the bottle of wine and the chocolate sweets she'd wrapped up for him earlier. Then she bundled herself into her car and drove across town feeling as though a trapped hummingbird was fluttering in her stomach.



Baron lived in an end-unit townhouse. The entire building was a combination of stones in an assortment of browns, ranging from tan to sepia. The woodwork was stained a dark chocolate, creating an overall masculine and imposing structure. Numerous times, Anna had tried to convince Baron to at least put plants on the front porch to break up all the brown. He always reminded her he was dreadful with greenery—a class-A plant killer.

She hiked up the stairs to the porch with her arms loaded down. The door was unlocked, and with careful maneuvering of the dishes, she managed to turn the knob without dropping dinner on the welcome mat.

When she didn't see Baron in the living room or kitchen, she called up the stairs, "I'm here."

"Just got out of the shower. I'll be right down," he said.

Anna put the lasagna on the stovetop and turned on the broiler. Then she slid the garlic bread into the oven. She pulled plates and glasses from the cabinets before opening the bottle of wine. By the time she heard Baron bouncing down the stairs, the table was set and she had his favorite music—jazz—playing on the satellite TV channel.

Anna grabbed the bread from the oven and switched off the broiler. A breeze blew stray pieces of Anna's auburn hair into her face. For a few seconds, the napkins on the table fluttered like butterflies. The scent of the ocean filled the air.

Within seconds, Baron stepped into the kitchen. His tall frame cast a long shadow across the tiles, and as always, his blonde hair was disheveled like someone who'd spent the day sailing or surfing. He grinned and scooped Anna up into a hug before she could even say hello. Baron squeezed her and kissed her neck, and all at once she was overwhelmed with the smell of a wind blowing across the sea and the strength of his arms tight around her, feeling as if she'd be blown miles and miles away from shore if he weren't the only thing holding her to the earth.

When he returned her to her feet, she steadied herself and exhaled. "Well, hey you," she said.

"It smells like an Italian feast." He glanced over her shoulder at the

bread and then turned to look at the table. “What’s with all the great food? You trying to win me over?” He winked.

Anna’s smile faltered. He’d forgotten. “It’s our anniversary.” She hoped she didn’t sound as disappointed as she felt.

Baron’s eyes widened, and then he winced. “I’m a jerk,” he said. “I forgot, but thankfully one of us is a decent human being. It smells great.” He smiled, cupped her face, and kissed her. “I say we eat, and then I’ll share my surprise.”

Anna’s stomach dropped. She tried to catch it before it busted through the floor, but it was hopeless. She couldn’t stop the smile that stretched across her face. “I can’t wait to hear it.” She served squares of lasagna onto their plates, and her hands trembled.

Baron poured two glasses of wine, and once they were seated, he said, “Let’s toast to new beginnings.”

Oh, this is it! Anna clinked her glass against his. Baron cut into the lasagna, took a bite, and moaned. “You make the best lasagna in the world. If you didn’t already own a bakery, I’d tell you to open a restaurant.”

“I wanted to make your favorite,” she said as she smiled into her glass.

“You’re the best.” Baron managed to shove another few mouthfuls of lasagna and bread into his mouth before he put his fork down. “I thought I could wait until dessert to tell you, but I’m too excited. I’ll be right back.” Baron jumped up from the table and rushed upstairs.

Anna lifted her napkin from her lap and placed it beside her plate. Her heart pumped so wildly she could barely breathe. She raked her fingers quickly through her hair and wished she’d applied lipstick or gloss or something to make her look less like she’d come over right from work. When Baron bounded down the stairs, she held her breath. He appeared at her side and held out a white paper sleeve, the kind given in airports that held boarding passes. Her smile fell into her plate of lasagna, but she took the offered surprise with both hands.

Anna tugged out a boarding pass. Baron’s name was printed in bold, capital letters on the round-trip ticket to California on a plane that left tomorrow afternoon. Foolishly, she glanced back at the sleeve

for a second ticket that might be lingering behind.

Baron's grin widened. "I got the job," he said. He pointed to the ticket when she didn't respond. "The firm is flying me out there for two weeks so I can acclimate myself to the way things are done. They're going to want me to start within the month. I'll probably go ahead and find an apartment while I'm there and take in the sights. I'll need to put this place up for sale. So much to do. But isn't this great? Two weeks in California. While I'm there, I'll go on a tour of a few vineyards, maybe go to the beach." When Anna still said nothing, Baron stopped smiling. "Aren't you excited?"

Anna pressed her lips together and slipped the boarding pass into the sleeve before handing it back to him. She wished Lily hadn't called her. Now she felt deflated when she should be excited for Baron. He'd had his heart set on this job, even if it was on the opposite side of the country from her. "It's great," she said, her voice as flat as naan. "It's just what you wanted."

Baron slid the boarding pass into his back pocket and reached out his hand. He twined his fingers with hers and tugged her out of her chair. "What's wrong, Anna-Banana? I thought you'd be happier."

"I was, I mean, I am. It's great. Really. Really great. You're leaving tomorrow?"

Baron brushed the auburn hairs from her face, and she closed her eyes and inhaled slowly, breathing in the heavy scents of garlic and baked cheese competing with the bitter smell of lingering ocean water. "Yeah. I'm going to pack and get everything together tonight, and I'll drive to the airport in the morning. This is a big deal for me. You know that."

Anna nodded. "It's a great opportunity," she said and tried to smile, but it felt broken on her face.

"It is," he said. "I'm sorry I forgot it was our anniversary. I'll make it up to you when I get back, I promise." Baron reached for her hand again, and she let him take it. "You know I'm terrible at remembering stuff like that." He pointed one finger to the side of his head and made circles in the air. "There's all this stuff going on in there all the time."

Anna swallowed. She stared down at the brown sugar trapped

beneath her fingernails. She felt like a peppermint had lodged itself halfway down her throat. Baron rubbed his thumb across the top of her hand, and the movement distracted her, eased the tightness in her chest, but not enough. She took a step backward. "I'm really happy for you," she said. "I know how much you wanted this. I guess I just thought that when it finally happened, there would be more *we* in your plan."

"More what?" he asked and shoved his free hand through his damp hair.

"Us," she answered, motioning to the space in between them. "There doesn't seem to be any 'us' in your future in California. It's always been about you there, and I...well, I don't know how I fit in anymore. Every time we've talked about it, it's literally only centered on you. And I couldn't help but hope or think or want to be a part of it somehow. Then Lily called today and said you told Jakob about the job and you were bringing over a surprise. She assumed it was a ring—" Anna stopped.

Baron's mouth fell open, and for a long, uncomfortable minute, he said nothing while Anna chewed on her bottom lip and thought about hiding beneath the brown leather couch cushions. She hadn't meant to mention the ring.

"Wow," he said and let go of her hand. He rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the table full of unfinished food and wine. "I thought you'd be excited about all of this. I didn't know you thought I might ask you to...you love it here, don't you? Don't you love this town?"

"This is where I grew up. It's a great town, but I don't have to live here forever," Anna said.

"You want to leave Mystic Water?"

Anna stared at her fork teetering on the edge of her plate. Hadn't he ever listened to her when she'd told him how she wanted to open her own bakery somewhere else, how she wanted to start over somewhere new? She'd often felt trapped in her hometown because *someone* had to take over her grandma's bakery, and she'd had no other choice—not really. "You'd be in California. And I'd be...*here*. Did you never think about what would happen to us if or when you left?"

Anna might have laughed off the entire misunderstanding if Baron hadn't looked so horrified at the idea of being engaged to her and so completely unaware of what his moving across the country would do to their relationship. She looked at him, feeling her insides splintering like peanut brittle.

"I'm sorry," he said, but he didn't sound apologetic. He sounded like a man woken from a deep sleep. "I don't even know what it's going to be like out there. Life is going to change for me. You know I love you, and I *need* you, but I've been focused on getting the job. And when that happened, I started thinking about the next steps to take to settle into the changes. I didn't think about what that would do to us."

"You didn't think," she repeated. When Baron continued to stare at the table, she added, "I'm gonna go home." Tears tightened her throat and pricked at her eyes. She needed to get out of there before she made a complete fool of herself and sobbed into the lasagna.

Baron reached for her. "Don't go," he said. "Stay. Let's finish our dinner. You worked hard on it."

Anna shook her head. "I think it's best if I go home. You can cut the lasagna into sections and freeze it. It reheats well." Anna grabbed her half full glass of wine and downed the rest of it. Then she walked to the door. With her hand on the doorknob, she hesitated. A part of her had hoped he would argue, hoped he would refuse to let her leave so that they could sort out this sudden weirdness between them. But clearly he wasn't going to fight for her. Clearly the idea of marrying her had horrified him so completely he had nothing else to say. Anna opened the door and rushed out.

2

Rum Cake

Anna leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. She fought the tears, but they gathered in her chest until she felt as though she was choking on them. *You win*, she whispered to them, and they rolled down her cheeks. She grabbed her cell phone and texted Lily: *Tonight was a bust.*

She reversed out of Baron's driveway and drove home. Within a few minutes, her cell phone pinged. Lily responded: *What happened?!?* Anna texted that she'd talk to her tomorrow. She wasn't in the mood for talking about the fact that Baron didn't really want her in California—hadn't even thought about her there. The only thing Anna was in the mood for was being alone and possibly eating cookie dough straight from the container.

Anna unlocked the bakery and dragged herself inside. She shuffled through the dark until she reached the kitchen, and she flipped on the lights. She hefted a five-pound tub of double chocolate cookie dough from the cooler. With an ice cream scoop, she doled out a healthy portion and promptly shoved it into her mouth. Then she grabbed a pot from the rack and heavy cream from the cooler. She warmed the cream over medium heat, and while she waited for it to come to an almost boil, she dumped dark chocolate chunks into a glass bowl. As soon as the milk heated through, she poured it over the chocolate. Then she grabbed a fork and whipped the chocolate nearly to death, whipped it until the chocolate ganache clung to the tines and refused to let go.

Anna grabbed a wooden spoon and dipped it into the ganache. She opened her mouth wide and crammed the spoon inside. Chocolate collected in the corners of her mouth. She licked her lips, and like a gingerbread cookie whose legs had been snapped off, she sagged to the kitchen floor, still holding the spoon in her hand.

Two years. Two years she had spent loving Baron Barker, encouraging him, partaking in every spontaneous adventure, supporting his every whim, even his three-week desire to write a Pulitzer Prize-winning

novel. Now Baron's latest adventure would take him across the country to one of the most prestigious architecture firms in the country, and he had obviously made no plans for her to go with him this time. Just the idea that he hadn't even thought of putting her into the equation made her squeeze her eyes shut, wrap her arms around her bent legs, and sob into her knees.



Half an hour later, Anna was still sitting on the floor when she heard someone walking down the stairs that led to her upstairs apartment. She felt a jolt as if she'd been injected with a shot of espresso. The dark, nutty scent of coffee filled the space. She lifted her head and looked at the clock.

"Anna," Lily called as she rushed down the stairs. "Where are you? Anna!"

"In here," she groaned, stretching her cramping legs out onto the cold tiles and letting her arms fall to her sides like limp noodles.

"Where?" Lily asked as she walked straight past Anna toward the darkened front room. "I've been knocking on your apartment door. I finally gave up and used my key. What are you doing down here? Baking?" Lily paused at the archway. "What did Baron say? You didn't answer any of my calls. What happened? Do you hate the ring? Where are you?"

Lily rounded the island and stopped so quickly she pitched forward and her blonde curls spilled over her shoulders. "What in the world are you doing on the floor?"

Anna blinked up at her, feeling the sting of more tears in her eyes.

Lily rushed over and squatted beside her. "What's wrong? Is the ring ugly? Did he give you his grandma's hunk of junk? I'm sure we can convince him to get you something better." Lily eyed the spoon in Anna's hand and the half-empty bowl of solidified chocolate on the floor beside her. "Is it that bad?"

"He didn't ask me anything, Lily," Anna said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "He's leaving tomorrow for two weeks. Said he's going to find a place to live. They want him there before Thanksgiving."

Lily's brow furrowed. "Okay, so he didn't ask you to marry him, but surely he's going out there to find a nice place for y'all to live."

"No," Anna said. "He didn't ask me *anything*." She closed her eyes and sighed. "He didn't ask me to go with him. I think it's over. He's leaving for his dream job, and he didn't even think about what that would mean for us. In fact, he didn't think about us at all. When I mentioned that to him and that maybe I thought we would go together, he looked like I'd just asked him to let me suck his soul out. Honestly, he looked so flabbergasted I would have laughed if I hadn't wanted to cry so badly. Plus, he forgot today is our anniversary. I made his favorite meal and those stupid little chocolate turtles he loves, but none of it matters." Her bottom lip quivered.

Lily sat down beside Anna and pressed her back against the bottom oven. "Well, this really sucks."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Lily said, "No, we're not going to sit here and feel sorry for you. If Baron doesn't know how awesome you are, then he's a world-class idiot." She stood and pulled Anna to her feet. "You clean this place up and go upstairs to take a bath. I'll be back in less than an hour with pizza and drinks. I refuse to let you spend your anniversary alone and swimming in this pity pool."

Anna nodded, but she felt like a puppet whose strings had been severed. Lily walked out of the kitchen, but before she left, she turned and said, "I'm sorry, Anna. I have half a mind to call Baron myself and give him the business, but I won't for your sake. Let him spend the next two weeks thinking about how much life sucks without you. I'll be back soon."



Anna's apartment above the bakery was small, a one-bedroom, one-bathroom, cozy space that always smelled like fresh chocolate chip cookies and warm vanilla cake. Her queen-size bed was a marshmallow affair of soft blues and white with a riot of feather pillows of differing shapes and sizes. Cookbooks spilled from the bookshelves in her living room and found their way to the coffee table, beneath the table lamp next to the overstuffed couch, and to the bay window, where they

leaned against the panes as though waiting for the moonrise. A vase of white daisies bloomed on the windowsill in the buttercream kitchen. Oatmeal cookies snuggled quietly beneath a glass-domed cake plate on the antiques, petite table for two.

She crawled out of her claw foot tub and wrapped a towel around her as she shuffled into her bedroom. After she pulled a comb through her wet hair, she tugged on a pair of pajama pants decorated with pink and aqua cupcakes and a matching aqua tank top. Then she sat on the edge of her bed and sunk into the down comforter. What would a life without Baron look like? He hadn't exactly *broken up* with her, but it was clear their lives were moving in different directions. He hadn't even incorporated her into his future plans. She had plugged him into every aspect of her life, and he had only fit her into the present, which was ever-changing with Baron. He smiled at her from a picture on her dresser, his blue eyes shining, and an evening breeze drifted through the open window, toying with her damp hair. Anna shivered. A knock sounded on the front door. "It's open," Anna yelled as she walked out of her bedroom.

Lily waltzed in. "Your mama would kill you if she knew you left your door unlocked," she said, resting a large pizza box on the kitchen counter. A paper bag and a two-liter bottle of Coca-Cola were precariously wedged under one arm.

Anna twisted her hair into a knot before jamming two chopsticks into it. The aromas of roasted hazelnuts and supreme pizza quickly filled the small space and gave Anna a shove of energy. "I knew you were coming over," she said with a shrug. Her cell phone vibrated on the kitchen table, and she snatched it.

"Is it Baron with an apology?" Lily asked.

"It's Tessa," Anna said through a sigh. "She says, 'What are you and Lily doing tonight? Let's get together.'"

Lily wrinkled her nose. "Not tonight," she said. "I love Tessa, but it needs to be just us. Tell her you have plans."

"What if she's lonely or needs somebody to talk to? Is her mama okay?" Anna asked.

"You're hanging by a thread right now. Her mama is fine, even

better than after last week's treatment. I just talked to Tessa today. She probably wants to whine about the pitiful date with Tommy Carpenter she had last night."

"Tommy the Taxidermist?" Anna shuddered. "Why did she give in? He's an odd bird."

Lily grinned. She deposited the Coca-Cola and paper bag on the counter. "By odd bird, you really mean he's a freak who likes to show girls his collection of dead animals. Tell her maybe tomorrow night," Lily said, tearing off paper towels to use as napkins.

Anna texted Tessa. Then she asked Lily, "What's in the bag?"

Lily opened the bag and revealed a half-empty bottle of rum. "Drinks are on me!"

Anna groaned. "You can't be serious. I have to be up at five a.m. tomorrow to start baking. I haven't had rum since that horrific incident in twelfth grade when I yakked on Becky Johnson. She *still* hasn't forgiven me. She calls me Anna O'Barf to this day."

Lily looped her arm through Anna's and laughed. "Man, that was awful. Why was it so *green*? Anyway, that's not all I brought," she said. She dug through her shoulder bag and pulled out a DVD.

"*Pet Sematary*? No way, José. You know I hate horror movies. I'd rather burn a batch of cookies and sell them to children."

Lily rolled her eyes as she pulled two fat tumblers down from the cabinet. "First of all, it's impossible for you to ruin a batch of cookies. Second of all, you spend all your time holed up in the bakery or chasing Baron wherever he goes. It's time you let your hair down," she said and plucked the chopsticks from Anna's hair, "and let loose for a night. Besides, I highly doubt you'll do anything as stupid as barfing on the homecoming queen after a few glasses of rum and Coke. Humor me tonight. I haven't felt good all day, and I need a breather."

Lily dropped ice cubes into the tumblers, and she poured in the rum until the ice cubes rose to the tip top before splashing in the soda like a garnish. She grabbed two colored straws from Anna's stash on the counter and gave the drinks a quick stir. "To a night of reckless fun and no yakking," Lily said, clinking her glass against Anna's.

"I have to work in the morning," Anna whined. She raked her

fingers through her wet hair.

“Work schmork. Drink up,” Lily said and flipped open the pizza box. “I say we eat on the couch so we can watch the movie while we dine on Pizza Hut’s finest.”

“I’m not watching this,” Anna argued. She took a tentative sip of her cocktail and scrunched up her face. “Holy guacamole, Batman, this is strong.”

Lily took a healthy bite of pizza. Mozzarella cheese stretched from the slice to her lips. “It was either this or *Sleepless in Seattle*—”

“I love that movie.”

“Yeah, I know, but we’re not watching a sappy romance tonight,” Lily said. She made a fish face and sucked her cocktail up through a bright yellow straw.

Anna carried the pizza box into the living room and placed it on the coffee table before sagging onto the couch. She sighed. “You’re right.” Watching a romantic comedy was probably a rotten idea. Her cell phone vibrated next to the pizza box, and she leaned over to grab it. “It’s a text from Baron.”

Lily squatted in front of the DVD player. She shoved her blonde curls out of her face so she could look back at Anna over her shoulder. “What’d he say?”

“‘Will stop by tomorrow on way to airport.’ And that’s it.” Anna pressed her lips together. A salty wind blew through the open kitchen window and slammed shut the top of the pizza box. Anna rubbed her hands up her arms.

“Nice, Baron, real nice. And so eloquent. He’s an idiot, Anna. He’ll come around. He knows you’re one of a kind.”

Baron was her best friend aside from Lily and Tessa; how was it possible that she felt this great divide between them now? Anna felt like she was trying to swallow two Pirouettes whole, and they were logjammed in her throat. She walked to the kitchen. Grabbing the open half of the window, she stood on her tiptoes and slid it closed. While Lily started the movie, Anna rejoined her on the couch and, ignoring the straw, tilted back her glass of rum and Coke and drained half of it.



After the movie, Anna insisted on turning on all the lights, and when she glanced at the door that led to the staircase going down into the bakery, she thought of turning on the shop's lights too. No need to let something undead creep around the bakery without warning.

Anna finished her third glass of rum and Coke and rubbed her temples. She blinked a few times to see if the room would come into better focus.

Lily leaned over and poked her in the arm with a giggle. "Who would you bring back from the dead?" Lily shoved an oatmeal cookie into her mouth.

"Are you insane? No one. Didn't you see what happened to the little boy? What about the freaky little cat?"

Lily wagged her finger at Anna. "Come on, Anna, loosen up and play along. Would you bring back Elvis? Maybe Tom Sawyer?"

"Tom Sawyer isn't even a real person."

"I bet he was cute though," Lily giggled.

"You're toasted. I'm going to call Jakob to come pick you up." Anna closed the pizza box and carried it to the kitchen. "You can't bring people back to life."

"You're right. Pretty gross business. Too bad you can't bring back the perfect man for yourself. Better yet, too bad you can't *make* one."

"I thought Baron was the right guy for me," Anna said with a heavy sigh. She tried three times to fold the pizza box in half and shove it into the trashcan. She finally gave up and left it on the counter.

Lily propped her legs up on the coffee table. "Just think, with your baking skills, you could make someone even better than Baron. Someone just the way you wanted him to be."

Anna shook her head and laughed weakly. "I wish," she said. But she wrinkled her forehead in thought as she sat on the couch and curled her legs beneath her. "Grandma Bea used to tell me she made my grandpa out of dough."

Lily snickered. "Are you serious? Sounds like something she'd say."

She could make anything. Like you.”

“I *loved* when she’d tell me the story of how she made him,” she said, leaning her head back on the cushions and closing her eyes. “When I inherited all her cookbooks, I found his recipe in the back of one of them.”

“*His* recipe?”

Anna rolled her head to the side to look at Lily and immediately regretted it. Her brain sloshed around like hot cane syrup inside her skull. She put both hands on the sides of her head to steady the swaying room. “The recipe with the ingredients for how she made Grandpa. How much flour, sugar, that sort of thing. And the secret ingredient too.”

Lily snorted into her fourth rum and Coke. “And what was the secret ingredient?”

Anna shrugged. “No idea. She kept it in a locked box and refused to ever let me touch it. Every time I asked about it, she would change the subject.”

Lily sat up and put her glass on the coffee table. “You’re serious? What was in the locked box?”

“I never opened it.”

“Where is it now?”

The scent of spicy, freshly brewed coffee wafting through the room caused Anna’s eyes to water. “Under my bed.”

Lily’s brown eyes widened. “And you never opened it? Not even after the funeral?” When Anna shook her head, Lily jumped up from the couch, swayed on her feet, and clutched her stomach. “Whoa, bad idea.” She blinked rapidly, and once she regained her balance, Lily reached for Anna and dragged her to the bedroom. “Let’s break it open.”

Anna stood beside her bed and rubbed her right temple. “I have the key.”

“How could you not have opened it?” Lily asked, tucking her loose curls behind her ears.

“I dunno. She said to never open it, so I just didn’t.” Anna knelt down beside her bed. “Geez, when I say it out loud, it sounds even lamer. Why *didn’t* I ever open it?”

Lily bounced onto the bed. “You are unbelievable. Have you ever stepped out of line, even once?”

“Yakking episode, twelfth grade. Real low point in my life.”

Lily laughed. “Open it! Open it!”

Anna opened the drawer on her nightstand and retrieved the key hanging from a blueberry-colored ribbon. She reached beneath her bed and pulled out the unassuming tin box. Rust speckled the box like splatter paint and left burnt orange smudges on her fingers. On the second attempt, the slender key slipped into the rusted lock. Dense energy pulsed from the box, through the key, and into her fingers, vibrating the bones in her hand. Her heart pounded in fierce, rapid beats, and she wished she hadn’t drunk a third glass of rum and Coke. Her head felt full of cotton candy.

When she flipped open the lid, there were yellowed letters tied together with kitchen twine sitting atop sand that sparkled like grains of golden sugar caught in the sunlight.

“Wow,” Anna breathed. She removed the letters and reached her hand out to touch the glittering substance, but Lily slapped her hand away.

“Don’t touch it.”

Anna pushed her drying hair from her face. “Why not?”

Lily slid off the bed and knelt beside her. “What the hell is that stuff? My heart feels funny. Why is it all sparkly like that?”

“Like it’s lit up from the inside? I dunno. It’s probably just some kind of special sugar.”

The golden dust sparkled and beckoned to Anna. She could feel a prickle down her spine, and the dust whispered to her. *Use me. Take me.* She stuck her fingertips into the sand and felt a rush of warmth rocket up her arm. She quickly jerked her hand back.

Lily jumped. “What happened?”

“It shocked me,” Anna said. She rubbed the palm of her hand with the thumb of her opposite hand.

Lily stared transfixed at the sand. “Where did she get this stuff?”

“No idea.” Anna lifted the letters. “Maybe the answer is in here.”

“You don’t really think Grandma Bea made your grandpa out of

that stuff, do you? I mean, it sounds pretty ridiculous. You're probably right about it being sugar," she said, laughing, but it sounded forced, and the air around them smelled like bitter coffee grounds. "Maybe we're drunk. Maybe the rum was spiked with something."

Looking down at the brilliant dust, Anna began to really wonder about her grandma's story. "It sounds far-fetched, but what if it's possible?" Then she laughed and closed the box. "You're right. We've had too much to drink. Let me call Jakob to pick you up."

Anna tried to stand, but Lily grabbed her arm and pulled her down. "Wait. I have a *great* idea. Let's go downstairs, and you can make a man with this fairy dust because if anyone can make a delicious man, you can."

Anna giggled. Then she stopped when she realized Lily was being serious. Suddenly an image of Frankenstein flitted through her brain. An oversize stomping giant with a scarred, stitched face made with the body parts of corpses lifted a moldy hand and waved. She grimaced and blinked away the vision. *Bad idea.*

Lily shook her. "You look like you're going to be sick. Come on, get the dust, and let's make your man. I'll grab the rum."



Anna tried to smooth out the creases on her grandma's recipe. In her neat, looping script, Beatrice had written:

Joseph O'Brien

Add the basics: Flour, castor sugar. Only the best ingredients. Half a cup of confectioner's sugar to make him just sweet enough, but not too much. Two dashes of salt to complement the sweet. A good balance is essential. Add two and a quarter teaspoons of active yeast.

A teaspoon of vanilla extract because it goes well with just about everything. A few dabs of royal icing to make him stick and never wander away. A pinch here and there of favorite spices (basil, oregano, anise).

Two cups of warm water. Two eggs, lightly beaten. Knead the dough just long enough—very important. Kneading too long will make him hard and

unbendable, like a rock in the stomach. Kneading not long enough will make him soft—too weak, too pliable, a moldable mess in the hands of everyone. Not a good man.

One tablespoon of secret ingredient.

Bake for 30 minutes at 450 degrees. Make sure to give him a name before you close the oven door. Turn off the oven, but do not open it. Leave dough in oven for two hours.

Anna looked at the tin box and the ingredients scattered across the counters. Lily sat on the island and snickered while she talked about what kind of man she would make if she could bake worth a lick.

“This is stupid,” Anna said. “I’m tired, and I’m going to have a righteous hangover in the morning, which is going to be here, oh, in just about five hours.”

Lily pointed the nearly empty bottle of rum at her. “Make the man, and make sure he’s hot. It’ll make Baron so jealous. I’m kinda looking forward to that part of this whole shenanigan. And besides, if it doesn’t work, we’ll just gorge on the dough boy later.” Then she snorted and burst into another round of giggles.

Anna rubbed her eyes. “Man, this ranks way up there on the list of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.”

She grabbed a large bowl. She tossed in a cup of sugar, then two cups of all-purpose flour and two cups of whole wheat flour. She hoped the combination would give him an even skin tone, and the completely absurd fact that she was actually giving this recipe so much thought had her grabbing the bottle of rum and taking another swig.

Anna cut open a packet of active yeast and dumped it into the bowl. Then she added a cashew-size glob of purple royal icing to the mix in order to make him loyal followed by a half cup of confectioner’s sugar in the hopes he would be somewhat romantic. She stirred in two teaspoons of salt and a teaspoon of vanilla extract. She poured canola oil into the bowl because he needed to be able to withstand the heat and not break down when life became too hot or too complicated. She measured out three cups of warm water and gently whipped two eggs into it before pouring it over the dry ingredient mixture.

“What will make him good and wholesome and kind?” she asked aloud.

“Chocolate?” Lily said, finishing off the bottle of rum.

Anna dropped in a palmful of dark cocoa powder. She added the leaves from three sprigs of rosemary because it was her favorite herb and because its woody scent would hopefully make him a lover of the outdoors. Finally, she added a pinch of cinnamon because the season called for it, and then she sprinkled in cumin to give him a spicy, smoky edge.

Anna dipped a tablespoon into the sparkling, golden dust. She leveled it with her finger, feeling the warmth spread up her fingers, her arm, until it reached her head, where it tugged a smile onto her lips. She added the last ingredient and stirred. Then she plopped the dough onto a floured board and began to knead. When the dough had just enough elasticity, she patted it into a nice ball and put it on a baking stone.

As an afterthought, Anna rolled out a piece of white fondant and scribbled a note on it with an edible black ink marker.

Dearest Elijah,

If you ever knock on my door, I promise that I will love you forever. You are the perfect man for me. If you never knock on my door, I will regretfully never experience true love.

Always and Devotedly Yours,

Anna O'Brien

Anna shoved the note into the dough. She opened the oven, slid the baking stone and dough gently inside, and closed the door. Then she wiped her hands on her pajamas.

“Bedtime,” she said.

Lily was leaned over on the island in an awkward angle, the bottle of rum dangling from her fingers, too close to the edge. Her curls blanketed her face.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” Anna said, poking Lily in the ribs. “Time to go home. I’ll call Jakob.”

Half an hour later, Jakob retrieved Lily with a sleepy grin, and Anna turned off the oven and the lights in the bakery. Then she collapsed onto her bed without even pulling down the sheets.

3

Morning Glory Muffins

Anna groaned and rolled over. Sunlight slipped through the slats in the plantation blinds and lined her face. Her head pounded like a drum corps was working out the kinks in their routine just behind her eyes. She stretched her arm out, and her hand fell into an indentation left behind on the pillow beside her. Anna grabbed it and pressed it over her head. It smelled like pine and rosemary, which she would have thought was strange if she hadn't felt like someone had swapped her brain for pie weights.

She sat up as slowly as possible, afraid of any sudden movements. When she inhaled, she breathed in the smell of warm donuts' sugary, sticky glaze and melted chocolate. That was the moment she realized that her bedroom was entirely too bright, and not just because she had the hangover to end all hangovers.

Her eyes darted to the clock on her nightstand. It was 6:45 a.m. Anna gasped, and a shooting pain pierced her left temple. She groaned and doubled over.

She tried to fling herself out of bed, but the sheets tangled around her legs, and only the top half of her body lurched over the side, so she dangled there like a caterpillar half out of its cocoon. Within seconds, the sheets pulled away from the mattress, and she fell, smacking her forehead on the wood floor.

Anna lay there with her cheek squashed awkwardly against the floor and her body folded over uncomfortably, unable to move. She inhaled deeply and cracked open one eye. Why did her room smell like donuts? Anna pushed herself up and began a frantic rush to get ready. The bakery would be opening in fifteen minutes, and she hadn't even started a single treat.

She brushed her teeth while pulling on a pair of jeans. Then she tugged on a Smurf T-shirt, slipped on a pair of flip flops, and pulled her fingers through her tangled hair while running down the stairs to the bakery. As she neared the bottom of the staircase, the drippy, sweet

scents of baking intensified. At that moment, she remembered the dough she and Lily had concocted the night before, courtesy of a bottle of rum. Had it left behind that strong of an aroma?

Anna grabbed her apron from the hook and turned in a full circle, trying to decide where to start as she tied it around her waist. Her gaze stopped on a sheet tray sitting on the island. It was crowded with both glazed and chocolate-covered donuts. She reached out a tentative finger, and the chocolate came away, warm and gooey, on her fingertip. Her mouth fell agape.

“What the—”

A man walked out of the backroom carrying a canister of powdered sugar. Anna screamed and stumbled backward, tripping over a ten-pound bag of flour. She landed hard on the bag and slipped off the side of it as a powdery cloud puffed over her like fog, dusting her hair and clothes.

The man chuckled and sat the canister on the island. He held out his hand to her.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a voice that was unnaturally high and much too dry. She fanned the flour cloud away.

“Making donuts. It’s Wednesday. Isn’t that donut day?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“No, *here*. What are you doing *in here*?” She was afraid to stand up. Would anyone hear her scream? How did he get inside the bakery? Why would a crazy person break into the shop and bake for her?

The man continued to stand in front of her holding out his hand, and Anna took a good look at him. He was at least 6’2”, definitely taller than Baron. His eyes were Caribbean blue and his skin was the color of light brown sugar. His sandy brown hair was cut short but still long enough for Anna to run her fingers through it. Her hands twitched, so she sat on them.

His grin was lopsided, and his mouth was full of impossibly straight, white teeth. He was undeniably handsome, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t a psycho who liked to bake donuts. He wore one of her larger, plain white aprons. But beneath the apron she could see he had on a red T-shirt that looked exactly like Baron’s university shirt. His blue

jeans were at least an inch too short, and his flip flips looked an awful lot like Baron's favorite pair. He had scribbled his name on a sheet of paper and slid it into the clear pocket on the front of the apron. It read: Eli.

Anna's eyes opened as wide as jumbo jawbreakers, and she covered her mouth with her hands. She shook her head as if to shake away the image before her. Her eyes drifted to the oven where she'd left the baking dough the night before. The baking stone was drying in the rack beside the sink. The baked loaf was nowhere to be seen, unless...

"Elijah?" she whispered through her fingers.

"Yes?"

Anna scrambled to her feet. "Whoa, this can't be happening. This is *insane*. The rum was tainted. Maybe it was full of roofies or hallucinogens. Maybe I'm tripping out right now. You're not real. You *can't* be."

She stepped too close to him, and her senses were immediately overloaded. She smelled rosemary and cinnamon, spicy chocolate and melted sugar. Looking away from his clear blue eyes was difficult. Anna wanted to back away from the stranger in her kitchen, but a million invisible gossamer threads connected the two of them, tangled them, wove them together. She sucked air, heady and sweet, into her lungs.

"You feeling okay?" he asked. "I let you sleep in this morning. Of course I couldn't wake you even when I tried." He grinned, and Anna's mouth fell open.

"You were in my *room*?" She wiped her sweaty palms down the front of her apron. *Oh no, oh no, oh no.*

Elijah chuckled. "I slept in there, didn't I?"

A strangled sound bubbled up her throat. "You slept with me?"

Elijah laughed, wrinkled his brow, and a timer dinged across the room. He walked over to one of the ovens and opened the door. "Cookies are done. I chose peanut butter cookies for today's cookie of choice. Oh, and I made Morning Glory muffins already. I know you wanted to change up Wednesday's muffins. I think they turned out well."

With Elijah across the room, Anna could breathe normally again.

She shoved her hands into her hair, and when she tried to pull them free, some of her fingers stuck in the knots. She pressed her palms to her thighs and dropped her head between her knees.

“You okay?” Elijah asked.

Anna shook her head. “I think I’m going to pass out.” Black spots leapt in front of her eyes, and her next pull of air was full of the woody scent of wet pine trees in fall.

Elijah put his hand on her lower back. “Hey, why don’t you go upstairs and lie down? I can handle things down here.” His hand moved to her shoulder blades.

Heat zinged up her spine, pulsed from his fingers against the fabric of her thin T-shirt, warming the skin beneath. Anna jerked upright so quickly she lost her balance. Elijah chuckled and steadied her. The heat from his hands made her feel as though her insides were melted butter; her knees turned into Twizzlers. She stumbled out of his grasp. Someone knocked on the front door. Anna peered out through the archway that led to the shop. Frances Dotson cupped her hands around her eyes and pressed her overly made-up face to the bakery’s glass door.

“It’s seven,” Anna said. As she rushed to open the shop, she glanced at the display cases. Every shelf was filled with treats, minus the last open spot where the donuts would slide in.

“Good morning, Mrs. Dotson,” Anna said with a frazzled smile. The crisp October morning air rushed into the room.

“You’re never late,” Mrs. Dotson said, pursing her wine-red lips.

“Oh, you know,” Anna stuttered, throwing a quick glance toward the backroom. “Bit of a hectic morning.”

Elijah emerged holding the tray of donuts, and he smiled and waved. “Good morning. Fresh donuts.”

“Oh my,” Mrs. Dotson said. “New help, I see.” She raised her penciled-on eyebrows at Anna. “What are you doing with your hair? New style? I’m not sure it’s working for you.”

Anna turned and looked at herself in the hanging mirror behind the counter. A pitiful sound escaped through her parted lips at the sight of her unruly auburn hair. One side of her hair was out-of-control

wavy and not in an attractive way. It looked like two crazed geese had fought for dominance on that side of her head during the night. The other side was a tangled mess, half straight, half unfortunate.

“There are no words for this hair,” she grumbled.

“My thoughts exactly,” Mrs. Dotson said, clucking her tongue. “Introduce me to your new helper.”

Anna blanched. “No!”

“Pardon me?” Mrs. Dotson asked, arching her dramatic eyebrows. She opened her mouth to say something else, but Anna dashed away, grabbing Elijah by the arm and dragging him into the backroom.

“Are we dreaming?” Anna asked, mostly to herself. She re-tied her apron and wiped her hands down her front.

Elijah leaned casually against the island. “Do you usually dream of Mrs. Dotson? I know I don’t. The purple eyeshadow just doesn’t *do* it for me.”

Anna gasped. “How do you know her name?”

Elijah grinned. “Are you *that* hungover?”

Anna shook her head and then ransacked a drawer until she could find a rubber band. She whipped her hair into a messy ponytail and pointed her finger at Elijah. “Where did you get those clothes?”

“Your closet, where else?”

“You must be joking,” she blurted. Elijah was wearing Baron’s clothes. “How did you get here?”

Elijah lifted one eyebrow. “What is up with you this morning?”

“Humor me!” she nearly shouted.

“Well, I woke up and walked down the stairs,” he answered and winked at her.

Anna pressed her fingertips to her forehead and closed her eyes. She inhaled and exhaled several times. “This can’t be happening.”

The bell on the counter began to ding over and over again. “Are you planning on serving me this morning? There’s a line forming, Anna,” Mrs. Dotson complained.

“Be right there!” she shouted. “You, stay back here this morning. Don’t come out. At all.”

Elijah frowned. “But,” he peered over her head at the front of the

shop, “there are five people in line now, and who’s going to get the coffee going?”

“I don’t know,” she said in exasperation. “Just *stay back here.*”

Anna ran out into the shop and attended to Mrs. Dotson, who always ordered the same thing on Wednesdays: two glazed donuts, one lemon bar, one red velvet cupcake, and a Diet Coke to go. Anna waved a harried good morning to the other customers.

Mrs. Dotson paid and grabbed her bag. Before she walked away, she leaned over the counter, her five gold necklaces swinging forward, and called, “Excuse me, sir, but I’d like to welcome you. I’m Frances Dotson.”

Elijah poked his head around the archway, and Anna’s legs became cement. The entire line of customers shifted so they could see to whom Mrs. Dotson spoke. A lopsided grin tugged Elijah’s mouth up to the left, and he stepped out of the back, all broad shoulders and easy on the eyes. He held out his grizzly bear-size hand to Mrs. Dotson.

“A real pleasure, ma’am,” he said, in a decidedly Southern accent. “I’m Elijah, but you can call me Eli. Anna can call me anything she wants.”

Anna gripped the countertop. Mrs. Dotson cut her eyes over to Anna, but didn’t release Eli’s hand. “Is that so? I imagine Baron would object.”

Eli winked at her and leaned forward conspiratorially. “What he doesn’t know won’t kill him, and Baron is on the Naughty List at the moment.”

Anna wobbled and something sounding like “*This is very bad,*” stumbled from her mouth. Eli stepped over to her and put his hand on her lower back. Her blood surged hot, and all the clean air was replaced by the smell of cooking sugar.

“How did you end up working here, Eli?” Mrs. Dotson asked.

Without removing his hand, he ushered Anna behind the cash register so she could help the next customer, and Eli stepped aside so he could speak with Mrs. Dotson.

“Anna and I went to college together, The Culinary Institute of America in New York. Our culinary styles are nearly identical, but

nobody can bake like Anna,” he said, smiling over at her. “And I’m passing through, so Anna’s letting me help her for a while. Hopefully a long while,” he added.

Anna’s hand hovered over a Morning Glory muffin as she turned to look at Eli. She knew he was lying, but it sounded so natural, and even more than that, it sounded like he *believed* what he was saying. When the truth of that sunk in, her hands began to shake. If Eli was truly something she created last night, then he was like a newborn. He didn’t have a past, a family, a history *at all*. And yet, there he stood, telling Mrs. Dotson they’d gone to culinary school together. She had to get him away from the people. She had to hide him somewhere, *anywhere*, until she could figure out what to do with him.

Anna bagged four muffins and handed them over to Mr. Jones. “Will that be all?” she asked. She reached out to grab Eli, but he slipped away and headed straight for the coffee urns in the corner behind the counter.

“Better keep an eye on him,” Mr. Jones said to her when he handed her exact change.

Anna watched Eli carry the first urn to the backroom, and he made sure to smile at her when he passed. “I’m sorry, what’s that?” she asked.

Mr. Jones leaned toward her, and his readers slipped down his nose. “I said you better watch that one,” he repeated, pointing toward the backroom with an arthritic finger. “If he can charm old lady Dotson, then he’ll be charming all the ladies in town by the end of the week. That includes you,” Mr. Jones said with a playful smile.

“Me?” Why did her voice sound like she was doing an impersonation of Minnie Mouse? “I have a boyfriend, Mr. Jones. You remember Baron.”

Mr. Jones waved a dismissive hand and grabbed his bag. “Just the same. That one has his eyes on you.”

The bakery door opened and brought in the smell of burning logs and charcoal on a grill. Anna’s eyes fell on Thomas Harper, the local college’s biology professor. He smiled at her before falling into the back of the line. Normally, Anna would have been pleased to see his familiar face, but today wasn’t one of those days. Thomas, Baron, and Jakob

were all good friends, and Anna enjoyed their morning conversations, but Eli added a whole new dimension to everything. She could hear Eli moving around in the backroom. She hoped she could get through the rest of the customers before he reentered the shop. However, just as Thomas stepped up to the counter, Eli walked out carrying a coffee urn.

“Good morning,” Anna said. “Want your usual bear claw and regular Italian brew?”

A deep line creased between Thomas’ dark brows. “Who’s that?”

“Hmm?” Anna asked, but she felt a wave of heat roll over her as Eli passed by behind her. She tried to hold her smile steady for Thomas. “New employee.”

“I didn’t even know you were looking for help,” Thomas said, toying with the gold band on his left hand. “What happened to the young girl from the college? Josie, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, she’s great. Took a few weeks off for midterms and then fall break. Your usual?” she asked again. Thomas’ smile was tight, and his eyes followed Eli’s movements. Was Thomas being overprotective of her? He obviously hadn’t heard the news that Baron was ditching her for the Pacific Ocean and picturesque, rolling hills covered in vineyards.

“So, who’s he?” Thomas asked, watching the movement over Anna’s right shoulder.

Before Anna could answer, she felt Eli’s hand on her back. Her mind fogged over, and her heart pumped thick, hot blood down to her toes. She couldn’t focus on anything except the feel of his hand against her. Her bottom lip drooped open.

Eli held out his other hand to Thomas. “Eli,” he said.

“Thomas Harper. One of Anna’s usual customers. Every day actually.”

“Dedicated. I like that. How are you? Italian brew, right?” Eli asked, handing over a travel coffee cup with a lid. He removed his hand from Anna’s back.

Thomas took the offered cup and thanked him, but Anna blinked and immediately saw confusion in Thomas’ dark eyes. The air was rimmed with the smell of burning leaves, and she coughed. She grabbed a bear claw from the display case and wrapped it.

“One bear claw to go,” she said, struggling to inhale a full breath.

“I think I’ll sit awhile,” Thomas said, and he thanked Anna for the pastry.

“Sure. Great. Sit for as long as you like. I’ll just be here...baking or something,” she babbled. *No, go away, Thomas. Go away. Can’t you see I’m losing my marbles here?*

Since no one else was in line, Anna scurried to the backroom to fill a glass with ice water and to splash at least half of it on her face. She blindly reached for a paper towel to dry off and then she chugged some of the water.

“He’s territorial,” Eli said much too close to Anna’s ear. She yelped, tossing the rest of her water straight into the air. It rained all over the countertop, and she and Eli danced out of its path. Eli’s hand was on her arm, and she wiggled away from him.

“Stop doing that,” Anna said, pressing her back against the wall. Eli grinned, and the sight of his smile tugged something deep in her stomach.

“Doing what? I thought we were having a conversation,” he said.

“Stop *touching* me,” she said, waving her hands in front of her. “I can’t think when you do that.”

Eli’s grin widened, and he took a step closer. Her hands fell to her sides, and her too-wide green eyes watched him.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” he said, and his voice was thick like caramel.

Anna’s heart pounded hard, and she pressed her hands to her chest in case it burst out. Eli took another step toward her, and she made the mistake of looking up at his face. His blue eyes undid her, so she darted away from him, putting the island in between them.

“No!” she said. “You stay on your side.”

Eli leaned his head back and laughed loudly. It echoed through the backroom and out into the bakery, and Anna’s heart leapt at the sound of it. The front door opened, and the bell jingled. A briny breeze blew through the shop, ruffling Anna’s haphazard ponytail. Tiny piles of powdered sugar tornadoed across the island. A man’s voice said hello to Thomas.

“Baron,” she whispered and scrunched her face up. “Someone stick a fork in me. I’m done.”

“I’ll help him,” Eli said, moving toward the archway.

Anna jumped in front of him like a ninja and held her hands up, ready to karate chop him if she needed to. “No way, José,” she argued. “You stay here. *Please.*”

Eli held his hands up in surrender. “I’ll stay put, but only because you said please.”

Anna exhaled and stepped through the archway. Baron stood at the counter, staring at the pastries in the display case. “Hey,” she said. A jar full of jumping jelly beans ricocheted around in her stomach.

He looked up at her with sleepy eyes. She couldn’t read his expression, and she fought the urge to jump over the counter and wrap her arms around him.

“Donuts look good,” he said.

“Want a few for the road?”

Anna was already sliding the glass door open when Baron reached across the counter and grabbed her hand. He gave it a squeeze, and she squeezed back. “About yesterday,” he began, “I still don’t know what to say really. I had no idea you wanted to...”

“Wanted to what?” she asked, unwilling to help ease the awkwardness she heard in his words. She needed to hear him say it, to hear him say again that he hadn’t thought of her, of *them*.

He released her hand. “That you wanted to go with me, that you wanted to get *married*,” he said too loudly. “You’ve never even mentioned wanting to get married.”

Anna frowned, and her face reddened. She could see Thomas’ attention was locked on them. “That’s what normal people do, Baron,” she said in a voice only loud enough for Baron to hear. “We’ve been together two years.” *Don’t cry. Don’t cry.*

“And you want to get married?” he asked.

Anna wished his voice didn’t sound so strained, so tight. “Yes. Maybe. *I don’t know.* I know I love you. I wanted to be with you.”

Baron grabbed her hand again and twined his fingers with hers. “I love you, Anna-Banana. Wait, what do you mean, *wanted* to be with

me? That's past tense."

Anna sighed and closed her eyes. She inhaled the faint smell of the ocean; it seemed a thousand miles away. "You're leaving, and I'm staying, and you didn't even once think that I might want to go with you."

"For this two-week trip? I didn't even know they were sending me a ticket," he said, throwing his hands up.

"No, not *this* trip, Baron," Anna argued in a whisper. "Just in general. You're leaving me. That will make us past tense—" The anger pushed the tears aside.

"Hey, Eli," Thomas called from a table for two near the windows, "could I get a refill?"

Like the surprise crouched in a jack-in-the-box, Eli sprung through the archway and strode toward Thomas' lifted cup. Baron turned his entire body to watch Eli walk across the room.

"Who the hell is that?" Baron asked without lowering his voice.

Eli walked behind the counter and filled Thomas' cup. "Hey, man," he said to Baron with an easy smile. "I'm Eli, a college friend of Anna's. I'm helping out around here for a while, and she's letting me crash at her place." He motioned with his head toward the upstairs apartment. He carried the coffee to Thomas and returned to Anna's side.

Baron said nothing, and Anna wished so hard for a black hole to appear beneath her feet and swallow her. A vein throbbed in the center of her forehead. Baron looked at Anna, asking her questions with his eyes, but her mind was full of nothing but the wind, blowing straight through her ears.

"Is that a joke?" Baron asked Eli when Anna blinked at him in silence.

"Which part?" Eli asked, leaning casually against the back of the display case.

Baron's eyes narrowed. The bakery door opened, and a bone-cold wind flooded the room and blew the loose hair from Anna's face. Thomas walked out whistling the theme song from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

"Anna, what the hell is going on? I've never even heard of this guy,

yet he's *staying* with you? You live in a one-bedroom apartment—”

“It’s a good size bedroom. Plenty of room,” Eli said.

Eli nudged Anna with his elbow as though they were sharing an inside joke. She gawked at him. Baron squared his shoulders, and the air in the room sizzled like an electrical storm full of heat lightning and silence.

The bell jingled again. Tessa Andrews stepped into the bakery with one hand clamped onto her drab green purse straps and one hand lifted into a low wave.

“Good morning,” she said and smiled. Her short, light brown hair was tucked behind her ears, curling around her lobes. Her brown peacoat was buttoned all the way to the top, and she’d wrapped a beige scarf around her neck and shoved it down between the lapels of her jacket.

“Welcome to the circus,” Anna whispered.

“Hey, Baron, I wasn’t expecting to see you here. My mom ran into your mom at the hospital, and she said you were leaving for California,” Tessa said with a sweet smile. She touched Baron’s arm, and only then did he turn and look at her. “Congratulations on your new job. You must be so excited. And you, too, Anna,” she said, looking at her friend.

“Thanks, Tessa,” Baron mumbled.

Then, her eyes slid to Eli. Her brow furrowed, and she lowered her hand from Baron’s arm. “I didn’t know you were hiring a new employee,” she said to Anna. “Hi, I’m Tessa.”

“Eli. Nice to meet you, Tessa,” he said.

“Oh, he just blew in from out of town last night to Anna’s place,” Baron said. “Is that why you left early?”

Anna’s mouth fell open in indignation. “You *know* why I left early.”

Tessa adjusted her purse straps and looked at Anna. “I thought you didn’t feel like doing anything last night. You didn’t say you had out-of-town company.” Tessa’s mouth turned into a disappointed frown.

Anna shook her head. “Eli wasn’t here last night,” she said to Baron. “Lily was at my house. You can ask her.”

“He said he’s crashing at your place. I assumed the slumber party had already started,” Baron sniped.

“Slumber party,” Eli said with a wide grin. “I like the image that conjures.”

Baron’s jaw clenched.

“You and Lily hung out last night?” Tessa asked. “Why didn’t you call me? You know I wanted to do something.”

Anna’s head throbbed. “I didn’t feel well.”

“But Lily was there,” Tessa said.

“Listen, Tessa, it was a bad night,” Anna snapped. She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled. “I’m sorry. I’ll call you later today, okay?”

Tessa looked at Eli and Baron one last time, and then she skittered out of the door, letting in a smoky wind on her way out.

“Don’t you have a plane to catch?” Eli asked, pushing away from the display case and stepping so close to Anna their arms touched.

Baron snapped his arm out across the counter toward Eli so quickly that Anna gasped, but she managed to shove him away with one hand.

“Baron, no!” She slapped her other hand to Eli’s chest and shouted, “Get in the back now!” When he didn’t budge, she glared at him. “*Now!*”

Eli pressed his hand over the top of hers for a few seconds, and her vision blurred. Then he turned and disappeared into the backroom. She exhaled loudly and turned to Baron.

“What the hell is going on, Anna?” Baron demanded.

“Nothing. He’s just...passing through,” she answered, using Eli’s lie because what else could she say? *Oh, he’s no one special. I made him last night. He’s actually made of flour and sugar and fairy dust my grandma hid in a box. I baked him, and voilà, he’s a real boy!*

“Passing through,” Baron repeated flatly. “And apparently staying in your apartment. When were you going to tell me about him?”

“He just showed up today, first thing this morning actually,” she said quickly. “He’s harmless.” Her stomach tightened. Was he? “And I was going to tell you.” *Eventually.*

Baron shoved his hand through his hair. “I’m leaving the state, and a stranger is staying with my girlfriend. This is fantastic news,” he said sarcastically. “I don’t like him.”

Anna walked around the counter and touched Baron’s arm. He

visibly relaxed. “He’s a friend,” she said even though *friend* didn’t quite seem like the correct word to describe Eli. “You’re going to miss your flight if you don’t get going.”

“What about us in the past tense?” he asked, reaching out to smooth his hand down her messy ponytail.

Anna’s chest tightened, and she pressed her lips together. “This trip will give you some time to think about us.”

Baron nodded. Then his eyes drifted to the archway. “What about him? How long is Frankenstein going to be staying with you?”

“Frankenstein?” Anna’s stomach rolled, making her feel like she’d eaten too much raw cookie dough. She glanced over her shoulder, but Eli wasn’t standing there.

“He’s huge.”

“Maybe a few inches taller than you,” she said with a slow smile, and Baron pulled her into a quick hug. “I don’t know how long he’ll be here. Not long?”

“Not long sounds like a good answer to me,” he said and kissed the top of her head. He stepped away and exhaled. “I’ll call you when I land.”

Anna nodded. “Be safe.”

She watched indecision ripple across Baron’s face. He didn’t seem to want to leave, but she assumed that had more to do with Eli waiting in the backroom than it did with him wanting to stay with her. She wanted him to stay, to tell her that he couldn’t imagine moving across the country without her by his side. But he turned and walked out. Anna watched him until he rounded the corner and disappeared. Sadness settled over her like poured molasses. Her shoulders sagged. She’d spent two years building a life on a foundation made of piecrusts. What was she going to do with Eli? He couldn’t possibly stay with her in her apartment, which suddenly seemed much too small to contain the two of them.

Eli startled Anna when he lurched out of the backroom with his eyes crossed, rod-straight zombie arms, and dragging his right leg behind him. His bottom lip looked like it was being pulled by a fishhook. “Master,” he moaned, “I am here to do your bidding.”

Unexpected laughter bubbled up her throat so quickly she nearly choked on it. “What are you *doing*?”

Eli laughed and straightened up. “I’m being Frankenstein.”

She couldn’t help but laugh again, despite the fact that her life had turned into a train wreck. “That wasn’t Frankenstein. That was Igor.” She tried to sidestep around him, but he blocked her entry into the backroom.

Eli pointed to his chest. “No. Me, Frankenstein. You, Anna.”

She snorted and poked him in the chest. “No. You, idiot. Me, hungover.” She skirted around him, feeling the heat from his body reach out and blanket her arms, beckoning her closer.

Anna walked into the kitchen and saw the rusted tin box sitting on the side counter. She lifted it slowly in both hands. Electricity danced across her skin. Static filled her ears. If the golden sand in the box was actually the reason for Eli’s existence, then it made sense that Grandma Bea had locked it away and told her never to touch it. Now it was too late. She was a modern-day Pandora, and what she’d done couldn’t be undone.

She held the box away from her as though it might be a ticking bomb. Then she glanced over her shoulder. Eli leaned casually against the archway, his arms crossed over his chest, watching her with his too-blue eyes and a smile. Looking at him, she found herself unable to deny the truth: Eli was hers.

4 Mudslide Cookies

The rest of the afternoon was a circus of activity. More women than Anna had ever seen in her bakery flocked in as though she might be giving away free samples from the Fountain of Youth. For the first hour or two, Anna wondered what drew half of the town's women in for donuts or éclairs or dark chocolate truffles. When she finally noticed the way everyone seemed completely enchanted with Eli's good looks and affable manner, she understood. Even the men in town, with the exception of Baron, were charmed. He talked about sports with the jocks, music and literature with the inspired. Anna spent most of the afternoon sweating like a pig in the backroom, baking and trying to keep the display cases stocked.

At least baking was a distraction from the hollowness she felt because of Baron. It was also a distraction from Eli, from the way she wanted to reach out and touch him just to feel the intensity that rushed up her arms and made her stomach feel like she was riding the thrilling drop of a roller coaster, hands in the air, screaming with pure glee. She knew the feeling was *wrong*, but it came so naturally that it frightened her.

She carried a warm tray of freshly baked mudslide cookies to the display case. Eli stood beside a table of four women, all held in rapt attention, and he laughed. One of the women reached out and playfully swatted him. A twinge of jealousy twisted in her stomach, and she looked away. Was the attraction a side effect of the secret ingredient? Did every woman in town feel the same magnetic pull to Eli? Did he turn them to pudding, too?

Anna closed the display case and groaned. Deciding if her feelings for Eli were abnormal or real or manufactured was the least of her worries. She had a man, who had sprung up fully formed from a ball of dough, and she had no idea how she was going to explain his existence at all, let alone figure out what to do with him at the end of the day.

Two hours later, when the bakery closed and she and Eli cleaned and put everything away, her stomach was in such a tightly wound knot that she felt as if she'd been spinning too long on the merry-go-round.

Eli hung his apron on the hook and rubbed his hands together. "Finally," he said. "You've been working like a machine today. Ready for a relaxing evening?"

Anna wanted to say something, but she was afraid if she opened her mouth, she might pull a repeat of the twelfth grade rum incident.

"You really are worn out, aren't you?" Eli said. He crossed the room and untied her apron, pulled it over her head, and hung it on the wall. "How about you take a bath and I'll make dinner?" he asked, pushing her toward the staircase.

As soon as he touched her, all the confusing, conflicting thoughts and fears in her head melted. She felt warm all over, like she'd already slipped into a drawn bath. Eli untethered something inside her, and her body seemed to float above them, looking down at the only two people in the world.

Eli grinned. "Your eyes just glazed over," he said. He stepped away from her and turned off the lights.

Anna blinked a few times. "I'm tired," she said defensively, and because she had no idea what else to do, she climbed the stairs to an apartment that she could already imagine bursting apart if Eli continued to touch her. Walls would not be able to contain the energy that surged when he came too close.



Anna stood awkwardly in the open area comprising the living room and kitchen, hands shoved in her jeans pockets, and listened to Eli's footsteps on the stairs. He walked straight past her and into the kitchen. He dug through the pantry and then rummaged through the refrigerator. Anna could do nothing but stand in the living room breathing in the scent of winter pine and hot chocolate.

Eli finally stopped and looked at her. "Go take a bath," he said and made a shooping motion with his hands. "I won't burn down the place."

Anna obediently walked into her bathroom, but how could she relax in the bathtub when there was a stranger cooking in her kitchen? She sat on the edge of the tub and winced as she pulled the rubber band from her hair. Somehow Eli didn't feel like a stranger. In fact, he felt *too* close, too much a part of her core. She skipped the bath and opted for a quick shower.

By the time she finished drying her hair and changing into her most chaste pajamas, she was tempted to drop onto her bed and sleep for a few hundred years. The entire apartment smelled spicy, and she found Eli grabbing bowls from the cabinet. She leaned against the doorframe and watched him.

"Spying on me?" he asked without looking at her. He ladled chili into the bowls. The room smelled like cumin and cayenne.

Anna pushed away from the door and stepped into the living room. "How did you know I was there?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "The air feels different," he answered, grabbing two spoons and bringing the bowls to the coffee table. He motioned for her to sit and she curled up on one end of the couch, hoping to put distance between them.

She thanked him when he passed her a bowl. She cupped her hands beneath it and warmed them. "How so?" she asked.

Eli brought a box of Saltines and two Cokes to the coffee table and sat beside her on the couch, causing her to slide so close to the armrest she was nearly sitting on it. She couldn't risk touching him, not when her defenses were weakening due to the sleepiness that crept in at the corners.

He smiled at her and scooped a spoonful of chili into his mouth. He swallowed and answered, "It's easier to breathe, like a sigh pulled from way down here." He tapped his stomach. "Plus you smell sweet, like sugar cookies and cupcakes."

Her breath caught in her throat. It was a ridiculous sort of compliment, but it made her feel warm and gooey like a cookie straight out of the oven. She tried to readjust her position on the couch, and her knees bumped into Eli's legs. He patted his thigh.

"Stretch your legs out," he said.

Her eyes widened. An alarm blared through her brain, and the words *Danger, Will Robinson, danger!* echoed inside her mind. "I'm comfortable," she lied.

Eli balanced his chili bowl in one hand and grabbed one of her legs, and then the other, with his free hand. Before she could argue, her legs were stretched across his thighs, and within seconds, she felt the white-hot pulse of Eli's warmth radiating up her legs and causing her entire body to tingle. She could barely breathe, let alone *think*.

"Eat up," he said. He popped the top on his Coke can and took a big gulp.

She shoved the spoon into the bowl, distracted. She filled her mouth too full and then spent the next few seconds trying to figure out how to chew without food spilling out. When she finally swallowed, she said, "It's my favorite chili recipe."

"I know," he said and grinned at her.

"How?" she asked.

"I know lots of things about you," he said with a simple shrug.

"How?" she asked again. The chili revolted halfway down, and Anna rubbed her fingers across her chest in an attempt to fight off the heartburn. Did the fact that she created him give him an insider's guide to her memories, to her thoughts and desires?

"Because we're friends," he said and ate another spoonful of chili. He put his bowl down on the coffee table and rested his hands on her shins. "But we're different too."

Anna knew she wouldn't be able to eat any more. She stared at his hands on her legs, and rational thoughts fled the scene. She felt the uncontrollable urge to reach out and touch him. Eli took the bowl from her hands, which was a mistake because her fingers began to twitch, itching to find out what his skin felt like. Would he feel real? Would she be able to feel his heartbeat? Would she feel a pulse at his wrist, against his neck?

"I don't know what we are," she whispered. When his blue eyes locked on hers, she could feel her hand lifting. Even though she knew she should jam it beneath the couch cushions, she couldn't stop the movement. And then her fingertips were against his cheek, tracing

the shape of his jaw line, slipping down his neck. Eli reached up and grabbed her hand, and a volcano exploded inside of her. Her vision tunneled, and she couldn't inhale enough air into her lungs. She felt herself leaning forward, her eyes closing, wanting nothing more than to see what Eli felt like up close.

The Turtles' ringtone "So Happy Together" blared from Anna's cell phone in her bedroom. Her eyes jerked open. "Baron," she gasped. She jumped up so quickly her forehead slammed into Eli's, knocking his head into the back of the couch. He groaned, and Anna scrambled over him. "Sorry."

The cell phone vibrated off the dresser. She snatched it from the air before it hit the floor. "Hello? Hey, you made it? Oh, I was in the other room. Had to run for the phone. How are you? It ended up being a super busy day. I'm lucky I had help... Yeah, he's...eating." She shielded her mouth with her hand and whispered, "Of course he isn't going to sleep in my room. You know my bedroom door doesn't lock, and that's crazy. He's not like that.

"Tell me about where you're staying," she said, easing onto the edge of her bed. An evening wind drifted in through her open window, causing her hair to tickle her face. Anna sighed. "Sounds really nice. I guess the firm will keep you busy while you're there. Oh, okay, well don't miss your ride. Call me later. Or text if that's easier. Talk to you soon."

Anna stared at the phone until the screen went black. Guilt, viscous and raw, churned in her stomach like boiling simple syrup. She dropped onto her bed, arms splayed at her sides. Less than a minute ago she'd been a breath away from *kissing* Eli. She draped her arm over her face and groaned. When she inhaled, she breathed in the rich scent of Eli, all dark chocolate and passion. Anna pushed herself up on her elbows. He leaned against her doorjamb.

"I can't do this," she finally said when the silence dragged on too long. "You know I can't." She averted her eyes. "I love Baron."

"I know," Eli said as he stepped into her bedroom.

"Then you know why I can't do this," she said, waving her hands in front of her, "whatever *this* is. You're doing something to me, and it's

messing with my head.”

Eli smiled. “What do you want me to do?” he asked, sitting beside her on the bed.

Anna slid away. “Just stop what you’re doing. I can’t *think*.”

Eli’s smile faded. The air around them shifted. Anna held her breath.

When Eli spoke again, his voice was low. “I can’t stop,” he said seriously. He moved his hand across the bed until their fingers touched. “Can you? Tell me you don’t feel it too, and I’ll try to give you what you want. I’ll leave right now.”

Could he really leave? Was he free like everyone else to do as he pleased? The thought of Eli walking out the door made her mouth go dry. He wrapped one finger around one of hers, and she looked down at their hands.

“Do you want me to go?” he asked.

She shook her head, and the sight of his slow smile had her holding her breath.

“I’ll give you some space. Why don’t you go on to bed, and I’ll clean up.”

Anna nodded and Eli rolled off the bed. She scooted farther up the bed until she lay on her pillow and stared at the ceiling. He couldn’t possibly stay, but she couldn’t bear to send him out the door. Where would he go? What would he do for money? *How* would he get anywhere without transportation? He was wearing borrowed clothes and living off memories that weren’t even his own. Anna squeezed her eyes closed. It was worse than that; she didn’t *want* him to leave. Even now she wanted him to walk back into her room just so she could feel the intensity that rippled off him and washed over her.

A few minutes later, with the bedroom lights turned off, Anna listened to Eli pull a quilt from the linen closet, settle on the couch, and dial the radio to a local station turned down low. As tired as she was, she couldn’t fall asleep. Knowing he was in the other room kept her awake and listening.

Some time near midnight, Eli stood in her doorway and whispered, “You awake?”

She swallowed. "Yeah."

"You're supposed to be sleeping," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "Want me to tell you a story until you fall asleep?"

Anna pushed herself up on her elbows, and her heart pounded. "Are you joking?"

Eli jumped onto the empty side of the bed and nearly bounced her straight off the side.

"I would never joke about bedtime stories," he said. "What would you prefer? Suspense, horror, adventure, happily ever after?"

Anna knew she would never have a chance of falling asleep now that Eli was inches away from her, filling up her room with the smell of rosemary and pine. "Definitely not horror."

Eli rolled onto his side. "Once upon a time—"

"Are you making this up, or is this a real story?"

"All stories are real if someone believes in them. Now, hush."

Anna listened to Eli tell a story about a young boy who woke up in a strange land. She stayed awake long enough to learn he met a beautiful young girl, but Eli's voice calmed her in a way she hadn't expected. She drifted off to sleep just as the girl told the young boy she needed his help.

5

Chocolate Caramel Bombe

Anna dreamed of lying on the beach, the sun warming her skin, a breeze blowing in from the ocean. She could feel Baron beside her, so she moved closer to him and pressed against his side. She sighed in the perfect moment. In the distance, someone began singing “Working 9 to 5.”

Anna mumbled, “Keep it down.” But the music only grew louder and louder until she found it too irritating to ignore.

“Time to get up,” a male voice said.

Anna’s eyes opened. She found herself in her room, not on the beach with Baron. Dolly Parton sang from her alarm clock radio. Anna’s arm and leg were draped over the man in her bed, who was most definitely not Baron. Her whole body tensed.

“For the record, that was all you,” Eli said in a deep, sleepy voice. “My hands are under my head. You, on the other hand, are all over me and making it difficult for me to behave.”

Anna groaned and quickly rolled over, flopping out of the bed. She looked at Eli who was stretched out on top of the covers, his long body barely fitting in her bed, wearing only a pair of Baron’s boxers. Anna rubbed her hands down her face and dragged herself into the bathroom. She pressed her palms and forehead against the closed door. She felt as though someone had shoved her into a cotton candy machine.

The wood of the door warmed beneath her hands, and somehow she knew Eli stood on the other side.

“I’m not trying to make this worse for you,” he said, his voice muffled by the door.

She nodded and then realized he couldn’t see her. “I know, but I have a boyfriend. And he trusts me.” *And I don’t know what you are or why I can’t control what I feel about you.*

“Nothing happened.”

Anna groaned and flung the door open. “A man other than my boyfriend slept in my bed,” she argued. “That’s *something*. It makes me

sick to think about him lying around with someone in his bed, which means I shouldn't be doing this."

Eli stood before her in a borrowed pair of boxers, and her concentration wobbled. She took a step back into the bathroom and rubbed her eyes with fisted hands.

"I'll sleep on the couch. Pretend I'm your brother."

Anna grimaced. "Eww, no way. I don't have a brother, and if I did, I definitely wouldn't feel—" She stopped herself from finishing the statement with '*this intense desire*.'

Eli smiled, slow and easy. He stepped into the bathroom. "Wouldn't feel what? Like you wanted to plant a big fat one on me?"

"Ugh, I thought you weren't trying to make this worse," she said, shoving him out of the bathroom. "Now, stay out. I have to get ready. Then, I'll figure out what to do with you."

"I have a few ideas about what you can do with me," he said and smirked.

Anna closed the door and exhaled loudly.

"I'll meet you downstairs," he said. "It's cupcake day."

"I know what day it is, Eli!"

The whole apartment seemed to expand with the sound of his laughter.



Anna tried to focus all of her thoughts onto making sure the bakery's treats were prepared before the customers arrived at seven a.m. With Eli's help, they finished baking, icing, cutting, and arranging with plenty of time left over to hang out, which Anna tried to avoid by cleaning the windows and organizing an already organized pantry.

When the first customers arrived, Eli was right by Anna's side, and she couldn't help but notice what a great team they made. Before long, she was smiling and laughing with him and the customers. During a mid-morning lull, Eli sat down with Mr. Silverstein, who always ordered six different cupcakes on cupcake day and ate each one in turn, relishing them like guilty pleasures. He swore they kept him curious and happy for an entire day. While Mr. Silverstein worked on the key

lime cupcake with lime cream cheese filling, he and Eli discussed the town's upcoming Fall Festival that would occur a week from Saturday. Anna saw this as an opportunity to slip into the backroom unnoticed. She grabbed her cell phone and crept into the large freezer. She wedged the door open with a wooden spoon.

Anna quickly dialed Lily's number. Her best friend answered on the fourth ring. "Hey," Anna whispered, "do you have a minute? Okay, good. Let me preface this entire conversation with the fact that I know this is going to sound insane, but I haven't lost my marbles. Something happened the other night after you left—yes, the rum night. Yes, I had a hangover. No, I haven't heard from Baron today. Yes, I have a new worker in here, and he's...yes, he's gorgeous. I didn't tell Tessa first. She came into the bakery yesterday, and it was a madhouse so I didn't have a chance to call either of you—Lily, will you let me *tell* you?" Anna sighed in exasperation. "The new worker is Elijah, the man I made with the magic sand in Grandma Bea's box."

Anna held the phone away from her ear because Lily's laughter was piercing. When she finally stopped laughing, Anna said, "I'm serious. Why would I lie about that? Lily, just get yourself over here, okay? I need you. Well, I don't care. Make Amanda work the register. I need you—"

"What are you doing in here?" Eli asked.

Anna released a strangled yell and bungled the phone so badly it looked like she might be trying to teach herself how to juggle. It bounced out of her hand and off blocks of frozen butter before ricocheting into her forehead. She leaned down, retrieved the phone, and hung up on Lily.

"Taking inventory," she said, rubbing her forehead.

"Is that code for 'taking a super secret phone call'?" he asked with a smile.

He reached out and smoothed her long hair with his hand, pressing strands of cold hairs against her neck. Anna tingled. Eli looped his fingers around hers, and she didn't immediately pull away. He was right-out-of-the-oven warm against her cold skin.

"If you stay in here much longer, you're going to be a Popsicle."

Anna exhaled and hurried past him, shoving her cell phone into her back pocket. The front door opened, and October breathed into the shop, sending in the smell of pumpkin pie and apple cider. Eli went to help the customer, and she was grateful for the moment alone.

The bell jingled again, and Anna felt a jolt of energy. She rubbed her temples and walked through the archway. Lily burst into the shop and stopped halfway across the room. Her eyes locked on Eli, and he smiled at Lily.

“Wow,” Lily said.

Anna could tell from the way Lily tossed her blonde curls over her shoulder and the way her face had gone all soft and dewy that she was under Eli’s spell. Anna marched over to Lily and grabbed her arm.

“Lily, this is Eli. Eli, this is Lily,” Anna said, and then she dragged Lily to the backroom.

“Gorgeous is not an adequate word for that hunk of manliness out there,” Lily said. “He’s a sex god. Honestly, I know you have a boyfriend and all—and—well, I do too—but maybe they’d understand—”

“Keep your voice down,” Anna scolded. “Lily, focus. On *me*.”

“Okay, okay. If this was an excuse to have me check out the new help, then thank you. Now, can I take him out to lunch?”

“Lily!”

“You’re in a foul mood today.”

“Listen to me,” Anna hissed through clenched teeth. “That man out there is the product of our night of rum. Remember we came downstairs, and while you drunk yourself into oblivion, I created a recipe. I added the sparkly stuff we found in the box, and when I got up the next morning, Eli was here in the bakery.”

Lily frowned and twisted a blonde curl around her finger. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Anna whispered even though she could hear Eli talking to someone in the front of the shop. “That guy out there came out of one of these ovens. I made him.”

“Are you on drugs?” Lily asked.

Anna clenched her teeth together so tightly a vein bulged in her forehead. “Listen to me. I don’t think he has any memories of his own.

But how could he? It's like he sprung out of nowhere. You don't believe me? Go out there and ask him where he went to high school. Ask him where he went to college. Maybe ask him what his last name is, and then come back here and tell me."

Lily looked doubtful, but she left Anna standing in the backroom, where Anna proceeded to bang her head gently against the island. She could hear Lily talking to Eli, and she heard them laughing. But when Lily returned to the backroom, she wasn't smiling. The room smelled like day-old coffee.

"Well, he definitely went to college with you in New York, which I find disturbing that you never mentioned him before now. How did you not date him when you were there? He clearly thinks you're the cat's pajamas. But he wasn't as quick to tell me where he went to high school. When he came up with a name it was our high school, and he's our age, which means he would have been in our class. Obviously he's lying—"

"He's not lying," Anna said. "Those are my memories. Eli thinks he went to college with me because *I* went there. I created him, Lily. He has no memories of his own. Of course he would say he went to our high school—*my* high school."

Lily chewed her bottom lip. "Did you name him Elijah Long?"

Anna shook her head. "Just Elijah."

"Then I guess he's chosen a last name for himself." Lily laughed. "Anna, what kind of game are you playing? This is crazy. You know that, right? Okay, game over. Tell me what's really going on."

Anna reached out and grabbed Lily's hands. "When have I ever lied to you? I swear I'm telling you the truth." Anna felt Lily's hands tremble in her own.

"But that's impossible," Lily whispered.

"Somehow the impossible became possible."

"You can't go around creating people!" Lily said. "Was your grandma magic? Are *you* magic?"

Anna wrung her hands together. "I have no idea what this means. And I'm scared out of my mind until he walks into the room, and then I can't think of *anything*."

“What do you mean?”

“He has some kind of voodoo mumbo jumbo magic spell over me. My mind feels empty but full of him. Full of *us*,” Anna babbled.

“You think he’s evil?” Lily squeaked. “Like dark magic or something? You think he’s from the devil?”

Anna shook her head. “No.” She sagged against the island. “It’s not like that. He doesn’t feel evil at all. He seems good and kind and wholesome. I think if anyone is bad, it’s me. This is serious, Lily. Remember what happened to Victor Frankenstein? He lost his freaking mind.”

Lily pressed both her palms against the island. “I need a minute.” She pulled in a few deep breaths. Then she paced the backroom while she rambled. “First of all, Victor Frankenstein made a man out of used body parts—gross. That would make anyone go insane to be followed around by a gigantic, stitched-together man. I get tired of Jakob sometimes when he won’t give me space. But as far as I can tell, Eli is all one piece. Second, Eli isn’t exactly a monster that’s causing people to try and torch your bakery. What are you going to do? How did this happen? I feel like I’ve eaten bad Chinese food. Have you told Baron? Have you told anyone else? Not that they’d believe you. Where is Eli living?”

“He’s staying with me.”

“Are you bonkers? You’re letting that donut man live with you?”

The temperature in the room rose, and Anna breathed in the smell of melting sugar.

“Please tell me that I’m Donut Man,” Eli said and grinned.

Lily squeaked and stood behind Anna as if she thought Eli was dangerous.

“We’re out of double dark chocolate chip cookies. Mrs. Rogers just took the last dozen. Want me to get started on a new batch?” he asked.

Anna grabbed Lily’s arm and tugged her forward. “Actually, Lily is going to take you to buy some clothes. I’ll make the cookies. I know you didn’t bring much on your trip here, and she has the afternoon off. She volunteered to help out. Didn’t you?”

The bell on the front door jingled again, and Eli left them alone in the kitchen to assist the customer. Lily’s eyes widened.

“I can’t leave Amanda at the shop all afternoon,” she said, stepping in front of Anna and facing her. She mouthed, “You can’t possibly leave me alone with this freak show.”

Anna frowned. “I told you the rum was a bad idea,” she mouthed. “You owe me.”

Lily dragged one finger horizontally across her neck.

Anna shook her head. “The worst he’ll do is charm the pants off you, but don’t even entertain that thought.” Then she added, “*Please.*”

Lily huffed. Eli returned and leaned against the archway, smiling at them. Anna felt Lily relax beside her. Eli’s smile could stop wars. Anna walked past him and opened the register. She counted out a handful of cash.

“Here,” she said, shoving the money into Eli’s hands. “Yesterday’s pay for working.”

Eli pushed the money back. “You don’t have to pay me.”

“You’re not working for free,” she argued. “I think they’ll arrest me for that.” She held the money out to him, and he took it, holding her hands for a few seconds. When her thoughts started leaking out her ears, she jerked her hands away and glared at him. Eli smirked.

Lily adjusted her purse on her shoulder. “If we’re not back in a couple of hours, send out a search party. You know I have LoJack on my car, right? If anything happens, the police can find me.”

Anna exhaled loudly. “You’re going *shopping.*”

Lily responded with a glare.

Eli wiped a smudge of flour from Anna’s cheek, causing her to sigh in a completely inappropriate way. Her body arched toward his like they were two magnets sliding across the floor. “We’ll be back,” he said to her. Then he looked at Lily and said, “Anna and I have dinner plans. We’ll definitely not be out for long.” He crossed the room toward the door.

Lily stared bug-eyed at Anna as Anna lifted her fingers to her cheek. Lily gave her a look that said, *We’re going to discuss this later*, and they were out the door, leaving behind an afternoon wind that brought in cherry-red maple leaves.

Dark and Stormy Ganache

*B*lustery afternoon winds blew in swollen storm clouds. The muggy air dampened everything as the town waited for rain. Anna closed the bakery at dusk and hurried to grab the mail before the sky burst open. She flipped through the handful of letters, but suddenly she stopped. She dropped everything on the table except an envelope mailed from the coast. Anna shoved her finger beneath the flap and ripped open the letter. Torn pieces littered the floor. She yanked out the folded contract. It smelled briny, and it warmed her cheeks. The faint sounds of rolling ocean waves and crying gulls filled the room. She pictured the boardwalk and glittering sand blowing across her toes.

A smile broke across her face. She lifted onto her tiptoes and bounced up and down. Then she twirled across her small kitchen, holding the contract high in the air like a baby doll dance partner. Her front door opened, and the scent of ripe cherries burned her nose. Anna barely had time to haphazardly shove the contract beneath a cookbook on the table. Half of it stuck out and hung off the side.

“What on earth are you doing?” Evelyn O’Brien asked.

Anna stepped in front of the dangling contract. “Mama,” she said breathlessly, “you should knock. I never barge into your house without knocking.”

“I have a key. Why would I knock?” Evelyn moved a book from the chair cushion and sat. “Besides, what would I interrupt? A baking session?” She smiled at Anna. “Come and sit. I have exciting news.”

Anna dropped onto couch. “How’s Daddy?” she asked. “He didn’t come by for his cookies this afternoon.”

“He’s finally agreed to let me redo the kitchen. I had him looking for a specific tile this afternoon. But you’ll never guess who called me today. Charlotte Clarke.” Evelyn paused for emphasis. When Anna didn’t fill in the silence with a response, Evelyn huffed. “The Clarke House? She’s selling it. She knows you’ve always loved it, and she’s

agreed to let you make an offer first.”

Anna leaned forward, propping her elbows on her knees. Her heart pounded too hard. She’d been in the Clarke House only a handful of times during the years, but she had seen it in her dreams. It was a magical place, a yellow and white gingerbread house nestled among pink dogwoods, wild roses, and lavender. “Is this a joke?”

“Tessa is representing Charlotte as her realtor,” Evelyn said. “You’ll make an offer, of course. Opportunities like this are rare, and you could finally move out of the bakery.”

Anna’s mouth was as dry as if she’d thrown a handful of flour onto her tongue. “I like this apartment.”

Evelyn laughed and smoothed her hands down her gray slacks. “This is a shoebox, honey,” she said. “This isn’t a place you live in forever. I think Baron would love the Clarke House too. It’s big enough for a growing family.”

Melancholy slipped into the room, swirled around Anna, and settled beside her on the couch. She stared at the contract swaying off the table. “Baron was offered a job in California, and he’s moving,” Anna said, unable to look at her mother’s expression.

Evelyn sat up straighter in the chair, displacing the air in the room like an approaching tornado. The contract flapped against the edge of the table, and Evelyn glanced over her shoulder at the sound. “You’re going to leave Mystic Water? You can’t. You belong here.”

Anna’s heart punched out a panicked rhythm. Had her mother somehow found out about the job offer in Wildehaven Beach? Keeping secrets from her mother was nearly impossible. She had eyes and ears everywhere. Nothing was ever too secret to be kept from Evelyn O’Brien. Anna opened her mouth to explain, but her mother stood and paced the living room.

“I know you love Baron, but how could he ask you to leave? He has a perfectly good job at the firm here. What’s in California that he can’t do here? This is your home. This town needs you.”

The room stunk like cherries forgotten in a summer sun. Anna stood and rubbed her stomach. She felt nauseous and clammy. “He didn’t ask me to go.”

Evelyn's eyes widened. Her pink, glossed lips parted, but nothing came out. Then she pressed her hand to her collarbone. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry."

Anna tried to swallow but couldn't. Her mother's pity undid the last of her resolve. She shrugged as if to say, *It doesn't matter*. But it mattered so much she felt suffocated by her crumbling plans. Evelyn closed the short distance between them and wrapped her arms around her daughter. Anna clung to her.

"He's an idiot not to ask you to go," Evelyn said.

"Mama, you were just mad when you believed he had asked me to go." Despite the ache in her body, she smiled against her mother's shoulder.

"Of course, you can't go with him, but I'm indignant that he didn't ask," Evelyn said and pulled away from Anna. "You've followed that boy around for years and supported all his nonsense whims. I've always thought you were too good for him. You need a solid man. A good man who knows how special you are—"

A bolt of lightning lit the entire apartment. Thunder rattled the windows, and books leapt off the shelves. Amid the storm, the front door flung open, and Eli rushed inside. He dripped rainwater onto the hardwood.

"Barely made it," he said, dropping his bags on the floor and rubbing one hand through his wet hair. Water droplets flew through the air and caught the light like glitter. "One more minute and I would have had to swim from the car."

His drenched clothes adhered to his body as if he'd taken a shower fully clothed. Evelyn stood rigid beside Anna. Eli noticed Evelyn and smiled. Anna dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling, exhaling loudly.

Eli walked over to Evelyn. "You must be Mrs. O'Brien." He held out his hand, and Evelyn hesitated before shaking it. "I'm Eli."

Evelyn's light eyebrows rose on her forehead. She looked at Anna for an explanation.

"Mama, this is Elijah Long. He's a—a friend from college. He's helping me at the bakery for a while."

Evelyn smiled, but her eyes scrutinized Eli. "From the Culinary

Institute?" she asked. Eli nodded. "It's nice to meet you. Will you be staying in town for a while?"

Eli looked at Anna. "As long as Anna needs me, I'll be around."

When he smiled at her, Anna couldn't help but sigh. She shoved her hands into her pockets because all she wanted to do was trace the outlines of his chest muscles with her fingers.

"Is that so? Where are you staying, Eli? I hope you're not paying too much for a short-term lease. I know a few people who are renting out houses or small duplexes at affordable prices. I'm sure they would be willing to work out a month-to-month lease with you."

Eli smiled. "I'll keep that in mind. I'm staying with Anna at the moment."

Evelyn's brown eyes bulged like popovers, and Anna feared she might have to shove them back into her mama's head. "Eli, could you give my daughter and me a minute alone?"

Eli grabbed his shopping bags and headed for Anna's bedroom. "I'll jump in the shower. Nice meeting you, Mrs. O'Brien. I hope to see you again."

When the bathroom door closed, Evelyn turned to Anna. "Have you lost your mind? You're letting a grown man stay in your apartment? This place is barely big enough for you."

"Mama, it's only for a little while." Anna grabbed a towel from the kitchen and started drying Eli's puddle and trail of water.

"How well do you know him? Does Baron know he's staying here?" Evelyn asked. She fisted her hands on her hips.

"Yes, he knows." Anna didn't bother adding that Baron was displeased about her houseguest too. Having her mama and Baron on the same team was more than she could stomach at the moment.

"I can't imagine he's okay with it."

On her hands and knees, Anna wiped away the last of Eli's wet footprints. She stared up at her mother. "I'm sick of caring about what Baron thinks. I'm a grown woman, and I can offer a friend a place to stay if I want. It's my choice."

Evelyn's lips pressed together. Anna knew her mama wanted to argue. "It isn't proper. What will people say? You have a man staying

with you.”

Anna stood and threw the wet towel into the sink. “Mama, I don’t care what the town thinks. It’s my business.”

“He’s too handsome to stay with you,” Evelyn argued. Anna was so shocked she laughed. Evelyn added, “Don’t laugh at me. He is, and you’re a beautiful girl. Things happen between boys and girls.”

“Mama,” Anna said in exasperation. She filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove. Anna heard her mama fiddling with papers. When she turned, she saw Evelyn reading the contract.

“What is this?” Evelyn asked. “Are you offering to buy a bakery in Wildehaven Beach?” Her mama’s face paled, and she dangled the contract from her fingers as though it was a contaminant.

During the past two days there had been too many lies told, so Anna answered honestly. “Yes. The owner is retiring. The bakery is in the perfect location.” Anna reached for the contract. “It’s a great opportunity, Mama. You know I love the ocean. I was going to talk to you about it.”

“You have a stranger living in your apartment. You’re entertaining the idea of moving more than an hour away to a town where you’ll have no friends or family. Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?” Evelyn asked. She stared at Anna with her dark eyes and shook her head with disapproval. “I think you need to remember that this is your home, it matters what the people here think about our family, and you have a responsibility to keep your grandmother’s legacy alive.” Evelyn walked to the door. When she opened it, the raging storm winds gusted into the apartment, fluttering book pages and bringing in the pungent scent of sulfur.

“Mama...”

“Think about what you’re doing. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Evelyn grabbed an umbrella from the stand next to the door. She opened it and walked out into the rainstorm.



Anna swan dived onto her bed and exhaled a long, pent-up breath. Thunder growled outside her windows, and dishes rattled in the

cabinets. Eli stepped out of the bathroom; steam crawled along the floorboards. She turned her head and looked at him. He wore a towel wrapped around his waist. Anna grabbed a pillow and smashed it on her head, but she could still smell a hint of melting chocolate.

She felt him sit on the bed a few minutes later. She rolled onto her back. The blue shirt he wore perfectly matched his eyes. “Show me what you bought with Lily.”

“You want to talk about it?” he asked. He opened a shopping bag and grabbed the folded clothes inside.

Her brow wrinkled. She propped up on her elbows. “About what you bought?”

“About what’s bothering you.”

Anna shook her head. Thoughts of Baron, Eli, Wildehaven Beach, the Clarke House, and her mama sunk together in the mire of her mind. “Let’s see what you found.”

Eli laid his new clothes on the bed. Lily was a professional fashionista. Her exemplary taste shined as Anna sorted through Eli’s finds. She smiled at him. “Your pants fit.”

Lightning zigzagged outside her bedroom window. Eli pretended to model the jeans he wore, which now were long enough for his tall frame. Rain assaulted the windowpanes, and Eli returned to the bed.

“I thought you’d look more alike, you and your mother,” he said. “Do you look like your dad?”

Anna thought it was odd that Eli wouldn’t already know what her daddy looked like. Maybe some of his memories were blurry, like looking at a photograph through water. Anna shook her head. “I look like my grandpa. He was Irish.” *Or at least that’s what they’d told everyone.* She lifted a lock of her hair. “Red-haired and green-eyed. Fortunately for me, my hair is more auburn than flaming red.”

“People can’t call you Carrots,” he said. After a long pause, he added, “She was pretty burned up about something.”

He reached out and hooked a finger around one of Anna’s. She closed her eyes and sighed. He filled her with warmth, like being wrapped in a bed sheet just out of the dryer. She lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Holding Eli’s finger seemed to anchor her, calm the jumble

tangling inside her.

“I love Mystic Water,” she said. “It was a great place to grow up.”

“But?”

She rolled her head to the side and looked at him. Did Eli already know her feelings? Did he already know what she would say because she’d created him from her own consciousness? “But I never wanted to come back here and live forever.”

“And here you are,” he said as he leaned onto his side.

Anna felt drawn to him. She wanted to curl up against him and press her face against his chest. When he slipped his hand into hers, she knew it would be a mistake to move any closer to him. A fire sparked low in her stomach and sent flames of heat to every nerve.

“Grandma died, and someone had to keep the bakery running. It was the right thing to do.”

“But not what you wanted to do.” He rubbed his thumb over the top of her hand.

“I love working in the bakery and being a part of Grandma’s life,” she said. Then she tugged her hand out of Eli’s grasp. Touching him shoved aside the chaos in her mind and set her at ease, but he crept into all the empty corners of her and made himself at home.

“She’ll always be a part of you no matter where you live,” Eli said.

“Mystic Water needs me here. They depend on the bakery.” She rolled off the bed and walked to the window to watch the fierce rain slap the panes.

Eli sat up and slid to the edge of the bed. “Those sound like your mother’s words, not yours. I think everyone would survive without your chocolate chip cookies. People adapt.”

“The town loves this bakery almost as much as they loved Grandma. It’s what they want—to have it open and me running the place, keeping it alive.”

“What do *you* want?”

No one had asked her what she wanted in a long time. Anna fell silent. After a time, she said, “I want to hear the sound of waves rush the shore.”

“And drag your feet through the sand?” Eli asked.

She turned around and smiled at him. "Yes."

"Me too," he said.

The smile slipped from Anna's face. Of course, Eli wanted the same things she did. She would have bet the bakery if she asked him if he loved the smell of the ocean breeze, he'd say yes.

"I can't leave Mystic Water," she said. What would she do with Eli if she left? What was she going to do with him *now*? Anna pulled clothes from her dresser and headed toward the bathroom so she could shower.

"You're right," Eli said. "No one would ever forgive you, and the beach is a lousy place to live. Hurricanes are bound to strike. Wildehaven Beach is a dump. Entirely too much sand and sun."

Anger flared inside Anna. She pointed a finger at him. "You've never even been there," she argued. "Wildehaven Beach is beautiful. It's the perfect seaside town, and the bakery is on the boardwalk right on the beach."

Eli tapped the side of his head. "I have a mental picture in here. I don't remember it being that great. You'll never be able to get the sand out of the bakery. Your cookies will be gritty, but maybe beach bums like dirt in their food."

Anna glared at him. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Eli leaned lazily back onto the bed. "You must really like the place."

"I love it," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Maybe you should move there," Eli said.

"Maybe I will."

When he grinned at her, Anna realized he'd been pulling the truth out of her. In her frustration, she threw her clothes at him. Eli laughed and tossed the clothes back at her. He spun her underwear around his finger and smirked.

"You might need these."

Anna's face burned. She crossed the room faster than a breath and snatched her underwear from his finger. Then she marched into the bathroom and slammed the door. She pressed a hand to her chest and felt her heart pounding beneath her fingers. She'd never admitted to anyone how much she loved Wildehaven Beach. Now that the truth had been released, she felt unable to pull it back in.

Blueberry Pie

Anna hustled down the stairs into the bakery. The kitchen smelled of hazelnut and sugar cookies. Eli was bent over looking into the oven. He stood when he heard her enter. His hands dwarfed the pink mug he cupped. Anna hugged a recipe book to her chest. “You’re drinking coffee?” she asked.

He nodded and sipped. “I prefer French vanilla.”

“I don’t like coffee.” She laid the book on the island. “Why do you like coffee if I don’t?”

Eli chuckled. “I’m only allowed to like what you like?” He moved across the room to stand near her. The warm aroma of hazelnut and cream swept over her, and she inhaled.

She looked up at him. “Aren’t you?”

He laughed again, and the bell jingled. He walked out of the backroom and wished good morning to the first customer of the day. Anna released a shaky breath.

“Grab the sugar cookies, will you?” Eli called from the front. The bell jingled again.

Anna brought the warm cookies to the display case. “You didn’t wake me up,” she whispered.

Eli waited for the customer to leave before he refilled his coffee. “I can get things started without you. You tossed and turned all night. I thought you could use the rest.”

“How would you know that?” she asked. At bedtime, Eli had grabbed a quilt and pillow and slept on the couch.

“I heard you.”

Anna watched Mr. Jones park in front of the bakery and climb out of his burgundy Lincoln. “I’m not used to having someone stay at my place.” She smoothed her hand down her hair and thought of Baron. He hadn’t called since he’d first arrived in California.

“What about Baron?” Eli asked.

Anna turned to look at him, surprised by the way Baron's name sounded acidic on Eli's tongue. "We always stayed at his place. He said it was easier."

"He said that because he's selfish and lazy." Eli looked away from her and greeted Mr. Jones.

Anna felt the urge to defend Baron, but the truth of Eli's words stung. Together they prepared Mr. Jones' usual order, and she watched Eli closely. He was different, edgier. Mr. Jones left, and Anna busied herself wiping off the clean tabletops. She didn't want to admit that Baron was self-centered because she would have to admit that he never put her first. She would have to admit that she'd settled for less than she deserved. Anna sighed heavily and stared out the front windows. Wet maple leaves lurched across the street in the October wind.

She knew Eli was behind her when she breathed in the spicy scents of chiles and chocolate. She squared her shoulders but didn't turn around.

"You're mad," he said. "I'm sorry."

"For what? The truth?" She laughed, but her throat was tight, and the sound squeezed out, pathetic and broken. When Anna pushed past him, Eli grabbed her arm.

"What I said hurt your feelings," he said. "I'm sorry for that."

Anna wiggled out of Eli's grasp. The air in the room chilled her skin, and she shivered as she walked away.

"He's an idiot," Eli said.

Anna finally turned to look at him. She blinked her eyes a few times to clear her vision. "Knowing that doesn't make it hurt any less."

Eli walked to her, and the magnetic pull between them intensified. If she'd been wearing roller skates, Anna knew she would have zoomed straight into his arms. She wanted to be wrapped up in him, to hear his heartbeat, to have him eradicate the hollowness and sadness. The front door opened, and Evelyn walked in. She looked tailored and classy as always. Anna always wondered how such a beautiful, perfectly manicured woman could have a daughter like her, who was presently wearing a pair of jeans and a red T-shirt advertising Coca-Cola.

"Good morning," Evelyn said. She adjusted her diamond stud

earrings. “Charlotte is going to let us have a look at the house this morning. Grab your purse, and let’s go. Tessa is meeting us there.”

As the fog shifted in Anna’s brain, she babbled a few incoherent words in surprise. Then she said, “Mama, I can’t leave the bakery. I have to work today.”

Evelyn nodded toward Eli. “You have help. Eli, you’ll be fine for a couple of hours, won’t you? You can run this place without Anna, right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered. “Anna, it’s fine. I have everything under control.”

“I can’t leave Eli alone in the bakery,” Anna argued.

“What am I gonna do, eat all the brownies?” Eli teased. “I’ll try not to blow the place up.”

Evelyn made a shooping motion with her hands. “We’re wasting time. Thank you, Eli,” she said and smiled.

Anna grabbed her purse and tossed her car keys on the island in the bakery’s kitchen. She ripped a flap off a box of butter and scribbled her phone number on it. Eli stood in the doorway and watched her.

“Forgive me?” he asked.

Anna made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

He stepped into the room. “Is that a yes?”

She heaved a sigh and wanted nothing more than to ask him to just hold her until she didn’t feel so tangled up inside. But thinking of holding Eli caused a whole new set of problems. “Of course. I have to go. My mama is about as patient as a three-year-old waiting for cookies to bake. You call me if you need *anything*. If there’s an emergency, you know my car is parked in the back,” she said. She hurried to meet her mother mama, but she stopped abruptly at the front door. “You know how to drive, right?”

Laughter burst out of Eli. Anna stared at him and smiled. She wanted to stand there and hear it again and again. It loosened the tension caught in her chest. “Get out of here,” he said. “You have about five seconds before your mother calls you from the car.”

Anna hesitated and then rushed out.



A low, wrought iron fence separated the Victorian garden of the Clarke House from the sidewalk. Anna pushed open the gate and walked up the long pathway leading to the house, which was settled back from the road. Anna loved the mansard tower that was squared on four sides, the lacy trim, the bay window.

The carved wooden front door with inlaid glass panels opened. Tessa stepped onto the porch. “Good morning.” She tugged at the bottom of her gray suit jacket. “I’m so excited you’re going to put in an offer on this house.” She pulled Anna into a quick side hug. “I’ve always thought this house suited you. I told Mrs. Evelyn it *looked* like you.” Tessa gave Evelyn a hug while wishing her good morning.

“I’m here to *look* at the house,” Anna corrected, “not buy it.”

Confusion flickered in Tessa’s eyes. She tucked her hair behind her ears. “Mrs. Evelyn said you were interested in purchasing it.”

Before Anna could argue, Evelyn ushered everyone inside the house. “Let’s have a look at the house, Tessa,” Evelyn said. “No reason to spend all our time on the front porch.”

The foyer ceilings were high and arched. A hook hung from the main archway, left behind from the days when a kerosene lamp lit the entryway. Thick, decorative crown molding traced the top of every wall. They stepped into the parlor, and Anna *oohed* over the original iron mantle and fireplace. She smoothed her hand over the cool top. Sunlight poured in through the bay window.

The sitting room had been turned into a library with built-in shelves. The thick, wavy antique glass on the windows made everything on the outside look like a dream. Anna walked to the windows and pressed her fingertips to the glass. The trees swayed against the blue sky, making it appear as though a wonderful Dr. Seuss world waited for her on the other side.

“The kitchen is this way,” Tessa said. “I know that’s the most important room to you. Mrs. Clarke recently updated all the appliances.”

Anna and Evelyn followed Tessa down the hallway. Stained glass

transom windows invited rainbow light into every room they passed. The house smelled like warm gingerbread and sweet icing.

“Wow,” Anna said as she walked into the kitchen.

A vase of white daisies had been placed on the counter. The size of the kitchen was unusual for an older home. Anna assumed that at some point in its history, the Clarke House owners had decided to expand their cooking and eating area. The expansion alone made the house worth buying. There were two stainless steel wall ovens. The double refrigerator had been faced with a walnut panel so that it blended in with the cabinets, as had the dishwasher. Anna walked through the kitchen, her fingers brushing across the cabinets and appliances. The almond enamel gas range was shiny and wide with four burners, a large burner in the center, and a removable grill top. There was a warming cabinet set into the bottom and two smaller ovens. A lot of simultaneous baking could be done in the kitchen.

Tessa clapped her hands together and smiled. “I *knew* you’d love it. It’s gorgeous. Look at the light in here. And the walnut cabinets. I’d *die* for a place like this.”

Anna examined the farmhouse sink. She smoothed her fingers over the wide basins. “You love your condo.”

Tessa rubbed her fingers across the smooth granite countertop. “But this place is perfect for a family.”

Anna frowned. “I’m not moving in here with my parents.” She stepped into the breakfast nook. Spring roses would bloom outside the kitchen windows. Anna imagined hanging a hummingbird feeder right outside so she could watch for their fluttering wings.

Tessa worried a button on her jacket. “I just meant eventually. I know Baron wants kids—”

“Baron is gone,” Anna said and walked out of the kitchen. Her mama called her name, but she kept walking. She felt irritated with herself for wanting to cry. She had dreamed of being in this house with Baron, but those dreams were swept far away, carried out to sea.

The wide, spiral staircase was half suspended from the ceiling and curved like a seashell as it disappeared into the second floor. Anna grabbed the walnut railing and climbed. She peeked into the first

bedroom, which was obviously the master. Light reflected off the cornflower blue walls, and a large canopy bed dominated the center of the room. Anna walked through the ensuite bathroom, admiring the tiles and claw foot tub. On her way out of the room, she paused. For a moment, she imagined herself curled in the gigantic bed, flipping through a cookbook.

The second room was smaller and painted lavender. Sunlight slipping through the lace curtains cast intricate designs on the hardwood floor. A queen-size bed positioned between two large windows was centered across from an antique dresser with an oval mirror. The final bedroom had soft yellow walls, a twin bed covered in a cream-colored quilt, and a walnut dresser with a large framed mirror. There was another full bathroom in the hallway, and Anna admired the octagonal black and white tiles.

When she reached the end of the hallway, she stepped into the tower room. The small room had no useful purpose. It was much too cramped for a bed or even a table. The ceilings were low, and anyone taller than Anna would have to hunch. Two long windows allowed in plenty of sunlight. She noticed a slender door on the opposite wall. Anna opened it and revealed a narrow, wooden staircase.

The door at the top opened onto the flat surface of the roof—the widow’s walk. Anna stood in the sun and inhaled slowly. She smelled lavender and pine. She couldn’t imagine anywhere more perfect to live than this house. Except she wanted to pick it up and move it to Wildehaven Beach. A gull cried, and Anna smelled ripe cherries.

“What are you doing up there?” Evelyn asked from the bottom of the stairs. “Come down here.”

Anna met Tessa and her Evelyn in the second floor hallway. “What do you think?” Tessa asked. “Isn’t the master bedroom dreamy? There’s so much light in this house, and I know how you like windows.”

“Why don’t you ride with Tessa to her office and look over the contract?” Evelyn asked. “You can walk to the bakery as soon as you’re done.”

“Mama—”

“Go,” Evelyn said and patted Anna on the arm. “Nothing is binding.

Look it over and see how you feel. I think you'll realize it's perfect for you. I need to run. I left your dad at home with the contractor, and they're probably sitting on the back porch talking about football. I'll never get my kitchen finished." Evelyn hugged Anna and Tessa, leaving behind the whispery scent of her magnolia blossom perfume.

Anna followed Tessa downstairs, and they made another pass through the kitchen. They walked through the backyard in silence until Tessa finally cleared her throat.

"What's going on with you and Baron? I didn't mean to upset you earlier," Tessa said. "I feel out of the loop."

Anna rubbed her fingers over the leaves of an unruly rosemary bush. "He left, and I'm not going with him."

"You broke up with him because of his job? You know how much he wanted it."

"It's more complicated than that. I'm happy he got the job, but he's going to California and I'm staying here. He didn't even ask me to go, Tess. He didn't even *think* about us. I didn't break up with him, but it's obvious that it's over." Anna turned and walked toward the house. She wasn't mad at Tessa, but she was sick of defending Baron and sick of talking about him. Thinking of how Baron was able to leave her behind so easily sucked all the light from the day and blew a bitter wind across the yard.

"Did he say it was over?" Tessa asked when they stood on the back patio.

Anna wiped at her eyes. "He didn't have to say it. Isn't it obvious? There's no where to go from here." She pushed her long hair over her shoulders and smiled ruefully. "How's your mama?"

Tessa tugged at her jacket. "She's doing better. She keeps asking about you and Lily, wanting to know when y'all will stop by."

Anna nodded. "Any time she wants us to. When she feels like having company, we'll swing by and I'll bring her favorite dessert over."

Tessa smiled. "She'd like that. And what about Eli?" Tessa asked.

"What about him?" Anna opened the backdoor and walked inside.

"What's he doing with you?"

Anna stopped abruptly. "He's working for me."

Tessa tucked her hair behind her ears. “Is he dating anyone?” she asked. She locked the backdoor and met Anna in the hallway. “People were asking.”

Anna laughed, but the back of her throat burned as though she’d swallowed whole chipotles slathered in adobo sauce. “He hasn’t even been here a week,” she said. “But no. He’s single.” *But he’s mine.* The ferocity of the declaration surprised her.

Tessa smiled and locked the front door. They climbed into her Corolla, and Tessa turned on the radio. “I can’t believe he’s single. He’s really good-looking.”

“He is,” Anna agreed, and she noticed Tessa hadn’t stopped smiling.



Tessa parked in front of Andrews Real Estate Agency, and she and Anna climbed out of her car. Tessa’s spacious office was dull with its white walls, two framed prints of still-life paintings, and gray filing cabinet. The overly ornate lamp with its beaded shade looked out of place in the office. Her desk could have been substituted for any random desk found in an office supply store, made of particle board and mahogany laminate. The only distinguishable and odd-looking item in her office was a misshapen, lumpy doll Tessa’s grandma had stitched for her when Tessa was a child. Now it sagged on the desk like it no longer had the energy to sit up straight and watch the world. At least she had a wide window.

“Tessa, you really need to buy a plant or paint the walls. This place feels like a jail cell,” Anna said, sitting across from Tessa’s desk.

Tessa rummaged through the filing cabinet and pulled out paperwork on the Clarke House. “You and Lily say the same thing every time. Except she’s a lot meaner,” Tessa said and grinned. She passed the paperwork to Anna. “It’s a basic agreement. Should you decide to place an offer, you would need to put down earnest money. Mrs. Clarke wants a month in order to move out and arrange for all of her things. She’s also willing to negotiate on any of the furniture. It’s a pretty standard contract, nothing too quirky, but you can read through it and let me know if you have any questions.”

Anna's cell phone rang. She fished it out of her purse. "It's Lily. Hello? No, I'm not there. I'm at Tessa's office. No, I'm not buying a house. Are you okay? Sure, come over." She hung up and shrugged. "Said she has something to tell us. She sounds weird, sorta strung out."

"Too much espresso?" Tessa asked, and Anna laughed.

Anna flipped through the paperwork. She had enough money to put a decent down payment on the house. Her mortgage would be affordable. Mrs. Clarke only wanted a grand for earnest money, and even that was doable. Anna leaned back in the chair and placed the paperwork in her lap. She absentmindedly braided her hair and stared at the top page. She never dreamed she'd have an opportunity to live in the Clarke House. She could write a check and get the ball rolling. Then she thought of the contract in Wildehaven Beach. Accepting one dream meant forfeiting another.

"What's stopping you?" Tessa asked.

Anna looked up at her. She hesitated. "It's a big decision."

Tessa leaned forward on her elbows and toyed with a ballpoint pen. "Here's what I suggest. You put down the earnest money to let her know you're interested, especially since she agreed to let you have the first offer. I know you like the house, but buying one is a big deal, so think about it. You don't have to sign the contract today."

Anna nodded. Tessa's advice made sense. Maybe in a few more days she could sort through the mess that had become her life. Although she didn't know how she would be able to work out the problem of Eli in a few days' time. Anna wrote a check for the earnest money and handed it to Tessa. The room flooded with the smell of strong Colombian coffee.

"I thought you weren't buying a house. What is going on here?" Lily asked, pointing at the check in Tessa's fingers. She plopped down beside Anna. The manic energy she emanated vibrated off her and landed on Anna. Anna rubbed her hands up her arms.

"I'm not buying a house. Not yet. The Clarke House is for sale," Anna explained.

"I love that house," Lily said. She hung her purse on the back of the chair. "Tessa, didn't I tell you to stop wearing gray? It completely washes you out. You dress like a mortician. Maybe that's why Tommy

the Taxidermist has the hots for you. He thinks you're a gray version of Morticia Addams." She wiggled out of her coat. "How can you stand being in here all day? This place is like a tomb. Would it kill you to paint? And that doll, doesn't it freak anybody else out? It's a redheaded voodoo doll—"

"Lily," Anna interrupted. "Did you have something you wanted to tell us?"

Lily wrung her hands together, and anxiety rippled through the room. Anna and Tessa passed glances toward each other. The silence dragged on, and then Anna's cell phone rang.

"I'm sorry. I have to answer," Anna said. "Eli is alone at the bakery. Let me see who it is." Anna winced when she saw the bakery was calling. "Hello, is everything okay? The house was great, but is something wrong? Dadgumit, I completely forgot. It's supposed to be delivered at one p.m. No, that's okay. It's not your fault. Keep the display cases filled, and I'll be right there." Anna disconnected. "I am so sorry, but I really have to go. I'm supposed to have four dozen cupcakes delivered to Mrs. Shirley's luncheon today. I haven't started a single one. Can this wait?"

Lily sighed. "Yeah, it's fine. Go ahead. We can catch up later, I guess."

Anna rubbed her temples. "You sure?"

"Yeah, go," Lily said. "I can tell y'all later."

"You can tell *me*," Tessa said.

"I promise to call you as soon as I'm done." Anna stood. "I'll meet you anywhere, and we can talk." She looked at Tessa. "Thanks for showing me the house." She said a swift goodbye and then she rushed down the few blocks to the bakery.

8 Lady Fingers

Anna put away the last of the clean dishes and glanced at the clock. She had one more hour to get through before she could fall face first onto her bed. Her brain felt like a water balloon ready to burst. She'd barely arrived on time with Mrs. Shirley's four dozen cupcakes, and she'd sped straight across town, praying for only green lights and no stray dogs. Mrs. Shirley had given her the eye but thankfully still paid her the agreed-upon amount.

Once she returned to the bakery, the rest of the day had been a blur of colors and people, like watching confetti swept up in a windstorm. There was a constant flow of people into the bakery, people she'd never seen set foot on her black and white tiles. On one hand, she was thankful for the business. On the other hand, she couldn't help but wonder if it had more to do with Eli's charm than with her creations.

Anna felt Eli had been avoiding her all afternoon. Sure, they'd been swamped with a steady flood of customers, but she could count on one hand how many times he'd smiled at her. His distance only intensified her confusion. She still hadn't heard from Baron, and she refused to appear weak and call him. If he wanted to talk to her, he knew how to contact her. She sighed and glanced up at the ceiling as though she could see the contract for Wildehaven Beach sitting on the table. She thought of the Clarke House, of the earnest money she'd put down so easily.

She grabbed replacement napkins from the backroom and carried them to the front. Eli helped the last customer in the shop, and she felt his eyes on her back. Once the customer was gone, he spoke.

"What are you putting in your cookies?"

"Which ones?" she asked. The display cases were nearly empty. She debated whether or not she should bake more, but it was so close to closing time.

"All of them," he said. "These people can't get enough."

Anna looked up at him. "I think it's *you* they can't get enough of."

Eli laughed. "Me?" He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You and your mumbo jumbo magic. You've charmed the whole town," Anna said. She sighed and looked out the windows.

"But not you?"

His words startled her. She wanted to argue with him and tell him that he had charmed her the most, but the front door opened. As soon as she saw Tessa, she realized she'd forgotten to call Lily.

Anna met Tessa halfway across the bakery. "Is Lily okay? What was her news?"

Tessa glanced over Anna's shoulder and waved at Eli. Then she whispered, "It's not my news to share. You'll have to ask her. It wouldn't be right for me to tell you. Anyway, I wanted to come over and ask Eli a question."

During all their years of friendship, Anna had never known Tessa to know a secret about Lily that she didn't know. The idea made her skin feel prickly. Tessa wrung her hands together and smiled at Eli.

"Is there any way you're free tonight?" she asked him. Anna's mouth fell open.

Eli glanced at Anna and shrugged. "What's happening tonight?"

"I've been thinking. I want to paint my office, but I've never painted before. Do you think you could help me with it? It shouldn't take long, and I'd buy dinner," Tessa said. "And wine too."

Wine? To paint an office? Anna's body wouldn't respond. She wanted to walk over to Tessa and tell her to back off, but she just stood and stared like a goldfish floating in a bowl.

"Sure," Eli said. "Anna needs some space, so this is a good excuse to give it to her. What time do you need me?"

I need space? Anna shook her head, but no one was looking at her.

"If you're free now, I'd love to have you go to the hardware store with me. We can look at paint samples together," Tessa said, bouncing twice on the toes of her black flats before composing herself. She turned to look at Anna and smiled wide enough to park a full-size sedan in her mouth. "Can you let Eli go early today?" Her hazel eyes pleaded with Anna.

“Okay,” was all Anna managed to say. Then Eli was untying his apron, dropping it off in the back, and leaving the bakery with Tessa without even saying anything to Anna. The room stank of burnt caramel, and Anna hadn’t ever felt more alone than she did standing in the empty bakery, watching Tessa and Eli disappear. She pulled her cell phone from her pocket. No missed calls. No texts. Nothing but silence.



Anna lay sideways on her bed and held her grandma’s yellowed envelopes in her hand. She stretched to turn on her bedside lamp because nightfall was blanketing Mystic Water. Kitchen twine bound the letters, so she tugged them free. When Anna opened the first envelope, she realized they weren’t letters sent to her grandma. They were notes Beatrice wrote to herself and sealed. Tiny white daisies bordered the edges of the powder blue stationary. Anna rolled onto her back and read.

November 8

Mildred can’t stop talking about the gypsies. She is mesmerized by their jangling bracelets and colorful skirts, their long dark hair and almond eyes. They move like water, fluid and graceful, charming you with their bubbling voices. No one knows where they come from or where they are going. Most people keep their distance. Mystic Water is friendly, but they’re wary of outsiders. Mildred doesn’t care. She told me she’d sat by their crackling fires and listened to them tell stories for hours. At least until her mother found her and demanded she “go home right this instant.”

I don’t think they’re gypsies. They look and sound like Italians to me. They’ve passed by my shop for the past four days. They always stop and stare, but they never come inside. I’ve tried to smile at them to show them that not everyone in town is afraid of their strangeness.

This morning, Mildred ran into the bakery during the afternoon lull and dropped a tin box on my counter. She begged me to open it. Her eyes were so wild I felt sure she’d caught an animal, and I hesitated. Would Mildred be crazy enough to put a snake in a box and bring it inside my bakery? I opened it to find sand—glowing, golden sand. She said the gypsies had given it to

her. They told her it was mystical, that it could bring life to the lifeless.

I laughed, and Mildred grew angry. She said the gypsies told her the story of the men in their band. Not a one of them had been born naturally. They were all created using the mystical sand. I'd seen the gypsy men. They had eyes the color of licorice and raven hair that reflected the sun like obsidian. They were handsome in an exotic way, but they seemed no different from ordinary men.

I told Mildred they were obviously spinning tales, nothing more. She threw a tantrum that I was thankful no one else was around to witness. She said she wanted to create a man, said they'd given her a recipe as an example. I unfolded the recipe and laughed. "You can't make a man," I told her. Her anger turned to desperation, and she begged me to agree that we could at least try.

I only agreed to the ridiculous plan so she would leave because I knew the after-school children would be coming soon. Tonight, unless I can change her mind, we will make Mildred a man. In the morning, I'll make her say I was right.

Anna refolded the letter. *Gypsies in Mystic Water?* When Anna thought of gypsies, she thought of Romania, of men, women, and children traveling in covered wagons, dancing around fires with their hoop earrings and bangles shining in the light. Her mind's version of a gypsy was likely skewed by movies and books, and she wasn't even sure that calling someone a gypsy was entirely proper anymore. Had they made Grandpa Joe that night? Or was he made after Mildred's man? Anna grabbed for another letter, but her stomach growled.

After making herself a grilled cheese sandwich oozing with two American cheese slices on smashed flat, buttered white bread, she curled on the couch and wondered about Eli. What were he and Tessa talking about? Would she ask questions he couldn't answer? Would she get him drunk on wine and find out he could kiss like a dream? Her stomach knotted, but she shoved the sandwich into her mouth. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed Lily's number for the fourth time. It went straight to her voicemail. Anna didn't leave another message, and she debated sending another text. Maybe Lily was busy or maybe

she was upset with Anna for not taking fifteen minutes to hear her out.

Anna did what she always did when she was upset. She baked. As she stirred the batter for double fudge caramel brownies, she reread the contract for the bakery in Wildehaven Beach. When she finished reading that contract, she flipped through the Clarke House's contract. How could two dreams be so far apart? Anna poured the batter in a greased baking dish and slid the brownies into the oven. Then she sat at the table and used her finger to clean the remaining chocolate from the bowl.

When Anna had eaten three brownies, drank a can of Coca-Cola, and was bleary-eyed, she finally decided it was time to call it a night. Eli still hadn't come home, and it was nearing ten o'clock. She was tempted to call Tessa to see how their evening was going, but what if Tessa answered out of breath and giggly like a teenager in the backseat of a car on Look-Off Pointe? She climbed into bed with a stomach ache and fell asleep listening for the sounds of Eli's footfalls on the stairs.

Mirror Glaze

Anna awoke before her alarm clock went off and tiptoed to her bedroom door. Eli was asleep on the couch, one arm thrown over his head and both his legs dangling off the edge. He didn't look comfortable at all. She decided she'd offer him her bed and she'd take the couch until they could figure out better living arrangements. Maybe she could buy the Clarke House, and Eli could have his own bedroom there. The second bedroom was roomy with a lot of light, and he could choose his own paint color. Instantly she wanted to throttle herself. *Are you seriously entertaining the thought of buying a house with Eli? It's official. You're losing your mind.*

Anna changed for work and glanced at her cell phone. Baron still hadn't called. Was he so busy he couldn't spare a single minute? She imagined him wandering through vineyards smiling in the sun. In Anna's mind, a Californian woman meandered beside him, and they shared jokes about architecture and spontaneity. Anna felt as though she'd eaten a spoiled egg. She crept down the stairs and eased the door shut on the bakery. This time she would let Eli sleep in.

She started the coffee and turned on the ovens. Saturdays meant a hodgepodge of chocolate treats—chocolate peppermint cocoa, chocolate flavored coffees, éclairs, tarts, turtles, truffles, cookies, fudge, and mini cakes. Chocoholics came in on Saturdays just to indulge. Anna put on a small pot of French vanilla coffee especially for Eli. While she was whipping up a batch of fudge, Eli came down the steps.

"I'm late for work. Does this mean I'm fired?" Eli asked with a sleepy grin. He grabbed his apron from the wall and looped it over his neck.

"Possibly," she said. She grabbed the small carafe and poured him a cup of coffee. "Good morning."

Surprise flitted over Eli's face, and then he smiled at her. Her chest expanded, and she sucked in a sweet, sugary breath. In these moments, Anna could pretend Eli was just a man who had walked into her bakery

and not someone who'd stepped out of her oven in the middle of the night. He seemed so real—so real she wanted to run her hand down his arm to see if it still made her tingle. Did he make Tessa tingle too? She cleared her throat.

"How was last night?" Anna said, returning to the fudge on the stove. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I used my stealthy ninja skills," he teased. "It was fun. Tessa's a nice girl. She has terrible taste in color though."

Anna's shoulders relaxed. *Tessa's a nice girl. Not a super sexy woman.* Guilt piggybacked on Anna's relief. She had a boyfriend, which meant it was completely selfish for her to want Eli for herself too. She poured the fudge into a square ceramic dish. "Tell me she didn't choose gray or beige."

"Orange." Eli gathered ingredients to make the turtles. "Gumdrop orange. I think it glows in the dark."

Anna shook her head. "Weren't you supposed to help her pick out a color?"

Eli held up his hands in surrender. "There's only so much a man can do when a woman makes up her mind."

"Does it look like the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown?"

"Why yes, Linus, it does." Eli drank from his mug.

Anna chuckled. It felt good to share easy conversation with Eli again. She tested the chocolate peppermint cocoa. The rich, dark liquid warmed her tongue and put a shine in her green eyes as she swallowed. She sighed with a smile on her lips. "I would live inside this if I could."

"You and Willy Wonka," he said.

Anna set her mug in the sink and gathered ingredients for the truffles. Today she thought she'd make a variety filled with dark chocolate, raspberry, peanut butter, or almond cream. "I wish he was real."

"I bet you wish you had a golden ticket too," Eli said. Anna looked over her shoulder and they shared a smile that made her insides feel hot and gooey like the center of a fresh cinnamon bun.



Tessa called mid-morning and asked if Anna was free to have lunch with her mom and Lily. Anna had just enough time to whip up Mrs. Andrews' favorite dessert, banana pudding. At a quarter until noon, Anna breathed in the scent of day-old coffee. She stepped out of the backroom to see Lily and Tessa talking to Eli. Tessa looked like she'd been riding the Ferris wheel at the fair, all rosy-cheeks and glossy eyes. In contrast, Lily had subtle shadows smudged beneath her lower lids, and her blonde curls spiraled out of control, barely contained behind a pink headband.

Anna joined them. "I'll be back in an hour or two. Call me if you need anything," she said to Eli.

Tessa touched Eli's arm. "Anna, you have to swing by and see the office. Eli did the best painting job. He was such a great help."

Lily didn't say anything, and she wouldn't meet Anna's gaze. "He said you picked a nice, bright color."

"October Orange," Tessa said. "I think it's actually called Tangerine, but October Orange sounds better."

Lily made a strangled noise in her throat and said, "I'm going to get some air."

While Tessa thanked Eli again, Anna followed Lily outside. "You okay?"

Lily shook her head. "I've been pukey all morning. No offense, but the smells in the bakery were making my stomach turn."

"That's not good. Why don't you go home? Tessa and I can go to lunch."

Lily saw her reflection in the bakery windows, and she tried unsuccessfully to pat down her hair. "It'll pass."

Tessa leaned on the door and slipped outside. "Eli is so great, Anna. He's not like other guys."

"I wonder why," Lily said cryptically, and Anna narrowed her eyes, but Tessa seemed oblivious. They climbed into Tessa's car and drove to the Andrews' home.



Carolyn Andrews' skin was pale and pulled too tightly over her thin frame, but her hazel eyes were alert and bright, and her smile was easy. They sat comfortably in the airy sunroom, which was filled with late October sunlight without the chill of the outdoors. The tropical plants flourished, and the gray, overweight housecat lounged beneath Carolyn's chair.

"My three favorite girls," she said with a genuine smile. "I'm so glad you were all free for lunch today. It's been too long. I made chicken salad. Tessa, do you mind grabbing the lunch from the kitchen?" Carolyn adjusted herself in the chair. "Lily, you look peaky today."

Lily cleared her throat and rubbed at her collarbone. "I'll be okay. I haven't been sleeping well."

Anna felt a twinge of guilt. She and Lily still hadn't talked about whatever Lily wanted to share, and clearly something was wrong with her best friend.

"I heard Baron got the job in California," Carolyn said.

Anna resisted the urge to sigh. Hearing his name made her want to rub away the ache that throbbed in her chest. "Yes ma'am."

"I never thought the two of you were an exceptionally good match," she said. "Nor were he and Tessa."

Lily's head popped up. "Tessa?" She glanced at Anna.

Carolyn smiled and stared out the window as though she was recalling a fond memory. Her dark hair was shot full of gray now, and it was impossible to miss the frailty in her movements. "He moved here about a year before you came back home," she said, looking at Anna. "He was this handsome, adventurous boy so full of life and energy. He needed a place to live, so of course he stopped by our office. Tessa helped him find a place, and I knew from the first moment she saw him that she was crazy about him. She'd never smiled so much in her life."

Anna's throat felt tight. Tessa had never once mentioned she had wanted to be with Baron. "He loves that townhouse," Anna said stupidly. Lily looked as shocked about the news as Anna felt.

"She pined over him for the better part of a year, and then *poof*, you came home, and he could see nothing but you." Carolyn smiled at Anna. "But that's the way life is, full of unexpected entrances and exits."

I know you'll miss him." She leaned over and patted Anna's hand. "But he was much too flighty for you. I'm surprised you tolerated him for so long," she added with flick of her wrist. "You need a different sort of man."

Anna nodded, but she couldn't swallow the jawbreaker-size knot in her throat. Tessa breezed in with the sandwiches and chips on a tray. When she returned with the lemonade, they ate, and no one mentioned Tessa's year-long crush on Baron Barker.



Eli ran the bakery with ease and looked relaxed when Anna returned from lunch. She'd barely stepped onto the black and white tiles when Tessa barreled in behind her, nearly smacking her with the door.

"Oh, sorry, Anna," she said. "I think it'd be a great idea for all of us to go out tonight. Maybe Fred's Diner? Lily said she and Jakob could go."

Anna noticed that Tessa was only looking at Eli. He turned his blue eyes on Anna. "We don't have any plans, do we? No cakes to make, no parties to prep for?"

"Are you including me?" Anna asked.

Tessa giggled—*giggled like a teenager*—and smacked Anna in the arm. "Of course I'm including you. Both of you."

"I'm in," Eli said, and Tessa's grin stretched so wide Anna worried her face might split apart like a plastic Easter egg.

"Easy there," she mumbled. Then she nodded and said, "Me too."

"Great! Let's meet at seven." Tessa rushed out of the bakery.

"Did you feed her Pixie Sticks for lunch? She's really excited about something," Eli said.

About you. "How did we do today? Did you win new customers?" Anna eyed the half-empty cases. "Maybe I should whip up a few more batches today."

"The éclairs were a big hit," he said. "People couldn't quit bragging about how good they were." He smirked at her.

"You made the éclairs."

"I know."

Anna rolled her eyes and went into the kitchen to get to work. She knew Eli followed her when she breathed in the scents of spicy chocolate and warm, sticky sugar. She watched him gather the tools they'd need. He looked real enough, solid, human, and her mama was right—he was too handsome. She *liked* him, and she didn't want him to be anywhere else other than in the bakery with her.

Anna wasn't stupid. She knew Tessa liked Eli because she hadn't seen Tessa this giddy over a boy since David Newman moved to Mystic Water in the sixth grade. But wasn't Eli hers? Didn't she make him because Baron was a jerk? Baron, who hadn't called in two days. Baron, who Tessa also had wanted to be hers. Anna was pulled from her thoughts when Eli mashed his finger between her eyebrows.

"Stop thinking so hard," he said and smiled at her. "You're going to wrinkle your face permanently."

She smacked his hand away, but she was smiling and losing herself in his too-blue eyes.



Fred's Diner was packed with the Saturday night crowd. Anna and Eli found the group sitting in a semicircle booth for six in the far back corner. Tessa's face lit up as though someone shone a flashlight down from the ceiling. Anna imagined a speech bubble appearing above Tessa's head saying, "He's here! He's here! He's here!"

Tessa wore a carnation pink shirt and matching lipstick, the first color Anna had seen on her in months. It complemented the rose undertones in her dewy complexion. Her excitement brought out a youthfulness that made her eyes bright and eager. Tessa looked at Eli and patted the red vinyl beside her. Eli slid in and Anna sat beside him on the end. Jakob and Lily were across from them in the half circle.

Jakob leaned casually against the back of the booth with his arm hooked around Lily's shoulders. He oozed calm with a healthy dollop of sex appeal. Jakob's dirty blonde hair looked like Lily had been running her hands through it, and he still managed to look presentable and clean in a pressed button down shirt and khakis. The dimple in his left cheek reminded Anna of a mischievous little boy. His affable nature

had always made him one of the most popular boys in school, and he was mostly oblivious to the stares he incited from women on a daily basis. Jakob grinned at them, but Lily looked as though she was lost in her own thoughts, not even registering they'd arrived.

Anna introduced Eli and Jakob. Once Jakob quizzed Eli on his sports preferences and realized they had a lot in common—which shocked Anna because she knew very little about sports—they were immediate friends. They spent the first few minutes sharing their opinions on quarterbacks and fumbles and biased referees. Anna's neck prickled as Eli talked. How could he possibly have that kind of knowledge?

The waitress bustled over for drink orders, and Anna ordered a root beer float. Tessa ordered a glass of Muscadine wine, and Jakob ordered a Coors Light for him and Eli and a Terminator—the equivalent of three margaritas—for Lily.

"Lily, are you seriously going to drink that big thing?" Tessa asked, looking like she'd sucked a lemon slice.

Lily glanced up and shook her head. "Just water for me."

Jakob nudged her with his elbow. "You always order the Terminator. Still not feeling good, baby?"

"I don't want to push it," she said, and he squeezed her shoulder.

Anna pushed her foot against Lily's shin until she looked at her. "You okay?" Anna mouthed while everyone was busy looking over the menus. Lily discreetly shook her head and mouthed, "Later."

They all ordered greasy diner fare, and Anna sucked down her root beer float, wishing she'd ordered something stronger. She needed it because Tessa had touched Eli at least a hundred times, and now Tessa's hand was propped on his forearm while she talked. Tessa had also turned into a laughing machine. Eli was suddenly the most hilarious person on the planet. When he could, Jakob tried to interrupt the conversation so he could get a word in.

Jakob nursed his beer, and when Tessa paused after describing a recent mold problem affecting real estate in the area, Jakob leaned forward. "So, Eli, you work at the bakery? Ever think about a different type of culinary job?"

Eli grinned and swigged his beer. “You mean a more manly culinary job?”

Jakob snorted into his bottle. “Was it that obvious?”

Eli chuckled. “Why does everyone always think pastry chefs have to be women?” he asked, faking exasperation. “Actually, I’ve always wanted to own a sandwich shop with regular and gourmet options. Homemade chips.”

Anna’s mouth fell open, and vanilla ice cream dribbled onto her chin. “You have?” She snatched a napkin from the dispenser and wiped her face.

Eli shrugged. “Maybe a combination deli and bakery where people could eat lunch and have desserts available. Something near the ocean.”

Anna felt like someone pushed her beneath the broiler. Her skin itched. Then a gust of cold, briny air blew her auburn hair from her shoulders. Eli was creating his own life full of his own dreams and desires. He was becoming his own man, not just a man she created.

“Could I order, say, alfalfa sprouts on seven-grain bread with the crusts cut off?” Jakob asked and finished his beer.

“I pegged you as a club sandwich kind of guy,” Eli joked. “You come to my place, and I’ll make you the best girly sandwich you’ve ever had.”

The food arrived, and Anna stared at her bacon cheeseburger. She wasn’t sure she could stomach it. Tessa filled Eli’s ears with descriptions about the myriad properties in town that would be perfect for his deli. She couldn’t give him an ocean breeze, but she could give him a cheery location and a promise to visit every day.

Anna chewed a french fry and noticed Lily was pushing her country fried steak around with her fork. Her skin was olive drab, and her spiral curls drooped. She moved her plate away and excused herself to the bathroom. Anna waited a minute and then followed.

Anna stepped into the bathroom, which housed two separate stalls and a single sink made of Carolina blue ceramic. Lily flushed the toilet and emerged looking ashen and wobbly.

“You think you have the flu?” Anna asked.

Lily made a scoffing noise in her throat. “Hardly.” She threw cold tap water into her face and washed her mouth out.

“What is it then? You look like you feel terrible.”

“Thanks,” Lily snapped. She dried her face with a brown paper towel and poked at the skin beneath her eyes.

Anna leaned against the wall. The room reeked of hot grease and roasted espresso beans. “What’s going on?”

“It isn’t a good time.” Lily tried to walk past Anna.

Anna grabbed her arm. “Tessa knows.”

“Because she had time to listen to me.”

“That’s not fair,” Anna argued. “You know I had to go back to work. I called you, but you didn’t answer, and you didn’t respond to my texts.”

“I was mad at you,” Lily said. “And puking.” Frustration rippled off her like summer heat on asphalt.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve had a lot going on too. We made a man a few days ago, and he’s living with me, and I have feelings for him, and Tessa is clearly in love with him, and Baron hasn’t called me in days.” Anna’s eyes slowly filled with tears, and she blinked them furiously. “My life is a mess.” She wanted to tell Lily everything—about the house and the offer in Wildehaven Beach—but her throat felt as though she’d eaten marshmallow fondant and she couldn’t swallow.

“It’s not all about you,” Lily said. Tears sparkled in her restless eyes. “You’re not the only one with big problems.”

Anna gripped the edge of the sink to steady her legs. This was all wrong. She wasn’t supposed to be fighting with her best friend in a bathroom that stank of yesterday’s Philly cheesesteak and angst.

Then Lily’s shoulders slumped, and she rubbed her hands down her face. “I’m sorry, Anna. I feel like a cat left out in the rain.” She flipped the lock on the bathroom door to prohibit anyone else from entering. “I don’t mean to snap at you. I’ll tell you what I told Tessa, and I swear if you react the way she did, I’ll deck you and leave you on this sticky floor.” She managed a rueful smile.

Lily exhaled the same moment Anna’s cell phone rang in her back pocket. She reached to silence it and saw that it was Baron calling.

“It’s Baron,” Anna said, swaying on her feet.

Lily made a shooing motion with her hand. “Answer it. I’m not going anywhere.”

Without hesitating, Anna answered the phone. “Hey,” she said. “I’m good. How have you been? It’s been a while. I’m sure you were busy. Where are you? It’s so loud I can barely hear you. Is that a dance club? Who’s Valerie? Oh, okay, sure—call me later.” Anna held the phone to her ear even though Baron disconnected. She stared at someone’s marker scribbles on the stall wall. It read: *In Case of Emergency, call Candi*. Anna wondered if Candi could heal the sick feeling seeping through every vein, scalding her from the inside. “He’s at a club with someone named Valerie. I heard her laughing in the background. He sounded drunk.” Anna choked and leaned over to put her head between her knees. “I think I’m going to puke.”

“Maybe you’re pregnant too,” Lily said.

Anna popped up so fast she stumbled into the paper towel dispenser and cracked the side of her head. She looked at Lily with eyes so wide all the light from the room pulled toward her and dimmed. A burning October breeze, smelling of brittle leaves and dark earth set afire, wriggled beneath the locked door.

“You’re pregnant?”

Lily nodded, looking as breakable and frightened as a porcelain doll dangling from a second-floor window. Anna pulled her into a hug and held on until Lily relaxed. “Does Jakob know?” she asked.

“No,” Lily said. “I’m terrified to tell him. His mother will likely pull her dyed blonde hair from the roots. She’ll debate whether or not to sew the scarlet letter to my chest. We’re not married. We’re not even engaged. It’s so scandalous.”

Anna shoved her cell phone into her back pocket. “First of all, Hester Prynne was married to another man when she had her affair.”

“Who the hell is Hester Prynne?” Lily said, wiping at her tears.

“*The Scarlet Letter*. Never mind. Jakob adores you,” Anna said, grabbing toilet paper from a stall and handing it to Lily. “We’re adults, not teenagers any more. So you’re pregnant, so what? It’s a big deal, sure, but it’s not the end of the world. Jakob would marry you in a heartbeat.”

“He’s about to make partner at the firm. If they find out about this, he might not get it,” Lily cried. “They’re so conservative there.”

Anna inhaled slowly. “You’ll have the most beautiful baby. We’ll get you through this and figure out the best time to tell Jakob.” She smiled.

Lily wiped at her eyes and smiled sadly. “Thanks for not reacting like Tessa. She freaked out so badly I puked in her office.”

“You added color. An improvement,” Anna said. “From what I hear the new color is intense.”

Lily grabbed Anna’s arm. “Don’t go in there. It’s blinding. For hours afterward, everywhere I looked was streaked with orange.” She laughed.

“I’m glad you’re not going to punch me and leave me on this floor because I think that gum has been there for at least a month.”

“Longer,” Lily said.

Someone knocked on the door. “Y’all okay?” Tessa asked.

Lily checked her reflection in the mirror and pinched her cheeks for color. She nodded and Anna unlocked the door.

“Just peachy,” Anna said as she opened the door. If peaches were confused and scared and clinging to their best friends so they didn’t drown.

10

Black Sticky Gingerbread

Anna wrapped herself in a quilt and sat cross-legged in the bay window. She cradled a mug of hot chocolate. She'd convinced Eli to sleep in her bed while she took the couch. It was 8:30 a.m., and he was still snoozing away in her comfortable bed. But maybe his sleeping late had more to do with the fact that he'd stayed out until nearly 11 p.m. helping Tessa. Over dinner, Tessa had mentioned wanting to rearrange the furniture in her condo to improve the layout, and Eli had offered to help.

Anna was tucked in on the couch when he'd come home. She'd wanted to ask him about his evening, but he'd seemed out of sorts and exhausted when he finally shuffled through the door. He hadn't even put up much of an argument about taking the bed from her. He'd said thank you and disappeared into her bedroom.

Anna placed her mug on a book and picked up the contract for the bakery in Wildehaven Beach. She rested it on her knees and flipped through the pages. The contract couldn't have shown up at a worse time. She knew she should probably move into the Clarke House. At least her mother would be thrilled, but Anna couldn't forget the bakery or the way the ocean breeze called to her. She leaned forward and exhaled a breath against the windowpane. Then she drew a question mark into the fogged glass.

Anna heard Eli rustling around in the bedroom, his bare feet on the hardwood. She turned to see him step into the living room. His hair stuck out from one side of his head, and he had the sleepy, innocent blue eyes of a little boy. "Good morning, Sleeping Beauty," she said. The room filled with the lingering scent of sugar and cinnamon.

Eli grinned and pointed to the window. "What's the question of the day?" he asked.

Anna flapped the contract in the air. "How to break the news to Mr. Cornfoot that I won't be buying the bakery from him."

Eli frowned and moved a few books so he could sit next to her in

the bay window. "You're giving up on Wildehaven Beach?"

Anna exhaled and fogged up the corner of the windowpane. She drew a frowny face. "I'm not giving up. I'm doing what's right."

"Right for you? Or for everyone else?" He picked up her mug and sipped her hot chocolate.

"I put in an offer on the Clarke House. I'm going to buy it. It's a great house." She looked at him and resisted the urge to reach out and pat down his wild hair. "But I want to do both. I want to live in the Clarke House in Wildehaven Beach."

Eli finished her drink. "You want more?" She shook her head. He walked into the kitchen and refilled the mug for himself. "Why don't you call Lily and drive to the beach. Take another look at it. Make sure you really don't want it anymore."

Anna uncrossed her legs and stood. "I like that idea. We have the day off and no plans." She folded the quilt and draped it over the chair. Then she grabbed her cell phone and called Lily. After a short conversation, she hung up and frowned. "She doesn't feel well today. Would you want to go with me?"

Eli smiled. "Love to." He caught his reflection in the oval mirror in the kitchen. "Whoa, look at my hair. Looks like I had a rough night." His laughter filled the apartment, and Anna felt the walls swell.

"How *was* your night?" she asked, chuckling as he tried to smooth down the unruly side of his head.

Eli stopped laughing and rubbed the back of his neck. He stared at the magnetic poetry words on the refrigerator and shuffled them around. "It was okay. We moved her stuff."

"Until eleven p.m.? Did you rearrange her entire house?" Anna asked, still smiling.

Eli cleared his throat and shrugged. "Not really. We hung out for a while, and then I came home." He finished his mug of cocoa and put the mug in the sink. "I'm gonna jump in the shower, and then I'll be ready." Eli passed her, and Anna caught a whiff of overdone cookies.

When she heard the shower turn on, Anna walked to the refrigerator. Eli's short sentence read, *I want to believe but I want cake.*



Wildehaven Beach was approximately an hour-and-a-half trip down a two-lane highway. Anna wanted to cook a quick breakfast before they left, but Eli suggested they stock up on random convenient store snacks for their road trip. Anna wasn't sure she wanted junk food for breakfast, but Eli convinced her it would be an adventure. After sharing a large bag of Doritos, a Snickers, a bottle of Coca-Cola, and Skittles, Anna and Eli were singing at the top of their lungs, and it felt good to let go of all the stress for a while. During breaks from singing, they talked about places they'd like to visit, their favorite foods, and movies they wished they'd starred in. Eli's answers didn't exactly match Anna's, and rather than finding the information disturbing, she felt comforted by the fact that Eli was becoming his own man.

Anna parked behind the bakery, and they followed the sidewalk until it connected with the boardwalk. The breeze off the ocean was chilly, and Anna zipped her jacket. She and Eli stepped onto the boardwalk, and instead of going straight to the bakery, they walked toward the water. An older man tossed a bright green tennis ball to his golden retriever, while a young woman jogged down the beach. Otherwise, the beach was deserted. Gulls soared through the air like feathered kites and skittered across the wet sand, dodging the waves lumbering in. Farther out, a group of brown pelicans undulated over the gentle waves like toy boats in a bathtub.

Anna untied her shoes, stuffed her socks in her jacket pocket and rolled up her jeans. Then she bounced into the cold sand. It squished in between her toes, and she shivered. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the smell of the ocean, all fresh, salty air and new possibilities.

"Last one to the water has to drink chunky buttermilk," Eli challenged.

Before she could open her eyes, he was already sprinting for the wet sand. Anna yelled, "Cheater!" But she laughed and followed him, pumping her arms like a steam engine and closing the distance between them. Eli reached the water first and kicked a spray of water

in her direction.

“You’re faster than I imagined,” he said, bending over and sucking in cool air. “The intense expression on your face is intimidating.”

Anna kicked water at him and smiled. “High school track team,” she said. She pointed at his legs. “Slim chance of winning when I’m racing against those mile-long legs.” She laughed and dodged a kick of water. “You cheated, so I’m not drinking chunky buttermilk.”

Eli laughed. Then he turned and looked in the direction of the boardwalk. “Which one is it?”

Anna stood beside him, breathing in the scent that was purely his. She pointed straight ahead. “The one there on the end with the blue and white awning. Aren’t the windows gorgeous? There’s so much light all day, but he used heat-reflecting windows to keep out the summer heat.”

Eli used his toe and wrote in the sand. Anna followed behind him, reading his words until the entire sentence was complete: *This could be yours*. She grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the boardwalk.

“Let’s go have a look. You can meet Mr. Cornfoot and his wife.”

They washed sand from their feet in the freezing cold water from the tap at the end of the boardwalk. Anna jumped around and complained of the cold until her feet were nestled back in her socks and shoes. She smelled warm chocolate chip cookies before she even opened the bakery’s door. Warm air rolled out to greet them, and Mr. Cornfoot popped his head out from the kitchen. His weathered face stretched into a smile.

Timothy Cornfoot was tall and still lithe from years of playing tennis. His hair was nearly white with slight undertones of the dark brown he wore in his younger days. His eyes were dark and inviting, reminding Anna of smooth dark chocolate. “Anna,” he said, wiping his hands on his apron. “This is a surprise.”

“I had the day off today, so I thought I’d visit,” she said. “It smells so good in here.” She walked to the display cases and smiled. She tapped the glass with her fingertip. “Mr. Cornfoot makes the best cream-filled donuts I’ve ever had.” She debated asking for one, but she was still full of Doritos and chocolate. “I received the contract in the mail.

Everything looks in order.”

Mr. Cornfoot nodded. “Can I get you two anything?” He held out his hand toward Eli. “I’m Timothy Cornfoot. I have coffee or hot chocolate, and Mel is pulling a coffee cake out of the oven right now if you’d like a piece.”

Eli shook his hand and introduced himself. “I work with Anna in Mystic Water. I’m her assistant, and I’d love coffee and cake.”

“He’s more than an assistant. He can do everything I can,” Anna said. “Hot chocolate, please.” While Mr. Cornfoot prepared two mugs, Anna looked at Eli and shook her head. “How can you possibly be hungry?”

“I never turn down an opportunity to eat,” he said.

“Are you coming to Wildehaven Beach with Anna?” Mr. Cornfoot asked. “If she accepts the offer.”

Eli glanced quickly at Anna, and her lips parted as if she might say, *Of course he is* or *Only if he wants to* or *Where else would he go?* or *Please*, but they were spared from answering because Mrs. Cornfoot stepped out of the kitchen with a coffee Bundt cake on a mint green cake plate. The room filled with the smells of warm vanilla cake, cinnamon, and walnuts.

“Who wants cake?” she asked. Melanie Cornfoot was a beautiful woman in her late sixties. Her hair fell past her shoulders, salt and pepper, and Anna thought she resembled Emmylou Harris. “Well, hello there. I’m Mel Cornfoot,” she said to Eli. As Eli introduced himself, Mel cut two pieces of cake. “Anna brought reinforcements.” She smiled at her husband. “How did the contract look?”

Anna thanked Mel for the slice of cake even though she didn’t have an ounce of space left in her stomach after the road trip snacking. Eli took a bite and closed his eyes. “This is amazing,” he said. “Don’t suppose you’re going to leave behind your recipes?”

Mel ushered everyone to a table. “Of course they’re included. I won’t have time to make cake while Timothy and I are globetrotting. I’m planning on people making cake for *me*.” She patted Timothy’s thigh and smiled.

“The contract looked great,” Anna said. “Just as you said it would.”

Anna cut her fork into the cake but didn't make an attempt to eat the small piece.

"But you're having doubts?" Mel asked her.

Anna's head popped up. "No," she said immediately. Then she exhaled. "Not really." She looked at Eli for help, but he continued eating. "It's complicated. I really do love it here. It's a big decision, and I'm weighing all the pros and cons."

"Good girl," Mel said. "You need to do what's best for you. Timothy and I would love to have you take over our place here. But if it's not right for you, then it will be right for someone else. Think it over. Consult your friends." She tilted her head toward Eli. "You look like a smart fellow. Did I hear you say you work with Anna? Want me to show you around the place, and you can give Anna your expert opinion?"

Eli grabbed his empty plate and stood. "I'm right behind you."

Anna heard Mel describing their top-of-the-line appliances. The kitchen had been completely updated two years ago, and it was amazing. The industrial-size mixer alone was enough to tempt Anna to buy the place. She could make so many batches of her goods at once. It would cut her preparation time in half, if not more. Anna looked out the window at the white-capped waves rolling onto the shore. The bakery wasn't the only thing she loved about Wildehaven Beach. She could smell the ocean amid the bakery scents. It settled around her like handfuls of thrown glitter, and her shoulders relaxed.

"I'll miss this place," Timothy said. "But it's time I kept my promise to Mel and showed her the world. We've been happy here, but I'm ready for a new adventure myself."

"Me too," Anna said honestly. She looked toward the kitchen just as Mel and Eli returned from the backroom.

"I'm sold," Eli said with a huge grin, and Mel laughed. "Anna, *you* would fit in that mixer."

"You two should enjoy the sun today. Take a walk. Take him to Tucker's Pier," Timothy said. "Mel, why don't you pack them a bag of treats to go?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Anna said. She carried her plate toward the kitchen.

“Nonsense,” Mel said as she slid open the display cases. “Eli, come over here and tell me your favorites.” He bounded over, and they whispered among themselves as the to-go bag grew fatter and fatter.

Anna thanked Timothy and Mel for the treats, and she and Eli stepped outside into the cool October air. The sun warmed her cheeks, and she exhaled a restful sigh. Would every day feel like this one—perfect and peaceful?

“Timothy and Mel are great,” Eli said as he strolled toward the beach. He shifted the bag to his other arm.

“Aren’t they?” Anna asked. “You know I can’t resist a bakery, so I wandered in one day, and we talked for hours. Before I knew it, Mel had me in the kitchen whipping up brownies, and we had the best time. I missed lunch with my parents that day, and my mom scolded me for working on my vacation. But it’s not like work to me,” Anna said and smiled at the memory. She untied her shoes, and Eli passed her the bag while he took off his shoes. “Whoa, this thing feels like a bowling ball. If we eat all of this, we’ll end up in a sugar coma.”

“Is that a challenge?” Eli smirked.



The return trip to Mystic Water felt as though time folded in half, and before Anna knew it, they were home. She groaned as she hauled herself from the front seat. The sun crept low on the horizon, and deep blues painted the sky. The first of the evening stars twinkled. Anna shivered as she jingled her keys around in order to find the one to her apartment.

“I can’t believe we ate all that,” she whined. “I feel like I have the shakes.”

“I can’t believe *you* ate three donuts. I thought you were pushing it with the second one, but when you went for the third, I knew it was bad news,” Eli laughed. “I bet you’d bleed sugar right now.”

Anna glared at him. “This is all your fault. You taunted me with them. All the *oohs* and *aaahs*. I had to test them.”

“Testing would require a bite, not the entire pastry,” he said.

“Do you want to sleep outside tonight? Maybe a little frostbite will

do you some good.”

Eli laughed and followed Anna inside. They shut the door as quickly as possible to cut off the freezing air that tried to follow in behind them. Anna turned up the thermostat, and the heat clicked on. Her cell phone rang, and she rustled around in her bag until she found it.

“Hey, Tessa,” she said. “I haven’t checked my messages yet. We went for a drive today. Wildehaven Beach.” Anna looked up at Eli. “Tessa says hello.” Eli rubbed the back of his neck and stared into the kitchen. Anna took a step toward him and poked her finger into his bicep. Still he didn’t look at her. “What? Why?” Anna asked. Then, she walked into her bedroom. “Okay, I’m in my room. No, he’s in the kitchen. Why are you whispering?”

Anna listened to Tessa for less than a minute. Tessa’s voice pitched high like an excited child, but Anna’s ears started ringing. The sugar in her veins pulsed thick and sickening. She went to sit on the edge of her bed, and she nearly missed. She caught herself before she dropped to the floor. Anna mumbled a few more words—possibly a goodbye—and disconnected. She rubbed her hand across her collarbone, and her throat felt so swollen she could barely swallow.

The room filled with the scent of stale donuts and glazed sugar that had hardened and flaked like crackled paint. She looked up to see Eli standing in the doorway. She’d never seen the expression in his eyes before—guilt and uncertainty.

“You kissed Tessa,” Anna said. It wasn’t a question. Tessa wouldn’t lie, and even more than that, Tessa was so thrilled that Anna could feel the energy rippling through the phone line and electrocuting her in the heart. Eli said nothing; he simply stared at her. The temperature in the room spiked, making Anna dizzy. Her brain rocked in her skull like a boat in a storm. “She said it was amazing,” Anna babbled. “That she never wanted it to end. The best ever.” Anna looked away from Eli’s piercing gaze. She blinked at the floorboards. “I’m happy for you both. Tessa is a great person.” The words hung in her throat as though they were connected to fishhooks that someone yanked.

“I’m going to take a shower,” she said. When she stood, her knees buckled, and she wobbled sideways. Eli stepped toward her, but she

held up her hand and shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” Eli said.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I can tell you’re upset.”

She tried to laugh it off, but her bottom lip trembled instead. “Why would I be upset? I have a boyfriend.” The word *boyfriend* sank into her stomach like burning coal.

“You do have a boyfriend,” Eli said quietly. His eyes pleaded with her to let him come closer to her, so she took a step backward. Being near Eli was too dangerous now. The idiot side of her brain wanted him to hold her and take away the sick feeling clawing its way out of her. But the rational side of her brain told her to redraw the friendship lines between them—the same lines she’d been assuring everyone else existed.

Anna rushed into the bathroom and shut the door. Then she trembled so badly her teeth chattered. She turned on the water scalding hot and sat on the edge of the tub while it heated up.

Eli had kissed Tessa. This perfect man she had created by accident, this man who tugged at her heart in a way no one else did, had kissed another woman. And not just any woman—one of her best friends. Maybe she was all wrong. Maybe Eli wasn’t hers. He was changing, making his own decisions, and evidently deciding Tessa was the one he’d like to be with instead of her. She knew she should be happy for Tessa’s excitement, for finding such a great man. But her heart squeezed so tightly in her chest she could barely pull in a breath. Instead of feeling happy for Eli and Tessa, Anna climbed into the shower, let the water beat against her cold skin, and cried into the blue and white tiles.



Anna’s bedroom door was shut when she emerged from the bathroom. She crawled onto her bed and held her cell phone in her hand. Finally, she dialed Baron’s number. The call went straight to his voicemail. “Hey, it’s me. I hope you’re having a good time...I miss you.” She disconnected.

Did she miss Baron? Her insides felt hollow, full of nothing but the

October wind. What she missed was the normalcy of her life a week ago—when she and Baron were still a couple, when he still lived in Mystic Water, and when she hadn't created a man who tempted her like nothing else—and who was in love with her best friend.

Anna rolled over and hung off the side of her bed so she could grab the letters she'd hidden beneath. She wondered if her grandma had anything else to say about Mildred's man.

November 25

She hates me. She hasn't spoken to me in more than a month. I've tried to apologize. I've tried to make her understand this wasn't my fault. Even her mother sends me away when she sees me coming up their walk. Mildred was my best friend. Now she won't even walk on the same side of the street. I wonder what she's told everyone because surely they wonder why we're never seen together anymore. I can only assume they think it's because of Joe. Joe is the one responsible for driving a wedge between two lifelong best friends.

I can see him sitting on the deck drinking sweet tea and reading the newspaper. He would have been perfect for Mildred. He's just her type, so doting and responsible. So predictable and kind.

How could I have ever known that Joe would not love Mildred? That he could love no one but his maker? His maker—me. I did not want a man. I did not dream of Joe. I had other plans for my life. There were places I wanted to see, but having Joe is like having a child. He is my responsibility now, and he loves me dearly.

He's good to me, but he doesn't set my heart beating like I dreamed of. His love for me feels like a part of his creation, not because he wanted to love me. He knows nothing else, only that I am the one he chooses to be with forever. Some nights I lie awake and feel the reality of my life now sitting upon my chest like an avalanche. When Joe feels me slipping into this dark place, he holds my hand and comforts me. But he never makes me explain what I'm thinking. Sometimes I think he knows that I do not love him the same way, and he is simply grateful that I allow him to love me.

I miss Mildred. I would trade Joe for her friendship again, but he would never leave me, and Mildred views him as tainted goods. I should

never have listened to her and made a man. Neither of us ever imagined the consequences.

Anna pressed the letter to her chest and leaned her head against the pillows. Her grandfather had been created for someone else. Grandma Beatrice regretted making him. Anna shared her grandma's feeling of responsibility. Beatrice had ultimately married Joe and had children with him. Had she ever been in love with him? Did she feel obligated to get married?

Anna stared at her bedroom door. Did the lingering effects of creation cause her to have false feelings for Eli? His feelings for her were already fading. Maybe it would be best to let Eli go, let him live his life with Tessa or whomever he chose. Anna rolled onto her side and looked at the darkness pressing against her windows. Eli had been a part of her life for less than a week. Letting him go should be easy. Wouldn't that help her life to return to what it was before he arrived? So why did the thought of letting him go make her forget to breathe?

11

Bear Claws

Anna walked to the long piece of parchment paper she'd tacked to the wall in the kitchen. She studied the desserts she'd written down throughout the day. With Mystic Water's Fall Festival happening in five days, she had a lot of work to do in order to prepare for her usual booth and for the auction. She added pumpkin pie to the list. It wasn't Anna's favorite dessert, but it was one of the most requested desserts in the fall.

"I think you should add your grandma's coconut cake," Eli said.

Anna and Eli hadn't spoken much all morning other than basic pleasantries. She wasn't sure how to act around him now, and he was careful to keep out of her way.

She didn't turn to look at him when he spoke, and she tapped the marker against the list. "It takes three days to make that cake," she said.

Anna felt Eli step farther into the kitchen. The air warmed, and she had a sudden craving for a warm cinnamon roll. She hazarded a glance his way. He looked so confident and calm. How was he adjusting to everything so easily when she felt like a toy car wound too tightly, ready to spring off into disaster?

"But everyone loves it. You can charge more for it, and people will pay. You know Mrs. Davenport will buy one. Doesn't Mr. Heller buy two every year?"

Anna walked into the storeroom and tore off another long sheet of parchment paper. She tacked it to the wall beside the first one. Then she split the list into sections according to the days of the week. She started writing the baked goods beneath the day of the week they would need to be prepared.

"If we add even four coconut cakes, they'll have to be started no later than Thursday. They'd need to be finished up Saturday morning, but we're already swamped on Thursday. I have to cater Emma Haynie's birthday party Thursday at noon. Most of Saturday morning will be

spent making last-minute touchups and setting up the booth. The festival starts at eleven a.m. and runs until the fireworks that evening. I don't see how we'll have time to add them."

Eli stood beside her, and she exhaled. He pulled the marker from her fingers. "Why don't we start the coconut cakes on Wednesday? Let's move the bear claws to Thursday. I'll do them in the afternoon while you're dropping off the party order. I'll have the coconut cakes finished by Friday, and they can sit overnight in the cooler. The flavors will have more time to meld, and they'll be even better for Saturday." He scribbled *coconut cakes – Eli* beneath Wednesday. Then he smiled at her and put his arm around her shoulders, giving her a quick squeeze. "And you're not doing this all by yourself. I'm here, and we'll get everything done."

Anna couldn't help but smile. "Thanks." Just when she was becoming too comfortable with his arm around her shoulders, he pulled away. The bell on the front door jingled, and Eli walked out to help the customer. She felt his absence like he'd been pulled away by the riptide, taking all the sweetness in the air with him. She turned and stared at the list. Then she began moving more items to the days-of-the-week section. The next few days were going to be a madhouse.

She smelled coffee grounds fresh out of the mill, and Lily bounced into the room wearing a lavender sweater, tight-fitting jeans, and her brown boots. Her curls were contained behind a headband with a silver, sequined flower on the side of her head.

"You look great," Anna said instantly.

"It's amazing what going from barfing all day to only barfing in the morning will do to you," she said and dropped her purse on the island. "I feel sick for about half an hour, and then the rest of the day I can almost forget I'm harboring a deep dark secret."

Anna knew Lily was trying to make light of her situation by being playful. "The only barfing in the morning is working for you. You look like the old Lily."

Lily smiled. She glanced at the lists and nodded her head. "I'm going to buy three dozen of the almond truffles. Make sure you make enough. Oh, pumpkin pie. Maybe I'll buy that too. I've had some weird

cravings already.” She looked at Anna. “On a scale of one to ten, how stressed are you about the festival?”

“Ten and a half?” Anna said. “At least I have Eli’s help. He’s completely competent. We’ll get it done.” Anna added another item to the list.

Lily stepped up and took the marker from her hands. She stood in front of the lists, blocking Anna’s view. “I talked to Tessa,” she said, looking serious. “She told me about her and Eli.”

Anna closed her eyes and sighed. Couldn’t she escape reality for five minutes without something reminding her that Tessa had stolen Eli’s affection from her?

“How do you feel about it?” Lily asked.

Anna shrugged. “Not as happy for Tessa as I should be, which makes me feel like a royal jerk.”

“Because you like Eli too,” Lily said. “You know we made Eli for you. Not for Tessa.”

Anna suddenly felt the need to weep. She tried to blame it on stress and not sleeping well, but her heart felt as though it had a belt tightening around it. “We didn’t even know what we were doing.”

“But he’s *yours*,” Lily argued, keeping her voice down.

Anna shook her head. “He’s making his own choices, and he’s clearly choosing Tessa.” Her voice trembled. *Pull yourself together*. “He doesn’t want me, Lily. It’s as simple as that. Baron doesn’t want me either,” she said, suddenly overwhelmed with self-pity.

Lily dug through her purse and pulled out a set of keys. She jangled them. “You need a distraction. Tell Eli to close this place down tonight. We’re getting you out of here before you eat your way through the brownie mix.”

Anna wiped at her eyes. “Where are we going?”

“The Clarke House,” Lily said. Anna opened her mouth to speak, but Lily continued, “You haven’t officially told me anything about the fact that you put down earnest money on the house, but I know you meant to tell me. Anyway, Mrs. Clarke is out of town until Saturday, and Tessa is quasi-housesitting for her. She goes over there at night to check to make sure everything is in order. I convinced Tessa to let

me go with you to the house to check everything tonight under the assumption that I wanted you to give me a brief tour. She made me swear on my life not to break anything. Can you believe that? What the hell, are we five? Anyway, we're really going over there so you and I can have some time alone in a magic house." Lily smiled.

Anna felt so overwhelmed with gratitude she gave Lily a spontaneous hug. "Let me grab my stuff." When Anna returned from her apartment, Lily was telling Eli that she needed him to close the bakery without Anna. He agreed, and he looked up at her as she came down the stairs.

"Thank you," Anna said.

"Of course," he said. "When will you be home?"

"Late," Lily said. She motioned with her head for Anna to follow her, and she turned and walked out of the kitchen.

"Should I wait on you for dinner?" he asked. His blue eyes seemed to convey that he wanted her home with him.

Anna was tempted to tell Eli she'd love to have dinner with him. She wanted to say she'd love to sit and talk for hours like they'd done during their trip to Wildehaven Beach. But that would be like asking Eli to turn on the broiler and shove her inside. She couldn't get the image of Eli kissing Tessa out of her head, and it filled her insides with boiling oil.

"No," she said. "Don't wait up for me." Then she hustled after Lily. The wind slapped her in the face and turned her cheeks red. The cold was a welcome change to the fire burning in her stomach.



Anna gave Lily a tour of the Clarke House, and she wasn't sure if Lily was more excited about the house or if she was. Once they were settled on the brown leather sofa in the library, Lily pulled her legs beneath her. She passed Anna her turkey on wheat and a bag of chips, and she unwrapped one for herself. "I've always thought this house would be amazing to live in," Lily said. "Remember how we used to drive by during the holidays when we were younger? She had so many lights strung like a fairy tale house."

"On Halloween, she always had the best candy too," Anna added.

She bit into her sandwich.

Lily nodded. "Hers was the only house Mama would let me eat the caramel apples from." She ripped open her bag of chips; a few jumped into the air and landed on the couch. Lily quickly tossed them back into the bag and brushed the evidence of crumbs from the cushion. "What made you want to drive to the beach yesterday?" she asked.

Anna swallowed. She rested her sandwich in her lap. "There's something I haven't told you. No one knows except Eli, and my mama, which was a complete accident. I wouldn't have told her yet." Anna updated Lily on the recent happenings and the contract offer.

Lily's eyes were wide and disbelieving. "You're moving? I thought you put an offer on this house. Why didn't you tell me you were thinking about buying a bakery?"

Anna sighed and leaned against the armrest. "It never seemed real until the contract arrived. I never intended on moving back home and running Grandma's bakery for the rest of my life. But Mama flipped when she found out. She says I'll be disappointing everyone if I leave." Anna stared at rows of books neatly arranged on hardwood shelves. Was her mama right? Would she be allowing Grandma Bea's legacy to die? Was she being self-centered?

Lily put her sandwich on the coffee table. She opened her bottle of pink lemonade. "Selfishly, I'm glad you came home, and I'll be sad for you to leave, especially now. My life is about to turn upside down."

"It's not like I'd never come home, and you know you could visit anytime," Anna said. Guilt crept from the corners of the room and coiled up her legs until it wrapped around her stomach and twisted.

"Wildehaven Beach isn't that far away, and I'd never turn down a weekend visit at a beach house." Lily smiled. "What will you do about this house?" She reached for her sandwich again.

Anna shook her head. "I haven't accepted the offer for the bakery. Mama would be over-the-top irate with me."

"She'll get over it," Lily said. "What do you want more? This house or the beach?"

Anna drank from her Coke can to try and wash down the uncertainty lodged in her chest. "It's not that easy. I want them both."

Lily clicked her tongue. “Too bad. You can’t have your cake and eat it too.”

Anna nodded. “I think I’d rather disappoint myself than disappoint everyone else. Mama’s right. A lot of people depend on me here. Now there’s the complication of Eli. He works here and has a job with me.”

“Take him with you,” Lily said seriously.

Anna cleared her throat and blinked a few times. “I’m not sure he’d go with me.”

“What do you need him for?” Lily asked, eating the second half of her sandwich.

For my sanity. For happiness. For the way he makes me feel like I’m a stick of butter melting in the summer heat. “He bakes well,” she said.

Lily narrowed her eyes at Anna, who avoided eye contact on purpose. “I’m sure that’s not the only thing he does well. Would you want to go without him? Would you be okay starting there on your own knowing he was here?”

Anna pressed her lips together and shook her head. She was seconds away from crying. Lily seemed to sense the approaching flood and slapped Anna on the knee. “Hey, if you don’t buy this house, I think you should let me have it.” Lily leaned her head back and funneled potato chip crumbs into her mouth.

The shock of Lily’s statement halted Anna’s sadness. “Would you want this place?”

“With Jakob? Of course. Who wouldn’t want this house?”

“I’ll let you have it, but only if you promise to deck it out in lights during the holidays and give out caramel apples at Halloween,” Anna said.

“Jakob would have to be in charge of the lights. This time next year I’ll have a baby to worry over.” Lily glanced out the window. “That sounds so weird.”

“I’m guessing you haven’t told him?” Anna asked.

Lily shook her head. She toyed with one of her curls, wrapping and unwrapping it around her finger. “He’s supposed to know this week if he makes partner or not. I’m waiting for the best time to tell him. I don’t want to jeopardize his promotion. He’ll want to tell his parents, and once his mother knows, I suspect the news will spread faster than

wildfire.”

Anna wrapped up the rest of her sandwich. “Are you afraid of how he will react?”

“A little,” Lily said. “I’m hoping he’ll be excited because I’m completely freaked out.”

Anna reached over and gave Lily’s knee a squeeze. “He does love you, Lily. You know he wants kids.”

“But we’re not married. You know how old timey this town is,” Lily said. “You think people will treat me differently?” Her watery eyes revealed her fears.

“What people? Stupid people? Hypocrites? Those people don’t count. Only the people who know and love you matter. Think of the awesome sweets we’ll have at your baby shower.” Anna walked to the hall closet and dragged down two quilts. “Finish your sandwich, and let’s wrap up and sit in the tower room. I think it’s time for chocolate.”



Anna and Lily curled on the floor of the dark tower room wrapped in quilts that smelled like cedar. Lily had brought hot chocolate and travel mugs so they wouldn’t have to use any of Mrs. Clarke’s dishes. They sipped in silence for a while and stared out the long windows at the distant city lights. Stars appeared and disappeared as clouds rode the winds across the sky.

“Are you still in love with Baron?” Lily asked.

Anna cupped her mug with both hands and stared at the lid. “I’ve wondered that a lot recently. How could I have feelings for someone else if I was in love with Baron?” Anna said. “But I don’t think this just has to do with Eli. Even without Eli, Baron would still be leaving me for California. It hurts, but I think I’m more hurt from the disappointment. I love Baron, and I miss him, but I think the time when we were in love has passed—if it ever existed.” She pushed her auburn hair behind her shoulders. “He proved how he feels by not including me in his future.”

“And Eli? Are you in love with him?”

Anna’s heart squeezed, and she held her breath. “Tessa has feelings for Eli.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Anna looked at Lily and smiled wearily. “You have always been the one to drag everything out of me—never satisfied with my avoidance tactics.” Anna glanced up at the stars. “It’s possible I’m in love with him. Not that it matters now. He’s chosen Tessa. But when I’m around him, I forget everything else. He gives me peace, and I don’t want him to go. When I think of him leaving, I feel like someone is splitting me in half. But what if that’s the magic?”

“What if it’s not?” Lily asked.

“How would I ever know if it was real?”

“Does it feel real?” Lily asked. Anna nodded. “That’s all that matters. You never talked about Baron the way you’re talking about Eli.”

Anna rubbed her hands down her face. She wanted to take a twenty-year nap and wake up to find her life was settled and there were no decisions to be made.

“We’re a sad little pair, aren’t we?” Lily bumped her shoulder into Anna’s.

Anna leaned her head on Lily’s shoulder. “What am I supposed to do now?”

“Tell him,” Lily said. When Anna started to protest, Lily continued, “I know Tessa likes him a lot, but you’re in love with him, and I’m pretty sure if he knew, he’d pick you. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. The whole town has.”

“Tessa would hate me,” Anna said. “She’ll think I’m trying to steal every man she likes.”

“We had no idea she liked Baron,” Lily said. “And Baron chose you. Give Eli the option. Maybe he’ll choose Tessa. At least he’ll know how you feel.”

What would Eli choosing Tessa instead of her feel like? Would her heart stop beating? Would she feel released from the magic? Anna sighed and finished her hot chocolate. “I’ll tell Eli when you tell Jakob. Deal?”

“Deal,” Lily said. “We’ll tell them at the festival. That gives me less than five days to prepare myself for the freefall.”

Spice-Kissed Pumpkin Pie

At a quarter until midnight on Thursday night, Linda Ronstadt blasted from the radio in the bakery's kitchen. Anna pony danced around the island, moving her arms like a swimmer and tossing her hair around. She pointed at a pumpkin pie that refused to set up correctly and sang loudly, accusing the pie of being no good.

"Those are some strong words for a pie," Eli said with a huge grin on his face.

Anna gasped and clutched a hand to her chest. "You scared the beebeebies outta me," she said, rushing to turn down the radio's volume. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I don't think you would have heard a bomb going off," he said, walking over to her pie. He poked his finger into the custard, and it sunk straight through to the pie pan. "You're right. This pie isn't good." He licked his finger. "Tastes good if you like sweet pumpkin soup."

Anna shoved stray hair from her face, leaving streaks of flour on her forehead. She grabbed the recipe and hopped onto the island. She scanned the ingredients and frowned. "I added too many eggs. I don't think I've ever made that mistake," she said. "I'll start over in a few minutes." Now that she was sitting down, fatigue made her limbs heavy and her eyelids droop.

"You need to go to bed," he said, sidling over to her. "It's almost midnight. I can make the pie while you get cleaned up."

Anna glanced at the clock. Where had all the hours gone? "You've been up as long as I have. It won't take long—another hour tops." She slid off the counter and yawned. "How was the movie with Tessa?" Anna had spent a few hours wondering what going to the movies with Eli would be like. Would he share the popcorn? Would they make space for both of their elbows on the armrest? Would he hold her hand? While making a dark chocolate tart, she'd even imagined she and Eli at a drive-in movie cuddled up next to each other watching an action-

adventure movie. Never mind the fact that she hadn't been to a drive-in movie since she was six, and there wasn't a drive-in theater within fifty miles.

"It was a chick flick. Tessa cried twice, and I ate a large popcorn by myself." Eli grabbed her arms and made her look at him. "Go to bed," he said. Then he pulled her into a hug. "You're wiped."

Anna sagged into him like a baby doll. He smelled like he'd been on a date, like movie popcorn and melting M&Ms. She pressed her cheek into his chest and exhaled. "And the pie?" she mumbled into his T-shirt.

"I'll make it." He let go and turned her around, pushing her toward the staircase. "I don't want to see you again for a few hours at least."

She smiled sleepily over her shoulder. "I want to argue, but I'm too tired. Good night and thank you."

"Sweet dreams," he said, and she dragged herself up the staircase. Tomorrow, the circus of baking would start all over again.



Anna showered and changed into her pajamas, and Eli was still downstairs in the bakery. She wasn't quite ready to fall asleep—not when he was still working—so she reached for Grandma Bea's letters. Anna closed the door all but a crack wide enough so she could hear when Eli came to bed. Then she flipped off her main light, turned on the lamp, and crawled beneath the covers.

December 5

For three days, the shop was a ghost town. The bakery might as well have been a sinkhole the way people seemed to avoid it while walking through town. At night, Joe and I would toss out the goods that were only fresh for a day, and we saved the items we could resale. The third night of tossing out my baked goods, I stood over the trashcan and cried. That's where Joe found me.

I told him I didn't know why people weren't coming anymore. He said we'd know soon enough, and someone knocked on the front door as if in response to his words.

My good friend Mary Margaret knocked again, and I unlocked the door. She and I stood in the darkened front room like fugitives. She spoke in whispers and eased, inch by inch, away from the windows until we were standing behind the counter.

She explained that Mildred told the entire town I stole her boyfriend. She'd filled everyone's head with lies. Mary Margaret apologized for not coming by sooner, but she said Mildred had kept her hawk eyes on her. Evidently the whole town was on edge because of the wildness they saw in Mildred's eyes. As soon as Mildred left a town meeting the previous night, all the bushes around City Hall had caught fire.

I was indignant. I told Mary Margaret I hadn't stolen Joe. Joe had chosen me.

Mary Margaret understood. She said she believed me because it didn't make sense for Joe to have been Mildred's boyfriend when no one had ever seen him before until they saw him in the bakery. She also said she and Mildred had gotten into a big argument because Mildred told her a cockamamie story about me making Joe out of dough like a common witch. Mary Margaret admitted that she feared Mildred was losing her mind. Then she had checked her watch, knowing we both were aware there was no way she could see the watch face in the darkness. She said she needed to go and that I should keep hope that people would return.

Mary Margaret pulled open the door and looked both ways before she rushed out of the bakery. Resentment flared in me like a gas burner. My apologies had fallen on deaf ears. Mildred not only rejected my friendship, but she also had infected the town with her bitterness and rage. She had pushed past personal and had chosen to destroy my business.

Joe was cleaning off the countertops when I returned to the backroom. He looked up at me and gave me his most gentle smile. Up until that moment, I had not truly appreciated his support, his constant companionship. He had never once told me to snap out of my gloomy state, never once told me to get over losing Mildred's friendship for reasons he could not understand. Now when my hometown turned its back on me, he offered me a smile that said, "I'm here."

I told him we were entering a war, and if it took me all night, I would bake sweets that would draw the town to me like bears to honey. Mildred

wouldn't beat me.

Joe grinned, and for the first time, I saw mischief flicker in his green eyes. He said he wouldn't let Mildred beat me either.

We stayed up until the wee hours of the morning baking, icing, mixing, and molding. Sparks flew from the ovens. The scents of chocolate and vanilla filled the air with a pink haze, slipped beneath the doors, and lights flickered on all over town. Sugary smells, warm, sticky, and sweet, floated from the kitchen and coated everything like a fine dusting of powdered sugar. Cupcakes sparkled on colorful cake plates, and cookies filled the display window like smiling faces.

Before we could unlock the door at seven a.m., a line had already formed. At least half the town rushed in with eager eyes and watering mouths. By noon, we had nearly sold out of everything. People bought faster than we could replenish our stock. Joe and I stood behind the counter, and I reached over and slid my hand into his. He gave my hand a squeeze, and I couldn't stop smiling.



Friday was ordered pandemonium—if there was such a thing. Running the bakery during usual hours and trying to make last minute preparations for the festival left Anna feeling like she was trapped inside a spinning top. She hadn't sat down all day, and without Eli's badgering, she wouldn't have eaten either.

Anna crossed the last baked good—blueberry muffins—off the list and smiled. She bounced into the front room and lifted her arms over her head like a cheerleader at a pep rally.

“We're done!” she said.

Eli looked up from the boxes he was packing for tomorrow. He'd labeled all the boxes according to what each contained and where it would be placed in the booth or at the auction. He smiled at her. “Way to go,” he said. “This is my last box, and we can call it a night. We can celebrate the fact we're going to bed before midnight.”

Anna looked out the windows. “What time is it?” When had night fallen? White string lights stretched across the fronts of the downtown buildings. Gas lamps flickered, lighting the path of the festival's layout.

Colorful tents had already been assembled and lined along the street. Anna could just make out the outline of the live music stage.

“It’s after eight,” Eli said.

Anna walked to the front windows. Lights twinkled, and maple leaves tumbled across the tops of the tents. Tomorrow Mystic Water would become a colorful riot of music, crafts, foods, and activities.

“You’re going to love the festival,” Anna said. “It’s one of the best times to be in Mystic Water.”

Eli folded the flaps on the last box and stretched his back. Then he walked over and stood beside her. “Want to order pizza and watch TV until we start drooling?”

Anna’s heart fluttered. Yes! “You’re not going out?” In Anna’s mind, she expected Tessa to want to be with Eli every evening when he wasn’t working because that’s what she would have wanted.

“I’m exhausted. I’d rather be a bum on your couch.”

Anna smiled at him and leaned her head against his bicep for a moment. “We have to set an alarm *before* we start eating. I have a feeling that once we fill up on pizza, we’re going to fade fast.”

Eli chuckled. “You’re in charge of the alarm. I’ll be in charge of the pizza. Let’s close this place down.”



Eli ordered pizza, and Anna filled the claw foot tub with water and lavender-scented bubble bath. When she eased into the water, the bubbles rose to her ears, and she draped her hair over the lip of the tub and sighed. Anna closed her eyes and soaked for a few minutes before she dried her hands and reached for one of Grandma Bea’s last letters.

December 24

Today Joe brought home a guitar. He saw it in the pawn store window during his afternoon walk, and he said he felt lured in by the music he heard in his head. I laughed when he sat down at the kitchen table and tuned the strings. He hummed and twisted the knobs until each string sounded perfect.

I busied myself tossing dirty aprons and towels into the washing

machine, but when Joe started strumming his fingers across the strings, I stopped, bent over with my hands hovering above the dirty laundry. I straightened slowly and walked into the kitchen.

Joe whistled and played a song I'd never heard before. He looked up at me, grinned, and made up words about me and the bakery. I asked him how he knew how to play the guitar because I don't have one musical bone in my body, and he shrugged. Said he felt it. My skin felt shivery as I realized that Joseph O'Brien was becoming his own man with his own talents and his own ideas. And still he loved me. That was something to smile about.

13

Passion Fruit Torte

Anna had rented two large blue tents housing long tables in the front and extra tables in the back used for storing the product not on immediate display. Cupcakes spun on the whimsical arms of holders shaped like trees. Pies sat in neat rows and summoned people over with their buttery, flaky crusts. Pairs of cookies wrapped in plastic bags tied with aqua ribbons lined the fronts of the tables. Eli hung a nylon sign announcing the name of the bakery, and it draped across the tops of both tents.

Anna hugged her arms around her chest and bounced on her toes. “I think that’s everything. People should start piling in here within half an hour.” She reached for her hot chocolate and drank. It spread warmth throughout her chest and traveled to her fingers and toes.

A cold north wind rushed down the streets. Anna’s knitted scarf flew into her face, and the sign flapped wildly before Eli could tie it down tightly. Grandma Beatrice had always said a north wind was a bad omen. It foretold coming storms, disaster, and sometimes violence. Anna shivered.

Eli stepped off the ladder and folded it. He grabbed his coffee. “You think the cold will keep people away?”

“Not the people in this town,” Anna said. “I don’t think a snow storm could keep them out.”

Hours later, the downtown streets of Mystic Water were alive and packed full of people bundled in scarves, hats, and mittens. Steam rose from cups of coffee, hot chocolate, mulled cider, and buttered rum. Big band music swelled from the stage, and Anna bopped her hips to the rhythm. Vendors sold bratwursts, giant turkey legs, and kettle corn. Funnel cakes filled the air with the smell of hot vanilla, and blue and pink swirls of cotton candy bounced above heads like edible balloons. People walked by eating corndogs, grilled cheese sandwiches folded in wax paper, and french fries in brown paper sacks dotted with grease.

Anna brought out cookies and brownies to replace the dwindling supplies, and she refilled the cupcake stands. “We’ve sold more than half of our supply,” she told Eli. “If sales keep up at this rate, we’ll have to close down before the festival ends.”

“We can enjoy the rest of the night,” Eli said.

“My thoughts exactly.” She smiled at him.

Three young women giggled their way over to Anna. They cupped mugs of steaming hot chocolate, and happiness bubbled inside them, making their cheeks rosy and their smiles wide. She didn’t recognize them as bakery regulars.

“Hey, y’all,” Anna said. “See anything you like?”

The bright, red-haired woman glanced over the offerings. “We’re from out of town—road trip! And everyone keeps telling us we *have* to come and buy something from your booth. They swear your stuff is magical. I’m looking for a cure. I ate too many nachos—”

“Too many nachos?” the dark-haired woman laughed. “You cleaned out their supply. And I recall you trying to bite my finger off when I reached for one.”

The redhead snickered. “Man, that cheese was good. What do you have that’ll settle this stomach? Money is no object,” she said playfully.

Anna lifted an aqua box stamped with an emblem of the bakery’s logo. “Peanut butter truffles cure cheese overload. Eat a few of these, and you’ll forget your rumbling tummy,” she said with a smile.

“I could really use a good night’s rest,” the dark-haired woman said. “Crashing with these two nuts takes its toll on my beauty sleep.”

Anna gave her two bags of double dark chocolate chip cookies. “Guaranteed to bring you peace and relaxation.”

“What do you have to spur creativity?” the woman with long, curly hair asked with a laugh.

Anna motioned for her to follow her to the far end of the table. “I call this the Black ’n Blue,” she explained. “It’s a freshly made pie with blackberries and blueberries and a buttery double crust. I’d say one piece will do the trick, but if you find yourself in a creative lull, I’d add a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top.”

The redhead squeezed in beside her friend. “I think we passed the

ice cream station a few minutes ago.” She looked up at Anna. “Don’t suppose you have a fork and spoon handy?”

Eli rummaged around in a box while Anna took payments for the desserts. Then, Eli passed the woman three forks and spoons. “We have a little bit of everything.”

“I bet you do,” the redhead said, and she winked at Eli. Then all three women giggled and walked off.

Eli shook his head and watched the women fade into the crowd. “Do people really think your sweets are magical?” he asked.

Anna shrugged. “If they believe it works, then it does. I know only what they’ve told me.” She refilled her travel mug with hot chocolate.

“What’s the most magical thing you’ve ever made?” he asked, and she coughed as she choked on her drink.

Tessa chose that moment to bound around the side of the tent. “Hey!” She waved at Anna and pulled Eli into an awkward side hug. “I haven’t seen you in days,” she said to him. “Anna’s been working you too hard.”

Anna wanted to look away, but she couldn’t stop staring at Tessa’s arm wrapped around Eli, breathing him in, staring up into his blue eyes. Eli gave her a squeeze and patted her back for a moment.

“Hey, Tessa, how’s the festival?” Anna asked, hoping forced conversation would pry Tessa’s arm off Eli.

“It’s great,” she said, dropping her arm, but not moving away from Eli’s side. “Mama felt like walking around today, so we’ve been taking everything in. There’s so much more to see this year. She’s resting in the park, listening to the band, so I told her I wanted to come by and see how y’all were faring.”

“We’ve been busy,” Eli said. A customer stepped up to the booth and ordered a slice of coconut cake.

Tessa lowered her voice. “Think you can let Eli slip away with me for a while tonight? Later, of course. I don’t want to take away your help, but I think after suppertime, you’ll be a lot slower and able to handle things by yourself. I’d love to watch the fireworks with him.”

So would I. “Check back tonight. If it’s slow, I’m sure he’d love to have a break.” Anna knew they might be done early, but she didn’t

mention it to Tessa. *Because you're being a bad friend.*

Tessa made a squealing noise in her throat—very unlike her—and squeezed Anna's forearm. "Thank you, thank you. I'll be back later." She bounced over to Eli and managed to touch him five different times while she explained she would check on them later.

Anna felt as though she'd eaten too many raw oysters. How could she tell Eli how she felt when Tessa was so obviously crazy about him? What kind of friend would she be? Just as her guilt was spiraling out of control, Lily and Jakob walked up.

Lily's arm was hooked in the crook of Jakob's elbow, and she carried a travel mug of coffee in her mittened hand. Jakob wore a down jacket and a black stocking cap pulled over his ears. He shook hands with Eli.

"It's dinnertime," Jakob said. "Can you sneak away for some pub grub? The Thirsty Whale has a booth in the park, and they've got the best fish and chips you've ever had."

Eli looked at Anna and rubbed his stomach. He grinned at her, and she was rendered incapable of saying no. "Go," she said and made a shooing motion with her hands.

"I'll swap Lily for Eli," Jakob said, herding Lily to the front of the booth.

Lily grabbed his coffee mug. "You'll be okay?" he asked.

"I have Lily. What could go wrong?" Anna asked. Another powerful north wind blew through the streets. People grabbed their hats, and paper napkins tangled around ankles on their escape. Anna pressed her hands against the bags of cookies as if they might take flight and find new homes. Eli zipped his jacket and smiled.

"Don't blow away," he said. Then he followed Jakob as they weaved through the crowd. She watched him walk away until Lily tugged her arm.

"Tell me you didn't sell out of the almond truffles," Lily said.

Anna lifted a pink box with Lily's name written on the top. "My treat to you. Two dozen almond truffles. Don't eat them all at once."

Lily grinned. "I can't make any promises." She opened the box and popped one into her mouth. She closed her eyes while she ate it. "Perfect," she said. "They always make me feel so stress-free. And

speaking of stress, when are you going to tell him?"

Anna sagged against the table and slumped on the edge. "I don't think I can," she admitted. "I can't do that to Tessa."

Lily put down her box. Then she dragged Anna to the back of the booth. "You can't do this to *you*," she argued. "How do you think Tessa is going to feel when she finds out later that Eli has always been in love with you? You're doing her a favor by telling him the truth."

"You're operating under the assumption that Eli is going to choose me if I tell him how I feel," Anna said. "What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not," Lily said.

Anna caught movement at the front of the tent.

"Could I buy a slice of pumpkin pie?" a young boy asked.

Anna smiled and helped him while Lily waited impatiently for her to return. When she finished with the customer, Anna pulled Lily farther back and lowered her voice. "I read some of Grandma Bea's letters. She wasn't in love with my grandpa at first. She actually made him for someone else. She said Grandpa Joe loved her because she created him," Anna explained. "What if Eli is only attached to me because I made him?"

"What do you mean you *made* him?"

Lily and Anna jumped in unison. Lily squeaked in surprise while clutching Anna's forearm. Anna's heart leapt into her throat and cut off her air supply. Tessa was one of the last people on earth Anna wanted to happen upon such a conversation.

Tessa stared at them with expectant brown eyes. Lily was the first to respond. She tried to chuckle. "She meant she made Eli his favorite dessert."

Tessa tucked her hair behind her ears and glanced around. "I heard what you were saying, Anna. Something about Grandma Bea making your grandpa. Is that true?"

"How could that be true?" Lily asked, still trying to laugh, but it sounded fabricated and tight in her throat.

Tessa looked only at Anna. "The truth," she said.

"Tessa, it's nothing," Anna said. "I thought you were with your mama."

Tessa exhaled. She looked at Lily and Anna and rewrapped her brown scarf before speaking. "How could Grandma Bea have created your grandpa?"

"That's an absurd question," Lily said, fisting her hands on her hips.

"Don't make fun of me, Lily," Tessa said. "I know y'all aren't telling me the truth. You're both acting weird."

"It's a long story, Tessa," Anna said. "We can talk about it some other time. Did you need something?"

Tessa went through the motions of tucking her hair behind her ears again even though it was unnecessary. She licked her lips and leaned forward as though she had a secret to tell. Anna and Lily involuntarily leaned toward her. "Was your grandmother making your grandpa for someone named Mildred?"

Anna's mouth dropped open. The air around them chilled and filled her lungs with an icy breath. "Why would you ask that?"

"Mildred was my grandmother. She told me this story at least a hundred times when I was growing up. She said your grandmother made a man for her out of dough. She said your grandmother used magic sand from a tin box given to them by gypsies. Then your grandmother stole him. I assumed she was crazy. She never seemed quite right in the head."

"That's quite a story," Lily said, casting a sideways glance at Anna.

"There's no way that story is true, is there?" Tessa asked, gripping both hands on her scarf. "It's impossible, right?" She looked as though she wanted to laugh but was afraid.

Anna could see disbelief in Tessa's eyes. She rubbed her right temple. "And if I tell you it's true?" Anna asked.

Tessa shook her head. "It can't be. Things like that don't happen." She reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears, pushing the hair a few times to make sure it stayed.

Lily exhaled loudly and rolled her eyes. "Tessa, please don't flip out like you did when I told you my secret. I don't want to have to sedate you. But the story is true. Grandma Bea tried to make a man for your crazy grandma, and it backfired in a way."

Tessa pressed her hand to her chest and shook her head. "Are you

serious? And you...you *made* Eli?" she asked, leaning backward as though the truth knocked her balance askew. "But that's impossible. All these years I thought my grandmother was a nutcase. How did you do it?"

Anna looked at Lily before answering. There was no going back now, no laughing the entire conversation off as a joke. "With the magic sand we found in the tin box and a recipe," she said honestly. "I didn't think it would work."

"But it did," Tessa said, and her eyes shone in the strung lights. "No wonder none of us had ever heard of Eli before." She laughed, but the edges of the sound were stained with a wildness that filled the air with the scent of fire burning through a green forest. "And your grandpa only loved Grandma Bea because she made him. Does that mean Eli's feelings for you aren't real? Is that why he's so attached to you? Because you made him? I was worried something was going on, even after he kissed me, but this means he might actually want to be with me! Do you think I should tell him?" Tessa pressed her hands together over her heart.

Anna grabbed Tessa's forearms. "You can't tell him." Lily shook her head in agreement.

"Why?" Tessa asked. "That way he'll understand that his attachment to you is because you made him. He'll be free to love me the way he wants to."

Anna shook her head vehemently. "No, Tessa. You can never tell Eli the truth."

"You want to lie to him?" she asked.

"It's not lying," Lily argued and stepped beside Anna. "You can't tell someone he's made from dough. He'll think you're out of your mind. It's better he doesn't know anything."

Tessa frowned. "I think we should be honest with him."

"For what purpose?" Lily asked. "So that you'll know you have all of his affections? You already do. You win. Game over. There's no reason to tell him anything."

Tessa frowned a moment longer, and then she nodded her head. "You're right. I really do think he cares about me." She smiled and

pulled them into a hug so quickly Anna and Lily knocked foreheads. “This is so exciting. You created a man just for me. I don’t even know what all of this *means*, but I feel all jittery inside.” Tessa sobered slightly and added, “I definitely don’t want to be like Grandma Mildred and have the whole town think I’m batty. Maybe it’s best if this is our little secret.” She looked at Anna and Lily, and they both nodded.

“I should get going,” Tessa said. “I came to grab Mama a few oatmeal raisin cookies, and she’s waiting on me. How much?”

Anna flicked her hand to the side. “Take whatever you want. No charge.” *You’ve already taken Eli.*

Tessa thanked Anna and told them she’d be back before the fireworks. Anna wrapped her arms around her chest. The wind rushed through the tent and whipped her long hair around her face. Her teeth chattered.

“You have to tell him,” Lily said.

Anna stared at the uneaten sweets. The lights dimmed and colors faded. “Why? You said Tessa’s already won.”

“I only said that so she wouldn’t go off blabbing to Eli that he’s the Dough Boy,” Lily said. “If he ever hears the truth from anyone, it should be from you.”

Lily refilled Anna’s travel mug with the last of the hot chocolate and handed it to her friend. “Now get up and put a smile on your face. You look like someone burned down your house. Jakob and Eli will be back soon, and we can’t have you looking like that.” She smoothed flyaway hairs away from Anna’s face. “Speak of the devil, and he appears,” Lily said as Jakob, Eli, and Jakob’s parents, the Connelys, walked up to the booth.

“Look who I found,” Jakob said to Lily. “Mom brought back a surprise for us from their trip.”

Anna motioned for everyone to come behind the booth. Eli offered Anna a french fry from his cardboard boat that had once been filled with battered cod and fries. She declined and said hello to Jakob’s parents. Then she made herself busy by straightening the display. Eli finished his dinner while Jakob and Lily talked with the Connelys in the rear of the tent.

“You think we’ll be done in an hour?” Eli asked, crumbling his cardboard boat and tossing it into a large city trashcan.

Anna surveyed the tables and glanced back at the empty boxes. “It’s possible,” she said. “There’s not much left to do, so if you have something else you’d like to do, I can handle the booth by myself.”

“We started together, and we’ll finish together,” Eli said.

“Tessa wants to watch the fireworks with you,” Anna blurted and then looked away from his gaze. When Eli didn’t respond, she glanced over her shoulder to see him watching her. She tried to offer him an encouraging smile, but her heart wasn’t in it, and only half of her mouth tugged up.

Jakob’s voice rose and pulled Anna’s attention away from Eli. “They brought it all the way from Italy,” Jakob said, his voice pinched at the edges. “The sommelier a few tents over was nice enough to open it for us. One glass won’t kill you.”

Oh, no. Anna watched Jakob hand Lily a plastic wine glass. Lily’s other hand unconsciously rested on her stomach. Jakob’s father, Mr. Connelly, was distracted by a teenage girl with an overly excited Labrador retriever. The dog’s leash had wrapped around her midsection. She spun around in a circle and giggled, and the dog seemed to think it was a game. However, Mrs. Connelly’s attention was on Lily, and her eyes narrowed.

“What’s wrong, Lily?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Lily said, smiling and avoiding eye contact. Anna caught a whiff of boiling coffee on a hotplate.

“Lily’s had a virus for a week or so,” Jakob asked. “But she’s feeling better. I really don’t think the wine will bother you now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mrs. Connelly said. “The flu?”

“Who knows?” Jakob said, filling Lily’s glass with the Italian wine. “She refused to go to the doctor. She was throwing up off and on for a few days, but now she’s only nauseous in the mornings.”

Anna saw a sheen of sweat glistening on Lily’s forehead. “You make it sound terrible,” Lily joked. The wine glass trembled in her hand and created ripples across the surface of the deep burgundy liquid.

“He makes it sound like morning sickness,” Mrs. Connelly said.

Then she leaned forward, and her dyed blonde hair fell across her shoulders, framing the creamy skin on her face. “You’re not pregnant, are you?” she said in a voice that masqueraded as a playful whisper but was clearly spoken loud enough for the group to hear.

Jakob laughed and wrinkled his brow. “Mom,” he said, “that’s awkward. Next subject please. How about this wine?” He nudged Lily with his elbow, but Lily didn’t respond. Her hands were shaking so badly a drop of wine sloshed onto the rim and rolled down the glass until it stained her finger red. Jakob finally sensed something was wrong. “You okay?”

Anna had been unable to move until that moment. She made a motion to swoop in and save Lily, but Eli grabbed her arm. “What are you doing?” she whispered, trying to tug her arm free. He shook his head.

“It was a joke, dear,” Mrs. Connelly said and smiled with her bright white teeth. She adjusted her string of pearls. “I know my son wouldn’t be so immature, especially not in the middle of such an important promotion. Drink to good fortune.” Mrs. Connelly gasped when the tangled dog butted its nose into the back of her designer skirt. “Excuse me,” she breathed out in offense to the apologizing teenager. Mr. Connelly tried to help untangle them.

Lily’s cheeks flushed, and her eyes began to water. She looked at Jakob and said, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

She handed him her full glass of wine. “For not drinking this. I didn’t want you to find out this way,” she said. She mouthed, “I *am* pregnant.”

Anna gripped Eli’s arm until she left behind the imprint of her fingers. Jakob’s eyes widened, and he shook his head as if to loosen the words Lily had shoved into his ears. “You’re what? How?”

Lily choked on a pitiful laugh. “I think the *how* is obvious.”

“This is terrible timing,” Jakob said. Unfortunately, Mrs. Connelly chose that moment to reenter the conversation.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Connelly asked, but no one was listening to her.

“I didn’t plan on this either,” Lily said. “But it happened, and now we have to deal with it.”

Jakob’s wrists dropped, and the wine in the glasses poured onto the grass. “I don’t even know *how* to deal with this right now. If the firm finds out...you *know* how they’re liable to act if they hear you’re pregnant,” he said.

Tears rolled freely down Lily’s cheeks. “I don’t want to jeopardize your career. That’s why I haven’t said anything.”

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Connelly said. “Did you say you’re *pregnant*?” The judgment in her voice was as severe as the edge of a scalding blade passing through chilled cheesecake. Without waiting for a response, she stepped closer to Jakob. Her voice was low and stern. “Tell me you have not been foolish enough to get your girlfriend pregnant right in the middle of the biggest opportunity of your life. You could ruin your whole career. I hope you’ll at least be intelligent enough to keep this mistake to yourselves until the firm makes their decision.” She shook her head. The soft lines of her face faded. Her coral colored lips were pulled tight, casting deep lines around her mouth, and her jaw was rigid as though she might be clenching her teeth. She stepped away and grabbed Mr. Connelly’s arm. He appeared somewhat confused, but she dragged him away through the crowd.

Indecision filled Jakob’s eyes. He rubbed both hands down his face. “Damn, Lily. Awful timing with this.” He looked at her and touched her arm briefly, and then he hurried after his parents, calling out to his mother. Lily turned around and stared wide-eyed at Anna and Eli, who were unintentional participants.

Anna walked over to Lily and pulled her into a tight hug. “Go talk to Jakob,” Anna said. Lily nodded and rocked on her heels for a moment. She tugged a curl and wrapped it around her finger. Then, she inhaled and exhaled a shaky breath, looked at Anna one more time, and rushed off to find Jakob.

Anna watched Lily go, and she rubbed her fingers across her collarbone. Night began to fall. A group of children ran by with lit sparklers, leaving behind trails of falling stars.

“They’ll work it out,” Eli said.

Anna nodded. *They have to.* A waltz began to play from the bandstand. As soon as the sun set completely, the fireworks would begin. Anna unloaded the few baked goods remaining in boxes, and she displayed them on the tables. Then she broke down the cardboard boxes with Eli's help. The temperature dropped slowly at first with the fading light, and then quickly, chilling her cheeks and reddening her nose. Their breath puffed out in front of their lips in misty, white clouds.

"There's my girl," a man said.

Anna smelled green pine needles and freshly cut grass. She grinned. "Hey, Daddy," she said. He stepped around the side of the tent with Evelyn behind him. Anna hugged him. "I wondered when y'all would stop by." She grabbed a bag of his favorite cookies and handed them to him.

"Looks like you've been ransacked," he said.

"We've had a good day," she answered. "Hey, Mama." Evelyn hugged Anna and then rummaged through what remained of the baked goods. "Daddy, this is Eli. Eli, this is my dad, Charles O'Brien."

Charles O'Brien was the opposite of Evelyn. Where she was wound tightly and neatly pressed, Charles was relaxed and casual. His friendly smile and quiet laughter set people at ease. Anna had always found refuge from her mama's strictness with her daddy. When Anna was a little girl, she and her daddy had often escaped to take hikes or sit in a fishing boat all day while Charles baited her hook and she spotted shapes in the clouds. He was the one to slip chocolates into her pockets and send her off to school when Evelyn packed Anna's brown lunch sack full of carrots and low-fat peanut butter on wheat bread.

"Call me Charlie," he said. "Nice to meet you. Evie said you went to school with Anna."

Eli nodded. "I did. Can't keep up with her, but I try," he said, smiling at Anna.

"That's not an easy task," Charlie said. "But don't give up just yet."

Eli laughed, and Evelyn asked if they were out of the walnut blondies. Eli helped search through the bags while Charlie pulled Anna to the side under the guise of telling her about the auction.

“I had to force your mother to stop bidding on your desserts,” Charlie said with a sparkle in his dark eyes. “She was upsetting the townsfolk.”

“Mama knows I’ll bake her whatever she wants,” Anna said and shook her head. She adjusted the black toboggan on Charlie’s head because one ear was covered and the other ear stuck out like an elf ear.

“She can’t help herself. It’s her competitive nature. She’s your biggest fan, you know,” Charlie said. “I know it doesn’t always seem that way.”

“Because she seems like my biggest critic?” Anna asked.

Charlie chuckled. “That’s her way of wanting the best for you,” he said. Then he lowered his voice. “She told me about the bakery in Wildehaven Beach. Congratulations.”

Anna’s green eyes widened. A tornado of warm air circled around them, lifting Anna’s hair from her shoulders. She hesitated and then smiled. “Thanks, Daddy,” she said, feeling ten years old again and basking in her daddy’s praise for a job well done.

“Charlie, we need to get going if we’re going to find a good spot for the fireworks,” Evelyn said, dropping the bag of blondies into her purse.

“Come have lunch with us tomorrow,” Charlie said. “I talked your mother into making us fried chicken and mashed potatoes.”

Anna laughed. “How in the world did you manage to convince her to cook with grease?” Anna asked, hooking her arm through Charlie’s and slowly walking toward the front of the tent.

“I bribed her actually,” he whispered. “New kitchen in exchange for greasy food at least once every two weeks.” Charlie and Anna shared a conspiratorial moment of triumph.

“Eli, join us for lunch tomorrow if you’re free,” Charlie said. “Evie’s cooking my favorite.”

“I’d like that,” Eli said as Charlie patted his back a few times.

“Be there at noon,” Evelyn said and retied Anna’s scarf around her neck before she and Charlie headed off to find spots to watch the fireworks show.

In the park, festivalgoers bundled up together on blankets and

gathered groups of camping chairs in tightly knit areas. Firemen stood around the site from where the fireworks would be shot and prepared for any stray sparks that might ignite trees or grass. Anna dropped the last cookie bag into the box and scanned the tables. The crowds on the streets thinned, and people huddled in clearings, already staring up at the stars dotting the midnight blue sky.

“All done,” Anna said as she lifted the last box into her arms. “I’ll carry this over to the bakery, and then I’ll come back for the cardboard.”

Eli took the box from her hands. He placed it on one of the back tables. “You don’t have to take it right now. The fireworks will be starting soon.”

Anna looked over her shoulder as if Tessa might arrive any second. She picked up the box again. “That’s okay,” she said. “You enjoy them. I can see the show from the bakery when it starts.”

Eli shook his head and took the box from her hands. His fingers brushed hers, and her stomach tingled as though embers kindled inside her. “Stay here with me,” he said.

This is it. She felt a rush like butterflies shivering inside her body, lifting her up, causing her chest to swell. She opened her mouth and exhaled. “Eli,” she said and paused. Words tangled inside her mind, and they struggled to find her tongue. “Thanks for helping me,” she said instead of what she meant to say.

“I like helping you,” he said.

It’s now or never. Rip it off like a Band-Aid. “Eli, I...” Her tongue dried and stuck to her teeth. She tried to swallow. When Anna looked up at him, she felt dizzy with emotion. She pressed one hand to his chest to anchor herself, but warmth spread up her fingertips, her arm, and burned up her spine. She felt his heartbeat beneath her hand.

Eli placed his hand over hers. “You what?” he asked, his voice low and expectant.

Anna blinked. “I’m in love with you,” she whispered, her legs trembling. “I know you like Tessa, but I wanted to tell you. It’s okay if you don’t feel the same way—”

Before Anna could inhale, Eli leaned down, slid one hand onto her cheek, and kissed her. There was no hesitation in the kiss like Anna

always encountered during first kisses. She knew without a doubt he wanted to kiss her, and once they started, she was captured, unwilling to stop. She arched into Eli, pulled toward him like a planet to its sun, and wrapped her arms around his neck. Anna felt her blood pumping through her limbs, felt her heart slamming against her ribs, felt the heat melting her like sugar. Eli slid one hand around her waist and held her against him.

The cold wind whipped past them, became caught up in their heat, and created swirling vortexes that collapsed a few tents down the street. Flames shot prematurely from the igniter and lit the wick of the first firework before anyone was prepared. It rocketed into the night sky and exploded, raining blue and green twinkling lights over Anna and Eli. The crowd clapped and hooted, thinking the show had begun. More fireworks followed, echoing explosions that mingled with the collective sighs of the townsfolk, and Anna kept kissing Eli because she couldn't stop.

“What the *hell* is going on?”

Eli pulled away, and Anna swayed on her feet. Silver fireworks shaped like giant stars filled the sky and fell away toward the treetops. The smoky haze shifted in her brain, and she pressed her lips together, still feeling the burn of Eli's kiss. Two blurry faces came into focus.

“Baron,” Anna said. All the sweetness pooling around her and Eli was swept away in the next assaulting wind, which left behind a rawness.

Tessa stood beside Baron. Her mouth dropped open in shock. Baron stepped toward them with his hands open, palms facing front.

“What the hell is going on?” he repeated.

“You're home early,” Anna said. Yellow fireworks exploded in rapid succession and lit their faces with golden light.

“I wanted to surprise you. I didn't realize I'd be interrupting,” Baron said, not taking his eyes off Eli.

Electricity crackled off Baron, and the hairs on Anna's arm rose in alarm. Baron cursed under his breath, fisted his hands at his sides, and lunged for Eli. Anna jumped between them and used all her energy to shove Baron backward. Tessa grabbed Baron's arm and pulled him

away from Eli.

“Baron, stop,” Anna said. *“Please.”*

Baron shook Anna and Tessa off him, glared at Eli, and then curled his lip at Anna. “I can’t believe you would do this to me,” he said, and then he stalked off.

Anna cast a glance at Eli over her shoulder. White lights sparkled in the sky like glowing rain. He nodded his head once, and Anna chased after Baron.



Baron stopped on the corner a block over. He rested his hand against the lamppost and hung his head. That was the only reason Anna caught up with him. Her breath rushed out in hot puffs of air.

“Baron,” she said. She saw his shoulders tense, but he didn’t turn to look at her. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be,” he said.

On the next gush of wind, Anna smelled the salty sea. Baron turned and shoved both hands into his messy hair. He shook his head and kicked his shoes against the sidewalk. A cluster of fireworks burst overhead, one inside another, each one bigger than the one before.

“You said he was your friend,” Baron said. “You lied.”

“I didn’t lie,” Anna said, hazarding a step closer to him. Anger and confusion hovered around Baron like smoke. Anna’s body vibrated with uncertainty. “That’s the first time anything like that has happened.”

Baron threw his hands up into the air. “I’m so lucky to have caught the one-time event.” His sarcasm burned across her skin.

“I said I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t make it better, but I can’t change what happened,” she said, already feeling the acrid sting of guilt in her throat. She pictured Tessa’s shocked face. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Convenient how I go out of town for a week, and you get to pretend you don’t have a boyfriend. Did you even think about how this would make me feel?”

Tears stung Anna’s eyes, and her heart thudded painfully against the cage of her chest. She pressed a hand to her breastbone. Like taffy

stretched too far and too thin, she pulled apart in the middle. Flashes of red in the sky turned her tears to rubies rolling down her cheeks. Anger splintered inside her.

“Are you joking?” she asked, and the words sounded jagged and sharp. “You took a job in *California*. In case you didn’t realize it, that’s across the country from here. You never once thought about me. You didn’t care how it would make me feel. As far as I can tell, you’re going to pack your bags and leave me, and that means our relationship is over.”

Anna’s words flew from her lips like poison-tipped arrows intent on piercing Baron in the chest. He took a few steps back under the assault and stared at her in disbelief. He looked like he wanted to argue her point, but he couldn’t.

After a long pause, he said, “You’re right.” His voice was quiet, barely audible over the explosions of fireworks booming overhead and echoing down the streets. He looked up at her. “I didn’t think of our future. I don’t know what that means.”

“It means we don’t have one.” The words caught in her throat and tangled around a sob. She wiped at her eyes.

“I need some time,” Baron said. “I didn’t expect to come home to this.”

“This won’t even be your home for much longer,” she said.

“No, it won’t.” He shrugged, shoved his hands into his pockets, and walked away, leaving Anna standing alone in the flickering lamplight.



Anna walked toward the bakery, watching the fireworks paint the empty street in throbbing kaleidoscope colors. She wrapped her arms around her chest, trying to hold on to the escaping warmth. Releasing a shuddering breath, she fished the bakery’s keys out of her pocket. Her fingers trembled, and the keys fell to the sidewalk. When Anna bent over to pick them up, she heard Eli’s voice, and he sounded angry.

Anna straightened so fast she sidestepped off the curb. Eli strode up the street with Tessa struggling to keep up with him. She said something that Anna couldn’t hear, and Eli stopped abruptly. Tessa

slammed into his arm. The string lights flickered and popped.

“Tessa, please, stop following me. I mean it,” Eli said.

Tessa grabbed Eli’s arm. “Don’t be angry with me,” she begged. “We can talk about this.”

Silver fireworks exploded in time with Anna’s pulsing heart. *Boom, boom, boom*. Tessa’s face was illuminated in ghastly light.

Eli pried Tessa’s hand from his arm. “You’ve said enough,” he said. “Don’t follow me.” His voice was resolute, and when he started walking again, Tessa stood and watched him go.

As Eli neared Anna, the asphalt grew hot beneath her shoes. Bulbs burst in the string lights, and half the street slipped into darkness. A stifling oven-hot wind slammed into Anna and filled her lungs with dry, burning air. Anna wasn’t sure if Eli even saw her standing in the shadows outside the bakery until he stopped a few yards from her.

“Open the door,” he demanded.

Anna unlocked the bakery, and Eli pushed inside ahead of her. She glanced down the street and saw Tessa was still standing there. The firework finale filled the sky with burst after burst, pounding the night air like a hundred bass drums. Smoke covered the stars and twirled in the sky, caught in an unseasonal wind that created swirling, dancing pinwheels. Anna looked away and stepped into the dark bakery.

Eli turned on the light in the kitchen, and Anna hesitated before following him. The entire room emitted a low hum that caused the pans to rattle on the shelves.

“Show it to me,” Eli said.

Anna stood in the archway. “Show what to you?”

Eli’s palms were flat on the kitchen island, and he stared at his fingers. “The gypsy sand.” Then he pushed off the island and turned to her. “Or tell me it isn’t real. Just tell me that Tessa is a nice girl but a liar.”

A tremble started low in Anna’s legs and shook her all the way to her scalp. *Tessa*. Anna opened her mouth to explain, but nothing came out. She pressed her hands together to keep them from shaking, but her entire body vibrated like a tuning fork slapped against a tree.

Eli shook his head. “No, Anna,” he said. “No, no, no. Don’t tell me that you created me.” He stormed over to the oven and flung open the

door. “*In there*. Don’t tell me I came out of *that*.” Eli’s blue eyes were narrowed and flecked with anguish. He slammed his fist against the island. “I’m not some *thing*, Anna.”

Anna’s hands found her mouth. Tears spilled over her lids and rolled down her fingertips. “You’re not a thing,” she said when she lowered her hands. “You’re not.”

“Then what the hell am I?” he asked in a breakable, angry voice. “Did you *create* me?”

Anna could barely breathe around the splintering in her chest. More tears rolled down her cheeks. “Yes.”

He clenched his jaw and shook his head, unwilling to accept her answer. “Show me the sand.”

Anna knew it wasn’t a request. She stumbled up the stairs toward her apartment with Eli on her heels. She switched on the light in her bedroom and crouched on the floor. Anna pulled out the rusted tin box and held it out for Eli with shaking hands. He turned the key and inhaled loudly through his nose when he flipped open the lid. He shoved one hand into the dust, and it shimmered on his fingers, skittered up his arm, and disappeared into his skin. He dropped the box onto the bed, scattering sand across her quilt.

Eli backed away toward the door. His blue eyes were wide and heartbreaking. Anna stood and held out a hand toward him. He seemed to look straight through her.

“None of this is real,” he said in disbelief.

“That’s not true,” Anna argued.

“Why?” he asked. “Why did you make me?”

Anna swallowed and averted her gaze. “I was sad about Baron, and Lily thought it would be a good idea for me to make the perfect man for myself. We didn’t think it would work.”

Eli released a bitter laugh. “Tessa wanted to prove she was telling the truth by asking me questions about my past. Do you know what my entire past consists of?” he asked. “You. Just *you*.” He pressed his fisted hands against his chest. “I have all this love for you, and it isn’t even *real*. I don’t even know what the hell I *am*.” He dug a folded sheet of paper out of his pocket and tossed it onto her bed. “Another lie.”

Anna reached for the paper. She unfolded a note written in her hand.

Dearest Elijah,

If you ever knock on my door, I promise that I will love you forever. You are the perfect man for me. If you never knock on my door, I will regretfully never experience true love.

Always and Devotedly Yours,

Anna O'Brien

The letter looked like it had been folded and unfolded a thousand times. Her candy note written to a ball of dough had become a real love letter. She looked up at him and pressed the letter to her chest.

"I do love you, Eli," she said. Her throat closed tight with sadness.

His blue eyes began to water and shine in the light. "I'm not even human," he said in a voice so quiet Anna found herself leaning toward him. "You can't love a monster." He turned and walked out.

"Eli," she called.

Eli stopped, hand resting on her doorknob. Anna wanted to run to him, throw her arms around him, prove to him that her love was real. But Eli opened the door and walked out saying, "Do us both a favor and let me go." Anna crumpled onto the hardwood and cried into her hands.

Blood Orange Sauce

Anna gathered the spilled golden sand from her comforter in small handfuls and dropped it into the tin box. Then she brushed the remaining grains onto the wooded floor where they sparkled like miniature jewels. She closed the box and rubbed her fingers across the rust-spotted lid.

The tea in the red kettle whispered for a few seconds before it became a loud whistle. She cradled the box in her arms, walked into the living room, and placed the box on the coffee table. Then, she shuffled into the kitchen and grabbed for the kettle's handle as she turned off the burner. She poured the steaming liquid over the peppermint tea bag resting in the bottom of her mug. Anna bounced the tea bags up and down in the water and crossed the small space to the bay window. She curled up, bringing her knees to her chest, and stared out the windows into the night.

Festivalgoers ambled up the downtown streets on their way to their cars. Their cheerful voices and laughter traveled up toward Anna's window. She watched their shadows disappear around corners, heard their engines turn over, not a soul knowing the devastation she felt. Anna sipped her tea, musing that it might possibly flow out of the giant hole she felt had been shot through the middle of her body. She rubbed her right temple, trying to ease the throbbing behind her eyes.

Keys jingled downstairs, and the bell on the bakery door rang. *Eli*. Anna stood abruptly, and hot tea sloshed over the rim of her mug. She winced and shook the wetness from her hand. Someone moved through the bakery and climbed the stairs. Anna held her breath and listened. Lily stepped through the doorway into her apartment, took one look at her, and Anna saw pity fill her eyes.

Lily jingled the keys. "Found these in the door. Are you okay?" she asked, hurrying over. Anna shook her head. Lily took the mug from Anna's hands and put it on the coffee table. "I want to talk about what happened, but before you say anything, you should know that Tessa

is downstairs. She found me after the fireworks and tried to explain everything. She's confused and upset, and you might not want to talk to her, but enough is enough, Anna. She wants to check on Eli. This whole thing has spiraled out of control, and we need to fix this mess. We're best friends—all of us."

Anna dropped onto the couch and folded in half, pressing her forehead to her knees. "Everything is ruined. I screwed this one up." Tears tried to swell in her red, swollen eyes, but she swallowed them down.

"You have to fix this."

Anna sat up and wondered if she could take one more person's disappointment. Would Tessa yell at her? Accuse her of stealing her boyfriend? But didn't Tessa deserve to ask Anna what the hell she had been doing? *Get in line*. Lily must have seen the indecision on Anna's face because she sat down beside her on the couch. Lily shrugged out of her coat and unwrapped her scarf.

"We can work this out," Lily said. "But we're going to have to talk about it. This isn't worth ruining friendships." She glanced around. "Where is Eli?"

"He left," Anna said. "I'm not sure he'll ever speak to me again." She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Never speaking to him again left her feeling an ache too deep to rub away.

Lily shook her head. "He'll come back. This whole thing is forgivable."

"Is it?" Anna asked.

The room filled with the soothing scent of fresh brewing coffee. "Everything is," Lily said. "You can talk to Tessa and sort things out with her."

Anna made a "come on in" motion with her hand. "Let's get this mess over with." Then she remembered the scene between Lily, Jakob, and his parents. "Hey, what happened with you and Jakob?"

Lily glanced into the kitchen. "Do you have coffee up here?"

"I have decaf in the pantry," Anna said.

"Decaf?" Lily curled her lip. "Why do they even *make* decaf? I need a jolt of something if I'm going to make it through this evening."

Lily walked into the kitchen and opened the pantry. She pulled out

a round tin of hot chocolate powder. She busied her hands while she talked. “Jakob’s mother is...difficult. She thinks we’ve ruined Jakob’s life. Completely melodramatic.”

“I have milk and heavy cream in the fridge.” Anna reached for her mug of tea. “What does Jakob think?”

“He’s trying to smooth things over with his parents, mostly his mother. His dad gave me a hug before his mother gave him the evil eye.” Lily shrugged, and put her mug in the microwave. “Jakob was more concerned with her than with my feelings, so I told him to call me when he’s done placating his mother. I mean, I’m *pregnant* for crying out loud.” She heaved a heavy sigh.

“He’ll call you,” Anna said.

The microwave dinged. Lily stirred the chocolate powder into the milk. “I know. It still makes me sad though. I wish his mother would be more reasonable and that Jakob wouldn’t have brushed off my feelings in favor of his mother’s opinion.” She blew across the top of the steaming cocoa before taking a sip. “Ready to start this party?”

Anna nodded. Lily called Tessa from the top of the stairs, and Anna listened to Tessa’s hurried footsteps. She stepped into the room with her hands clasped in front of her, and she hesitated. “Where’s Eli?” she asked.

“He’s gone,” Lily answered, so Anna didn’t have to.

“Gone where?” Tessa asked, her voice pitching high. She glanced quickly at Lily and then at Anna.

Anna shrugged. Tessa dropped into the chair. Tessa’s mouth was so dry Anna could hear her swallow. Disappointment highlighted her frown.

Guilt expanded in Anna’s chest, and she exhaled to release the building tensions. “I’m sorry, Tessa,” she said. “I really didn’t want to hurt you.”

Tessa wrung her hands together in her lap. “Why would you kiss Eli?” she asked, and her voice wavered slightly. “You *knew* how I felt about him.”

Lily pulled a mug from the cabinet and felt the side of the kettle. She dug a tea bag out of the pantry and dropped it into the mug. Then

she poured the hot water from the kettle. She carried the mug into the living room and handed it to Tessa.

Anna exhaled. "Because I have feelings for him too."

Tessa squeezed the mug between both hands and held it close. "I thought you had feelings for him because you made him." Anger pinched her voice. She stared into the tinting water. "You don't kiss someone your friend is dating, and you don't kiss other men when you have a boyfriend."

Anna nodded. She leaned forward, propped her elbows on her knees, and covered her face with her hands for a few moments. She massaged her fingertips across her forehead. "You're right."

"Tessa, Anna is well aware that she upset you and Baron, but she wasn't trying to intentionally hurt anyone. And you need to remember that we made Eli for *Anna*," Lily said, defending her best friend.

Tessa looked at Anna. "You should have told me you had feelings for him," she said. Then she stared at the floor while she added, "But you should know I have no intentions of giving up my feelings. I think Eli cares about me, and we have something." She inhaled and tried to straighten her shoulders. "I think you should back off."

Anna's eyes widened. She'd never heard Tessa be so forceful about anything. Could she give Eli up to Tessa? Would she even have an option now that he was gone?

Tessa sipped her tea and cleared her throat. "I wasn't trying to make the situation worse by telling Eli the truth." She sat her mug down and unbuttoned her coat. She slid her scarf from her neck and gripped it in her lap. "But I think he deserved to know the truth. He needed to understand why his feelings for you were confusing. I know you made Eli for you, but he and I were spending time together. He made that decision, right?" She reached for her mug.

"He wasn't a puppet," Anna said. She sighed and leaned back onto the couch cushions. "He spent time with you because he wanted to." *Because he was choosing Tessa. Then why did he kiss me like that, like he never wanted to stop?* A tiny flame smoldered low in her stomach.

Tessa tried to hide a small, relieved smile behind the mug. She sipped her tea. "What you did isn't okay," she said. "I can see why you

care about him, but my feelings for Eli are real, and I believe he wants to see where a relationship with me will go. I think it's only right and fair that you let him go."

Eli's words as he was leaving echoed in Anna's mind. *Do us both a favor, and let me go.* She closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay," she said. *You win.*

The three friends sat in silence for a minute. Lily folded her legs beneath her on the couch beside Anna. She drank from her mug, then asked, "What did you tell Baron?"

"The truth," Anna said. She finished her tea and pushed her hair behind her shoulders as she stared across the room at the brownies hiding beneath the glass cake dome. She explained what happened on the street corner with Baron.

The loss of Baron had become a dull ache. In her heart, pieces of him had been leaving for days. Only now with Eli gone did Anna realize how much she'd been using Eli as a crutch to ease the loneliness. With both of the men gone, she felt as hollow as a chocolate Easter bunny.

"It's over then?" Lily asked. Anna nodded. Lily reached over and grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," Tessa said.

When Anna looked over at Tessa, she could tell Tessa's feelings were genuine. A small smile passed between them. The tin box on the coffee table caught Tessa's eye. She leaned forward and tapped her finger against the lid.

"Is this the box?" Tessa asked. "With the sand?" Anna nodded. Tessa reached for the box and flipped open the lid. It sparkled and lit her face with dancing pinpricks of light. "It's beautiful." She smiled at the sand before closing the lid. "What are you going to do with it?"

Anna shook her head. "I dunno. I thought of burying it. It's caused enough trouble. I certainly wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands." She looked at Lily. "Do you think it would hurt the earth to bury it?"

"Do you mean would the earthworms grow to gargantuan size and try to kill us like they did in *Tremors*?" Lily grinned at Anna's shocked face. "I'm kidding. Although it would be an adventure, especially since

I know how to kill them after watching the movie.”

Tessa returned the box to the coffee table. “I don’t think you should bury it just yet. Think about it for a while, and then decide.”

Lily yawned and stretched her legs onto the coffee table. “The hot chocolate didn’t give me the jolt I needed. I should probably go home, but I’m so comfortable right here.”

Tessa stood and asked, “Do you mind if I make more tea?”

Anna stood and stretched her arms over her head. “There’s an assortment of tea flavors in the pantry. I think I’m going to take a bath if no one cares. Feel free to stay as long as y’all like.”

Tessa pulled Anna into a quick but tight hug. “You’re not mad at me, are you?” Tessa asked.

Anger wasn’t the emotion Anna felt blooming inside her. The emotion was darker and bleaker. There didn’t seem to be an easy way to describe how she felt, so she simply said, “No.” Then she added, “I understand if you’re mad at me for a while, but I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Tessa smiled. “It’s already passing,” she said, looking down at the tin box on the coffee table. “Such a small thing to cause so much chaos, but I think we can fix what’s happened.”

When Anna turned on the taps for the bathtub, she sat on the edge and wiggled her fingers through the steaming water. She thought of Eli on foot somewhere in town. Would he have walked far? Would he ever return? She sunk into the water, draped her hair over the side, and closed her eyes. Even if he did return, she’d agreed to let Tessa have him. That was reason enough for her to defy everyone and move to Wildehaven Beach. Losing Baron was going to be nothing compared to watching Tessa and Eli fall deeper in love every day. She shuddered in the tub.

15

Firecracker Bundt Cake

Anna jerked awake, startled to find herself reclining in cool water. After a few seconds of disorientation, she realized she'd dozed off while taking a bath. She shivered and climbed out of the tub, wrapping herself in a towel. The room smelled like baking bread, a mixture of rosemary, Italian seasoning, and maybe a sprinkling of mozzarella. She tugged on her clothes and opened the bathroom door.

Anna found Lily sleeping on the couch, her head leaning against the back cushions and her legs still stretched on the coffee table that was empty of everything. The living room felt too humid and sticky. The odor of a hot oven hung in the air like low-lying storm clouds. Someone had put the mugs in the kitchen sink. Tessa appeared to have gone home. When Anna turned from the sink, she noticed the door to the staircase leading to the bakery was open. She stepped to the door to close it, but the lights in the bakery's kitchen were on. That's when Anna heard someone moving around downstairs.

Her breath caught in her throat. Had Eli returned? She rushed down the stairs, nearly tripping over her bare feet as she stumbled down the last few steps. Who Anna found in the kitchen stopped her immediately. She gripped the railing on the staircase. Tessa was wiping flour dust from the island and looked up at Anna like a startled mouse. Grandma Bea's tin box rested on the island; its lid was flipped open, and the sand glittered in the lights. Anna's eyes drifted toward the ovens behind Tessa. The red light on the top oven was lit, indicating it was in use.

"What are you doing?" Anna asked. She let go of the railing and stepped farther into the kitchen. When Tessa didn't answer, Anna pointed to the tin box. "What are you doing with that, Tess?"

Tessa tucked her hair behind her ears. "Don't be mad, okay? *Promise* you won't be mad." Tessa reached over and flipped the lid closed. "I had an idea."

Anna began shaking her head. “Tell me you didn’t use the sand,” Anna said in a strangled voice. She could tell from Tessa’s expression that it was too late. She stared at the oven and felt a shiver run from her toes to her head, where it made her hair prickle and lift from her scalp.

“I did this for you,” Tessa said, and Anna was surprised to see such excitement in Tessa’s eyes because Anna felt an emotion akin to terror traveling over her skin. “I thought since you made Eli—and he’s for me—that I could make *you* someone to love.”

Anna covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head. She stared at Tessa with wide eyes before a realization struck her. She lowered her hand. “What recipe did you use?”

Tessa frowned. “I didn’t have your recipe,” she said. “I used my mother’s recipe for Italian bread from memory. Then I tossed in a few extra things.” She glanced over her shoulder at the oven. “It smells wonderful, doesn’t it?” Tessa’s eyes were alive with anticipation.

No recipe. The stench of burning cheese, bubbling and charring beneath the intense heat, began to saturate the kitchen. “This isn’t a joke, Tess. You can’t just make a recipe using whatever ingredients you want. How did you know how much of the sand to add?” Anna asked, moving slowly around the island toward the oven. She couldn’t stop the feeling growing inside her like an invasive vine. It wrapped around her stomach, then her lungs, then her heart. She tried to make her breaths deep and even, but her heart raced.

“I guessed,” Tessa said. “I dumped in a few handfuls.” She watched Anna and wrinkled her forehead. “I did this for you. I want you to be happy too.”

Anna shook her head. “Look what happened when Grandma Bea tried to make a man for your grandma. Their friendship was ruined, and everyone thought your grandma was crazy. Me creating Eli almost ruined our friendship. This isn’t right, Tessa.”

“Just wait a little longer,” Tessa pleaded. “Let’s see what happens. He might be the most wonderful man you’ve ever known. Maybe he’ll fix everything.”

An idea occurred to Anna. There might still be a chance to repair

the damage. “How long has the dough been cooking?”

Tessa glanced at the clock on the wall. “Twenty minutes or so.”

Anna exhaled. There was still time to stop Tessa’s mistake. Anna grabbed the handle of the oven, but Tessa snatched her hand away.

“Anna, *please*,” she said. “Let’s wait and see—”

The oven groaned and metal buckled as though something inside had become too large for the confined space. Anna grabbed Tessa’s arm and pulled her away from the ovens. Smoke oozed out around the oven door and swirled in the air, creating dark clouds that hovered near the ceiling. The room stank of char. Without warning, the oven door burst open so violently it snapped from its hinges and slammed into the island. Tessa’s fingernails dug into Anna’s arm. They stood and stared, unable to move, transfixed by what was happening.

Through the smoke, a malformed human-like hand reached out and gripped the side of the oven. Black smoke billowed out, and something moved in the darkness, unfolding itself. The built-in oven dislocated from the wall on one side and jutted forward. Anna heard the grind and rasp of metal. Connecting pipes and wires snapped. A face emerged, and Tessa’s scream caused a glass cake plate to shatter on the shelf. Blue shards exploded into the air.

Anna felt Tessa trembling beside her as her scream faded. The thing that emerged from the oven was no longer a ball of dough, but it wasn’t a man either. It lurched sideways and gripped the only remaining rack in the hot oven. The doughy flesh on its hand sizzled, and the thing opened a slit in its knobby face, releasing a garbled, bubbling noise. It snatched the rack from the mangled oven and heaved it across the room, where it clattered into the storage room and sizzled against unused cake boxes. With a shrieking of metal, the oven pulled completely away from the wall and crashed to the floor. Anna knew gas would be billowing from the exposed, broken pipes in the recess where the oven had been. They needed to get out of the bakery.

The monster was tall but lilted to the side on uneven legs that looked like misshapen breadsticks with stumps for feet. It had two very human arms, but its hands were a combination of sticky, raw dough and fingerlike extensions. The body was lumpy like raw dough

left uncovered overnight. Parts were hard and cracked like compacted mud in a dry riverbed, and other sections still looked as though they would be tacky to the touch. The entire torso was flecked with bits of green. When it turned its hairless head, it blinked black, deep-set eyes without proper lids, eyelashes, or eyebrows and stared at Anna and Tessa. Another horrible noise erupted from the slit in its face, and it lunged across the island for them, slamming into the box of golden sand. The box careened off the island and smashed into the opposite wall. Tessa screamed again, and Lily's voice shouted from the top of the stairs.

"What's going on?" Lily hurried halfway down the stairs and stopped as she fanned smoke away from her face.

"Get outside!" Anna yelled over her shoulder. "There's a gas leak."

"What in the hell is that?" Lily asked, staring at the misshapen creature pushing off the island into a standing position.

"Get out of here!" Anna repeated.

The monster yanked open a drawer in the island and pulled out a knife used for cutting large blocks of chocolate. Anna tried to push Tessa toward the staircase where Lily stood, but the monster had quickly grown accustomed to its uneven legs. It pounced around the island with unnerving agility, and Tessa and Anna were forced to run back toward the ovens. Lily lifted a small canister of flour from a nearby shelf and tossed it through the air. Her aim was slightly off, but the canister crashed into the monster's shoulder, breaking off a piece of its back, and the monster stumbled forward and fell. Flour scattered across the floor and mushroomed into the air like dust motes as the canister shattered against the tiles.

Lily snatched two bottles of cooking oil from the shelf and flung them at the downed monster, one after another. The first bottle hit him square in the back and lodged itself for a moment in the doughy flesh. The second bottle missed him completely, bounced off the tiles and burst open against the wall, sending a flood of oil across the floor. "Hurry," Lily yelled. "Get out while it's down."

Anna grabbed Tessa and pulled her toward the archway in the bakery so they could run out the front door. The monster lurched from

the floor, and the bottle of oil popped out of its back. It leaned down, grabbed the bottle, and hurled it at Anna and Tessa. The bottle caught Tessa in the back of her head. She moaned and collapsed forward onto Anna, causing both of them to fall. Tessa's body pinned Anna to the floor. Anna's breath rushed from her lungs. On her next inhale, she choked on the colorless gas that hovered over the tiles. The stench of rotten eggs filled her throat and caused her eyes to water.

Lily rushed to their rescue, and the only thing that saved them from the monster's wrath for a moment was the spilled oil. The monster's feet slipped, and it skidded into the wall, but it was quick to regain its balance.

"We have to get her off the floor," Anna said and coughed. "Gas."

Lily rolled Tessa off Anna and slapped Tessa's cheek, but Tessa didn't respond. The monster lurched around the island straight for them, sliding on slick, stumpy feet as it moved. Lily hooked her arms beneath Tessa's armpits and tried to drag her away. Anna pushed herself up and ran bent over toward the monster like a defensive tackle. She caught the monster in the stomach and felt her body press into its soft flesh. They slammed into the stove. The monster scrambled beneath her weight. Two of the burners on the stove clicked and flickered to life with low, blue flames. The monster made the mistake of pressing its hands on the stove as leverage so it could push off and knock Anna to the ground. Both of its hands ignited. Anna stumbled away as the monster waved its hands in the air in an attempt to extinguish the flames, but the fire leapt from its hands to its back and traveled to its feet, which quickly began to burn because of the oil slicking its body.

"Get out!" Anna shouted, scrambling to help Lily drag Tessa's body into the front room, but it was too late.

The monster bellowed, throwing sparks like an exploding Roman candle. For half a second, the gas hovering over the tiles glittered as though hundreds of fireflies fought to escape with burning wings. With one great inhale, sound and air yanked toward the epicenter of the leak, and then an instant later, the gas whooshed into flames that roared loudly and powerfully as they rushed across the floor of the bakery like a tsunami of fire. From the force of the burst, Lily was

thrown onto the staircase. Anna's head slammed into the archway, and she crumpled to the floor, lying on her side in a daze, watching flames lick up the walls, eat through bags and paper boxes. Tiny flames burned at her bare feet, and she tried to kick them away, but her legs were slow to respond. When she opened her mouth to call for help, the air wasn't fit for breathing, and she coughed instead.

A massive hulking creature moved through the bakery. When it spun into view, Anna imagined the burning shape was a flame dancer. It crashed into the island, into the walls, into the staircase railing, leaving behind blazing trails that wrapped around everything and climbed the walls. Anna tried to sit up, but her head spun even though she'd barely lifted it from the floor. The monster dropped to its knees, where it became a burning, bubbling mound dwindling to nothing.

Tessa lay in front of Anna with most of her body still in the bakery's kitchen. Flames jumped onto Tessa's clothes, and Anna reached for her, grabbing Tessa's arm. Anna tried to tug, but every time she breathed, she choked. Finally, Anna's eyes closed. A window shattered somewhere in the bakery. Male voices shouted, and Anna heard the pounding of shoes against the tiles.

Anna felt her body lift from the floor. She dangled in the air, pressed against something warm and strong. Cold air rushed across her face and into her lungs.

"I have her. Grab Tessa," a man said.

Someone carried Anna at a quick pace. She coughed a few times before a solid, freezing breath filled her body. When she opened her eyes, a thousand stars glittered in the dark sky. She saw trees appear, and branches empty of leaves stretched across her vision.

"Eli?" she asked in a rasping voice.

He laid her on the crisp, icy grass. It pressed into her pajamas like tiny toothpicks made of ice. "Lie still," he said, brushing her hair from her face. His hand lingered on her cheek.

"My feet hurt," she said. Tears rolled out the corners of her eyes.

Anna felt a rush of relief at seeing him again, seeing his blue eyes looking down at her face. She reached up to touch his cheek, but she heard Baron's voice. Then his face hovered into view, and Eli's was gone.

“Can you hear me? Are you okay?” Baron asked. “What happened?”

Anna suddenly pictured the jerking, burning monster as it destroyed the bakery’s kitchen. She sat up and gasped. Pain shot through the back of her skull, and she doubled over. She clutched Baron’s arm. “The bakery is on fire,” she said. “My apartment.” Anna saw a body beside her. *Tessa*. She reached for Tessa’s still hand. Then she panicked at the sight of only Tessa. “Lily? Where’s Lily?”

“Lily was in the bakery?” Baron asked. He looked up at Eli. “Did you see her?”

Anna watched Eli and Baron sprint up the street toward the bakery, which was lit from the inside with an eerie, flickering orange glow. Glass littered the sidewalk, and smoke billowed out of the broken windows. Anna crawled over to Tessa, who was covered in Baron’s jacket. She pressed her fingers to Tessa’s neck. There was a steady pulse, and she wiped smudges of ash from Tessa’s cheek. For a few seconds, Anna laid her forehead against Tessa’s shoulder, thankful to know she would be okay. The night had shifted from bad to horrendous. Anna looked at the fire over her shoulder. *Lily*.

Anna stood and winced at the pain in her feet. Her head pounded, spreading an ache from the back of her skull toward her eyes. She hobbled up the street in the direction of the bakery. Baron stumbled out, bent over and coughing. He leaned against the next building and sucked in the cold night air. Suddenly, the flames roared and the bay window in Anna’s apartment shattered. Baron looked up and saw her. He ran toward her, grabbed her arm, and pulled her away from the bakery.

“We have to stay back,” he said. “The whole place is going up in flames.”

Anna fought against Baron’s strength. “No,” she argued. “Lily and Eli—”

“He carried her out the back door,” he said.

“Is she okay?”

“Her outfit has seen better days, but she’ll be fine. I promise,” he said, grabbing both of her shoulders and forcing her to look at him. “I promise.”

Anna stopped struggling. Lily and Eli were safe. Her legs trembled, and she leaned against Baron. She saw tiny burns in Baron's shirt where sparks had leapt onto his clothes and left behind black holes. He lifted her from her feet and carried her back to the grassy area. Baron lowered her to the ground, and Anna sat there watching as flames destroyed her life. A siren broke through the silence of the night and whipped around the corner onto Main Street. Firemen bustled out of a gleaming red truck and assessed the situation. They attached the fire hose to the blue hydrant and opened the nozzle full blast.

Eli appeared through the smoke. His arm was draped around Lily's shoulder, leading her to the grassy area. When Lily saw Anna, she tore away from him and ran to Anna. They hugged tightly and shivered in the night air.

Lily said, "I woke up, and it was so hot. I came downstairs, and everything was burning. The stairs caught fire and boxed me in. I yelled and yelled, but I couldn't see y'all through the smoke. And then I couldn't *breathe*. Eli appeared out of nowhere and snatched me up like a doll." Her eyes drifted to Eli who stood nearby watching Anna. "Are you okay?" she asked, looking Anna over. "Where's Tessa?"

Anna motioned over her shoulder, and they knelt beside Tessa. "She's okay. She has a pulse." Just saying the words made Anna's throat close. She shivered and stood, crossing her arms over her chest and watching the firemen combat the inferno.

"You're probably freezing in those pajamas." Lily slipped her arm around Anna's shoulders. Anna leaned against her. It seemed like the whole world was burning. Smoke blotted out the stars, one by one. Main Street smelled like a catastrophe.

Anna started to say she was okay, but she wasn't. Ash floated through the air like snowflakes and caught in her hair. Her teeth chattered as the wind blew burned pieces of her life down the street.

"And the other thing?" Lily whispered.

"Gone. Burned up with everything else."

Ambulances and police cars arrived on the scene. Policemen and EMTs spilled out of their cars looking for victims. Baron ran over to meet them, and Anna watched as he pointed toward their small group

crowded on the grass, clinging to each other just to make sure they weren't alone. Water battled the fire until the firemen left behind a sodden, charred mess—a great, gaping hole where Anna's home used to be.

“We can fix buildings,” Lily said as encouragement. “But we can't fix people. At least we're all okay.”

Anna knew Lily was right, but when she stared at the remains of Bea's Bakery, her mind was blank of thoughts except for one word: *gone*. She had no job, no home, no clothes, no food. The wind brought wisps of curling, ashy smoke and the horrible stench of burned plastic.

The EMTs immediately assisted Tessa, lifting her gently onto a stretcher. When they jostled her body, Tessa finally awoke. She called for Anna with a smoke-choked voice. The policemen approached and asked Anna to give details of what happened. She rested her hand on Tessa's arm while she explained the events leading up to the fire. She and her two friends had decided to make cookies, and the oven had malfunctioned, creating a gas leak. Anna and Tessa made eye contact, and Tessa mouthed the words *thank you*. Mystic Water would never know what really happened inside Bea's Bakery, and they would never know there had been a fourth body present in the fire.

They were lucky to be alive, the policemen and firemen agreed. The EMTs situated an oxygen mask over Tessa's face. She blinked up at Anna as tears filled her eyes. “It's going to be okay,” Anna assured her. “It's going to be okay,” she said again to try and assure herself. Anna gave Tessa's hand a squeeze as the EMTs pushed the stretcher into the ambulance.

An EMT began asking Lily questions and insisted she take a ride to the hospital so they could check her over. Lily refused. “I'm staying with Anna.”

Anna turned and looked at Lily, at the defiance she saw in her friend's eyes. She walked over to the two EMTs speaking with Lily. “You should go. You need to make sure you're okay. We breathed in a lot of smoke, and I'd feel better if I knew you and the peanut were okay,” Anna said.

Lily's hand instinctively went to her stomach. “But what about you?”

Why don't you ride with me, and we can get checked out together?"

Anna's eyes drifted to the wreck of a building on Main Street. She rubbed the back of her head. "I should stay here. I need to make sure the police have everything they need. I should probably call someone. Insurance maybe. Of course all my paperwork was probably turned into kindling."

Lily lay on the stretcher. "Promise me you'll call the doctor in the morning? Wait, where are you going to stay? Do you want to go to my place? Jakob won't care."

Anna shook her head. "I'll go to my parents'. Thanks, though." Lily held out her pinky, and Anna almost smiled. She hooked her pinky around Lily's. "I promise I'll call the doctor in the morning." Anna pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling as they pushed Lily's stretcher inside the ambulance and closed the doors.

Anna hobbled up the wet street. Rivers of dirty water washed down the edges of the curbs and disappeared into the gutters. Anna bent down and lifted sopping wet papers. Underneath the soot and freezing water, Anna could faintly read the words of the contract for the bakery in Wildehaven Beach. The top edges were blackened and torn away. The contract hung limp in her hands, but she pressed it to her chest and squeezed her eyes closed.

She stood and inhaled a shaky breath, clenching her teeth to stop them from chattering. When she glanced around, she saw Eli in a crowd of people who'd gathered around the edges of the scene. Anna assumed they were late-night festivalgoers who had yet to make it home or who were lingering at the corner pub. She didn't see Baron anywhere. The crowd parted as the ambulances pulled away. Anna knew she should call her parents, but she looked at the burned shell of the bakery and realized her cell phone was somewhere lost in the rubble. Without thinking, Anna walked over to Eli. She stopped in front of him. She wanted to ask him to hold her, but she didn't have to. He pressed her against him as he enfolded her in his arms.

"Thank you," she mumbled against his chest. "I'm so glad you came back."

"Not as glad as I am," he said, holding her tighter. He slid his hand

down her hair and kissed the top of her head. His arms were streaked with soot.

“Everything is gone,” Anna said, finally allowing herself to fully cry, not caring that they stood in a group of people who were probably showering her with pity.

“It’s going to be okay,” Eli said as he stroked her hair, and Anna desperately wanted to believe him.

Time quickly slipped by as it tends to during a tragedy, with people moving in blurs of color without sound. Anna felt she and Eli were frozen at the center of the activity as everyone else whirred past like people on a carousel. She could have stood in his arms forever or at least until the shock wore off—which she felt might take forever just the same.

“Anna!” someone called. It was Evelyn.

Eli released his hold on her, and she turned to see her parents and Baron pushing through the crowd and around the emergency vehicles. Anna knew her mama must have been worried because she hadn’t taken the time to properly apply makeup or make sure her hair was perfect. However, Anna still thought she looked beautiful and was the exact person Anna wanted to see. Evelyn wrapped her in a hug so tight Anna could barely pull in a full breath. Evelyn stroked her back and pulled away just far enough to look at Anna’s face. Her daddy wrapped both women in his arms, kissing the side of Anna’s head. Then he pulled off his coat and wrapped it around Anna’s shoulders.

“I’m so thankful you’re okay,” Evelyn said. “When Baron called, my heart nearly stopped. Your dad drove like a maniac to get us here. It’s a miracle *we’re* okay.” Evelyn wiped at Anna’s dirty cheeks.

Anna looked at Baron with his hands shoved in his pockets and his burned shirt. “I called them,” Baron said. “I thought you’d want me to.”

Anna nodded and her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you,” she said, and she meant it one hundred percent. Baron had finally thought about what *she* needed. And she needed her parents more than anyone else at that moment. She wanted to nestle into the comfort they offered and lose herself. She wanted someone to tell her how to fix this terrible mess, but more than that, she wanted to lie down, close her eyes, and

drift away long enough to ease the pounding in her head and the ache in her chest.

Anna heard her daddy thanking Baron and Eli. She was pretty sure she heard his voice flood with emotion while he talked to them. She heard the police officers say they would call her if they needed anything else, and they were very sorry. The firemen told her she would have to wait a day before returning to the site because the rubble would likely still be smoldering from the heat of the fire even though it was freezing outside. The gas company was already working to fix the leak and prevent any of the other buildings from the possibility of catching fire, but the area was roped off for safety.

Anna walked toward Eli and slipped her fingers around his palm. “Do you—do you want to come home with us?” she asked, tearing up again. “You’ll need a place to stay.”

Eli shook his head. “Jakob is going to pick me up. He said I could stay with them for as long as I needed. You go on with your parents. I’ll be okay.”

Anna squeezed his hand. “You sure?”

“Promise,” he said, pulling her into one final hug.

Anna vaguely recalled being bundled into her parents’ SUV and leaning her head against the window as they drove away into the darkness. When Anna hobbled through the front door of her parents’ house, she breathed in the familiar scents of home—her daddy’s soap, the lingering aromas of sweet tea and pound cake, the fresh tiger lilies her mama always kept in a vase on the entry table. She plopped onto the couch while her daddy inspected her feet. She dozed off while he rubbed some sort of tingly cream on her skin, and she drowsily thanked him.

Anna leaned against Evelyn as they walked up the hallway to her bedroom, which looked exactly the same as it did when she was a kid. The pink and white striped walls and overstuffed duvet welcomed Anna. Her favorite childhood books adorned a white bookshelf, and the lacy curtains shivered when the heat kicked on. Evelyn folded down the duvet, and Anna lowered herself to the edge while her mama rummaged through the dresser for clean clothes.

“Here,” Evelyn said, handing Anna a worn-out, oversize T-shirt with hearts and moons on it. “This should still fit. I’ll get a glass of water and some pain reliever while you change.”

Anna pressed the soft fabric of the T-shirt to her cheek. It smelled like home, like years of running up and down the hallways with bare feet, like laughing and painting fingernails with Lily and Tessa on Friday nights. Anna draped her ruined pajamas over the back of the desk chair and slipped on the clean shirt. She crawled beneath the covers and eased her head onto the fluffy pillow.

Evelyn returned with water and medicine. Anna took both willingly and sighed as she lay down again. Evelyn opened the closet doors and searched for something before closing the doors. She offered a battered, one-eyed teddy bear to Anna.

“Buster?” Anna asked, and her voice cracked. She pressed her beloved childhood bear to her chest, wrapping her arms around him so tightly she almost wanted to apologize for crushing him. “I can’t believe you kept him. You always complained about how dirty he was.”

Evelyn pushed the hair from Anna’s face, and tears sparkled in her eyes. “I’m not a complete monster,” she said with a gentle smile. “I would never throw away Buster. You went on some grand adventures together. But that’s probably why he’s the dirtiest thing I’ve ever seen and also why he’s been banished to the closet for all time.” Evelyn leaned down and kissed Anna’s forehead. “Get some rest.” She switched off the bedside lamp. “We don’t have to figure anything out tonight. Your dad and I will help you sort through everything. You won’t have to do it all by yourself, okay?”

Anna had no doubt her take-charge mama would help her until the world was right again. She was almost tempted to inform Evelyn she also had a broken heart, and if she could find a cure, it would be wonderful. “Thanks, Mama,” Anna said, swallowing down her tears. “I love you.”

“I love you. Very much,” Evelyn said and closed the door.

16

Sugar Cookies

Anna rolled over and inhaled deeply. The room smelled like chocolate chip cookies and her daddy's breakfast coffee blend. Her mind registered that it was Sunday, and she couldn't understand why Eli would be awake and baking on a Sunday morning when the bakery was closed. The room was brighter than it should be against her closed eyelids. She opened her eyes and stared at pink and white striped walls. *Why am I at my parents' house?*

Then she remembered. Anna sat up, and the bed sheets pooled at her waist. The back of her head ached and felt bruised to the touch. Buster lay beside her, so she picked him up and gave him a squeeze. The bakery was gone. Her apartment was gone. When she inhaled, she smelled fire and burnt sugar. There were folded, clean clothes at the foot of her bed. She tossed back the duvet and swung her legs over the side. She placed her feet gently onto the floor. They were still sore, but the medicine her daddy applied had definitely made a difference.

Anna needed a shower. Her hair stank of smoke and ashes. She grabbed the clothes and made her way to the bathroom she'd used growing up. The countertop and cabinets had been redone in granite and walnut after she'd left home, but the wallpaper was still the same pattern of pink and pale green flowers. Toiletries had been placed on the counter, along with a brand-new toothbrush. Her mama had bought her favorite shampoo, conditioner, and soap. There was also a bottle of fuchsia nail polish that made Anna smile. Her mama would never give up trying to mold her into a girly girl.

After a hot shower, Anna dried her hair and tugged on the new jeans and long-sleeve emerald green shirt she found on her bed. The house still smelled like baked goods, and Anna panicked at the idea of her mama baking because she could turn brownies into bricks. The television in the living room was on a news channel, and the clock on the microwave said it was just past one in the afternoon.

The kitchen remodel had drastically altered the kitchen from Anna's childhood memories, but that wasn't what surprised her the most. The countertops and kitchen table were covered in baked goods. Some were sheltered by plastic wrap. Others were cuddled beneath plastic containers. A few sat atop colorful, ceramic cake plates. There was no way her mama could have baked so much in such a short amount of time. Anna walked to the oven and placed her hands against it. *Cold.*

Evelyn walked through the doorway that connected the living room to the sun porch. "Good morning—or afternoon, I should say," she said with a smile. "I knew those clothes would fit. That color suits you."

Anna combed her fingers through her hair. "Thanks for the bathroom stuff. And for the clothes."

"Tessa and Lily called this morning to check on you. They're both resting at home," Evelyn said. "I told them you were still sleeping, and they thought I was joking. Lily's exact words were, 'Her body hasn't seen a bed after eight a.m. in at least three years.'" Evelyn smiled. "Your dad made me sneak in and check that you were still breathing like he used to make me do when you were a baby."

Anna felt relief that Lily and Tessa were both home and doing okay. "Mama, where did all this food come from?"

Evelyn lifted a plastic container and gave it a shake. Cookies rattled around inside. "Your dad has eaten most of these. They *were* good. Not as good as yours, but close enough. These sugar cookies came from Mrs. Rogers." She pointed as she moved around the room. "The angel food cake is from Lottie down the street. Mr. Dixon dropped off the walnut brownies. Dr. Pitts brought the snickerdoodles. Tracey from the bank made the blackberry cobbler." And she continued until she'd itemized every treat.

"But why?" Anna asked.

Evelyn crossed the kitchen to her daughter. "Because they want to let you know how sorry they are to hear about what happened."

Anna's throat tightened. "It's not like somebody died." She reached out and brushed her fingers against a plate full of oatmeal cookies. They warmed her fingertips.

"To them, it's like a death. They loved that bakery, and they love

you. This is their way of letting you know how special what you did was to them and how special *you* are.” Anna’s eyes watered. “Now, don’t start crying again,” Evelyn said, but her voice was gentle. “You’ll make your eyes all red and puffy, and it’ll completely clash with your skin tone.” Evelyn pulled Anna into a hug. “How about some lunch? I have low-fat turkey on multi-grain bread. I’ll even add cheese if you want it.”

“Hold on now, Mama,” Anna said, wiping her eyes. “There’s no need to get crazy.” And they both laughed.



Against the firemen’s advice of staying away from the site for a day or two, Anna borrowed her daddy’s truck and drove to the bakery, to what was left of it. In the afternoon light, it looked like a scene from a disaster movie. The area was littered with twisted metal, burnt plastic that had bubbled and formed strange, ash-coated domes, shards of glass that shimmered in the sunshine, and a yawning hole full of mostly unrecognizable items. Anna’s former life was destroyed. She zipped the old work jacket she’d borrowed from her daddy because he said he didn’t care if she got it a little dirty. It was at least two sizes too big, but it was warm. Anna imagined it could keep out the chills brought on by kicking through rubble.

She slid her hands along the rope strung up by the emergency department and stared into the burned-out bakery. Her eyes settled on the freezer in the back. It stood alone without the comfort of the walls that once hemmed it in. Black streaks smeared across the stainless steel and looked like shadows of flames left behind during the blaze, but the freezer looked intact otherwise. Wearing a pair of yellow rain boots from her high school days, Anna carefully made her way over to the freezer because curiosity overcame her. The ground radiated warmth and reminded Anna of a solidified lava flow. She sidestepped her favorite set of mixing bowls that had melted into the shapes of nesting fortune cookies. Anna imagined cracking one open to read the message: *Your life is a wreck. Change directions.* She pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling while she looked at what remained of the lovely island her daddy had specially made for her. The

slab of granite had crushed the lower wooden half, and the ceiling had fallen into the middle of the kitchen.

Anna cautiously touched her fingertips to the freezer's handle. The metal was cold, so she wrenched it open. Debris scraped out of the way as the door swung ajar. The power was no longer working in the building, but the interior of the freezer was still quite chilly. Anna smiled in the sad sort of way that she'd seen people do on the news when a tornado had demolished their homes. They'd find a framed photo and they'd smile, but they were crying too. She pulled a tub of double dark chocolate chip cookie dough from the shelf and popped off the lid. Then she stepped out into the sunshine, closed the freezer door, and dug her finger into the dough. Anna chewed a mouthful and sighed. For a few seconds, the chocolate eased the ache in her chest. She could breathe around the sorrow without feeling as though she'd swallowed a macaron whole. On her next inhale, she smelled sugar and cinnamon.

"Afternoon snack?" a voice asked behind her.

Anna turned to see Eli walking up the alley beside the bakery. The soot from the night before was washed from his arms, and he wore a clean shirt advertising the local pizza joint. She offered the tub of cookie dough to him. "Want some? It's only slightly gooey. Still edible. I eat when I'm emotional—it's a terrible habit. I'm trying to break it, just not today."

Eli smiled, and the sight nearly brought tears to Anna's eyes. She wasn't sure she'd ever see it again, not after the way he'd left her apartment. Anna looked up as if she could see where she'd once lived, but all she could see was the blue sky and fat, happy clouds forming shapes. Eli reached out his hand to her, and she took it. He maneuvered her over the debris and took the cookie dough tub from her. He stuck his finger into the dough and popped it into his mouth.

"How was Jakob's place last night?" she asked.

"Not bad." He hooked his thumb into the shirt and stretched it out. "He let me borrow his clothes, and, man, are these jeans tight. I'm afraid to bend over or squat because something might burst, and I don't want the bursting to happen on my body."

Anna chuckled. She looked at her car still parked behind the crumbled building. A large chunk of bricks had fallen on her car, crushing her hood like a cartoon anvil. Her front tires looked like someone had held a blowtorch to them. "Guess I won't be driving anywhere today in my car. There goes my escape plan." She heaved a loud sigh.

"Looks like someone swapped your tires for tar," he said lightly and draped his arm around her shoulders. "All fixable though. What we couldn't have fixed was losing you. Good thing that didn't happen."

Anna nodded, but her throat was closing and tears prickled in her eyes. She tried to blink as fast as possible and cleared her throat. "I'm really sorry about last night," she said. *But not about the kiss.*

"Me too," he said, pulling her closer.

"Do you hate me?"

Eli turned Anna so she faced him. When she stared at the dancing pizza on his borrowed shirt, he fisted his hand beneath her chin and lifted her face. "I'm not capable of hating you," he said. "Am I confused? Yes. Do I know what to do next? Not really. But what I do know is that right now you need me, and I plan on staying as long as you need help repairing what we lost."

Anna nodded. "And afterward? You'll leave?"

Eli lowered his hand and looked toward the shape-shifting clouds. He pointed skyward. "That one looks like a seagull."

Anna looked up and agreed. It flew toward the ocean on fluffy wings.

"I think it's best that I leave. I need to figure myself out," he said.

Anna nodded because she was afraid to say anything, afraid she might beg Eli to stay with her. She wanted to tell him that she was home when they were together, but it sounded too pathetic, and she knew Eli deserved better. She put her hand on his chest. Her fingers tingled with his warmth, and the heat quickly spread up her arm and pooled in her chest until she was forced to exhale just to make room for all of it. Eli covered her hand with his. Then, he pulled her against him with one arm, holding the tub of cookie dough to the side.

She breathed in the scent of warm sugar cookies and nodded

against his chest. “Send postcards,” she said, trying to pretend the idea of Eli leaving didn’t feel like a glass shard in her chest.

“Where should I send them?” he asked. “The Clarke House or Wildehaven Beach?”

“Good question.” She pulled away from him and looked up into his blue eyes. “Maybe fold them into paper airplanes and send them on the wind. I’m sure they’ll find me.”

Eli grinned. “I’ll always find you. No matter where you are, I will always be able to find you.”

Anna snorted a laugh. She poked him in the chest. “You sound like Daniel Day Lewis from *The Last of the Mohicans*.”

“Did that up my sex appeal?”

“Definitely,” Anna said and couldn’t help but grin at his silly smile. He was trying to cheer her up, and it was working. Standing on the edges of the destroyed bakery and apartment, Anna didn’t feel as devastated because she still had Eli, and he wasn’t leaving her yet. He was going to stay until she was back on her feet, until her life didn’t resemble a catastrophe. The sun shone down on them, warming their cheeks. Anna grabbed for the cookie tub and stuck her finger into the dough. Then she leaned her head against Eli’s arm and sighed. In that moment, she could almost believe everything was going to be okay.



Anna and Eli spent the afternoon pushing through the debris in search of anything salvageable. At first, Anna found the job depressing, and every little burnt item made her feel weepy all over again, but she and Eli decided to make a game out of it. The person who found the most useable items won a free dinner. So far, Anna had a few metal mixing spoons shoved into her jacket pocket, one untouched bottle of chocolate liquor, and half a dozen cookie cutters. Eli rescued the largest item—a red stoneware baking dish—but Anna insisted size didn’t matter, only quantity. She had laughed when he raised the dish over his head in victory like a wrestling belt.

At dinnertime, when the sun started falling from its afternoon perch and threw horizontal rainbow streaks across the sky, Anna’s

nose was red and her fingers were numb and sore, coated with grime and soot. She climbed over the scattered mess where the front of the bakery once stood, and she paused on the sidewalk. She held a cracked cake plate in her hand.

“Think anyone will notice that half of it is gone?” she asked, rotating the plate 360 degrees.

“Nah,” Eli said. “You can tell everyone it’s a dieter’s cake plate. Half the plate means half the calories.” He stomped his way over to her, leaving behind a trail of black clouds swirling after him. “Shall we call it a night? We can order pizza from this place,” he said, pulling out his shirt and reading the upside down logo, “and have them deliver it to the park.”

Anna smiled. “We’ll be sitting in the dark,” she said. “We could eat in Daddy’s truck and pretend we don’t know why it smells like pizza when I return it.”

Eli carried the salvaged items to the truck and piled them in the truck bed. Anna’s stack of reclaimed items was much larger than Eli’s. “Looks like I’m buying.” He pulled a cell phone out of his back pocket. “Lily gave me her phone,” he said as he dialed the number for the pizza place. After ordering, they leaned against the truck grill and looked over the pathways they’d left behind in the rubble.

Two cars pulled up and parked beside them. Mr. Silverstein climbed out of an old orange Camaro. The driver’s side door squeaked on its hinges. He gave it a good shove to close the door. The car beside the Camaro was newer and a model Anna didn’t recognize. The driver stayed inside with the engine running.

Mr. Silverstein walked over to them and surveyed the damage before speaking. “Such a shame,” he said. “I couldn’t believe it when my wife told me what everyone was saying. We drove by this afternoon and saw the two of y’all working.” He turned to face them. “We did some talking about it, and we figured you’d need a little help from anyone willing to offer it. I noticed your car has seen better days.” He jerked his head toward the rear of the bakery. Then he held out his fisted hand to her. “Take this. We don’t need it, and we don’t drive it. It’s just an extra thing sitting at the house.”

Mr. Silverstein dropped a set of keys into Anna's hand. "You're giving me a *car*?" she asked. "I can't accept this. Thank you, but I'll get mine fixed." Anna glanced at Eli, who seemed just as surprised by the offer.

Mr. Silverstein shook his head. "I won't accept no for an answer. It's yours." Then he stepped away before Anna could argue, so she hurried over to him and threw her arms around his neck and thanked him.

Even in the disappearing light, she could see he blushed. Anna waved as he rode away with his wife. An easterly wind blew and Anna breathed in the smells of autumn, reminding her of running through fallen leaves, sitting under blankets roasting s'mores, and carving pumpkins with goofy faces. She tilted her head back and looked up at the stars twinkling in the darkening blue of the sky. Hope floated on the wind and tangled itself in Anna's hair. She reached up and pulled her fingers through the strands, feeling her hand warm.



After finishing most of the pizza, Anna leaned her head against the window and exhaled loudly. "The last slice did me in," she said. "From here on out, three is my limit. No less—definitely no more."

Eli finished off the sixth slice of pizza and wiped his mouth. "If I eat one more, these pants will become a moving hazard. The button could burst off at any moment, ricochet around the cab, and knock us out. Then we'd freeze to death overnight, and they would find us here in the morning, reeking of pizza and me without my pants buttoned."

Anna chuckled. "You've given that way too much thought," she teased. But she closed the pizza box to prevent him from reaching for another slice. "Precautionary measures," she said as she slid the pizza box onto the dashboard.

She stared down at the keys resting on the middle of the seat in between them. Picking them up, she closed her fingers around them and inhaled slowly. On the exhale, she reached her hand over toward Eli. "Here," she said. She dropped the keys into Eli's hand, and he looked over at her with his blue eyes in a way that made her want to throw her arms around him. The cab filled with the aroma of summertime, all

fresh cut grass and riding with the windows down—freedom.

“Why are you giving me these?” he asked, turning toward her in the seat.

“You’ll need a trusty steed to take you on your journey, cowboy,” she said, willing her throat not to close up. She rubbed her fingers across her collarbone.

Eli nodded and stared out the window. For a few long minutes, they sat in silence. Then Eli stretched his open hand, palm up, across the seat, and Anna placed her hand in his. He twined their fingers together. Energy zinged between their bound hands, and Eli squeezed his fingers against hers as if to show her he felt it too.

“Thank you,” he said, leaning his head against the back window and looking at her. He pressed his other hand to his heart. “No matter where I go, you’ll always be in here. Always with me.”

Anna turned away so that Eli wouldn’t see how she struggled not to cry, but she didn’t let go of his hand, and they stayed like that sitting in her daddy’s truck until the moon was high in the sky and the crickets in Mystic Water sang everyone to sleep.

Ooey Gooey Butter Cake

After spending the next few days kicking through the bakery debris, finding a couple dozen more salvageable items, and spending time on the phone with the insurance company, Anna was finally able to sit down and have lunch with Tessa and Lily. She hadn't been avoiding them exactly, but she hadn't been quite ready to talk about what happened. Her emotions were still too close to the surface, and she wanted to stay focused on rebuilding.

Anna walked into the deli on Main Street. She waved to Mr. and Mrs. Cavelli. Anna scanned the day's specials written in looping script on the chalkboard and pulled a sheet of folded paper from her pocket. She'd written down the choices for Lily and Tessa, and Lily's choice was the special. Mrs. Cavelli came from behind the counter and hugged Anna.

"So sorry to hear about the bakery," she said. "You're going to rebuild, aren't you? It wouldn't be the same without you around the corner."

Anna smiled. "We're definitely rebuilding," she said with a nod. "I think all the insurance quirks should be worked out by the end of the week, which means rebuilding can start soon."

Mrs. Cavelli smiled and retied her mustard-stained apron around her curvy figure. "Good," she said. "You need any carpentry help, you let me know. You know our son Richie is a great craftsman. Does beautiful work. Course I'm his mother, and I'm biased, but you ask anyone. They'll tell you he's excellent."

"What can I get you, Anna?" Mr. Cavelli asked from behind the counter. "If you don't order soon, she'll want to set you up with Richie, and I don't think he's your type."

Mrs. Cavelli fisted her hands on her hips. "What's wrong with Richie? He's a handsome boy, and he's a hard worker. Besides, I'm not trying to set Anna up with him. I know she has a boyfriend. You do

have a boyfriend, right?" she asked, joining her husband behind the counter. Her large brown eyes looked hopeful.

"Well, I—"

"Now, Rosa, that's none of your business." He grinned at Anna and shook his head. "Anna, what can I get you?"

"Nothing wrong with a mother wanting a pretty young woman for her son," Rosa grumbled under her breath.

Anna smiled and glanced at the list. She ordered a grilled brie and tomato on whole wheat bread for Lily, a smoked turkey club on sourdough for Tessa, and an old-fashioned grilled cheese for herself. She grabbed three bags of potato chips while they prepared her order, but when she tried to pay, Mr. Cavelli refused her money.

"Look at it as neighbors helping neighbors," Mr. Cavelli said, and Mrs. Cavelli nodded in agreement.

"But I can't let you give me all this food for free. At least let me pay for half of it. I'm feeding Lily and Tessa too," Anna said, pushing her money across the counter.

"When you reopen your bakery, you bake Rosa and me a cake, and we'll call it even," Mr. Cavelli offered.

Anna smiled. "Deal. What's your favorite kind?"

Mrs. Cavelli's eyes lit up. "Oh, I love the chocolate peanut butter torte with that cookie crust. I have dreams about it. It makes me feel like dancing." She swayed her hips to the music in her head.

"You got it," Anna said. She thanked them and carried the bags down the street to the park where she saw Lily and Tessa bundled up in jackets and scarves, stretching out a patchwork quilt in the sunshine. Bright red and brown cardinals bounced from limb to limb in a nearby oak tree, watching them as they arranged their picnic area.

Lily pulled three travel mugs out of her carry bag, and Tessa folded napkins and anchored them to the blanket with forks. She looked up and saw Anna, and they both waved. Anna plopped down beside them and passed around chips and sandwiches. The breeze carried the scent of melted cheese and freshly brewed coffee. Tessa tore open her bag of barbeque chips and flipped off the top piece of bread on her sandwich. She laid down a layer of chips and then put her sandwich back together.

Her first bite crunched, and crumbs fell onto the napkin in her lap.

“Remember when Tessa went through that phase where she ate only mayonnaise and barbeque Frito sandwiches?” Lily asked and sipped her coffee. “Her fingers were constantly orange-tipped.”

“Did she ever grow out of that phase?” Anna teased.

Tessa laughed and tossed a potato chip at Lily. It caught the wind and landed on Anna’s knee instead. Anna popped it into her mouth and said, “Finders keepers.”

“At least I didn’t go through a ketchup and macaroni and cheese phase,” Tessa said, looking pointedly at Lily.

“That *was* weird,” Anna agreed. She drank hot chocolate from the travel mug. The cardinals chirped a song, echoing each other.

A string of brie stretched from Lily’s mouth to the bread before it pulled too thin and broke. She wiped her mouth before saying, “Personally, I thought the peanut butter and Doritos phase was the real low point of my food experimentation, but this morning, I made a sandwich of dill pickle slices and cream cheese.”

Anna wrinkled her nose, and Tessa made a gagging noise. “I wouldn’t be spreading that around town,” Anna joked. She finished one half of her sandwich and leaned back on her palms. “Guess you can blame it on the peanut now though.” She glanced over at Lily. “How is everything with you and Jakob?”

Lily sighed. “Peachy. He’s great. *We’re* great. Tomorrow the firm is going to make him partner, and then after the weekend, we can let the cat out of the bag,” she said with a devilish smile. “He apologized for his mother, and he’s been dotting on me like crazy. I think the fire really scared him,” she said, looking away from Anna’s gaze.

“It does put life into perspective,” Anna said, glancing up the street at where the bakery used to sit.

“I know everyone’s been asking, but you are planning on rebuilding, aren’t you?” Tessa asked. “Won’t the insurance money help with that?”

“It will,” Anna said, “and we’re going to rebuild for sure. I’m not sure about the apartment above it, but definitely the building for the bakery. We might even be able to start as soon as next week.”

“What about Wildehaven Beach?” Lily asked.

Anna thought of the sodden contract she'd carried home the night of the fire. It was now dried and wrinkled and hiding under her childhood bed. "I think everyone would prefer I stay."

"What's in Wildehaven Beach?" Tessa asked, finishing her sandwich.

Anna realized she'd never had a chance to talk to Tessa about the bakery offer, so she took a few minutes to explain the situation. Tessa listened, but the color faded from her face. A cloud drifted in front of the sun.

"You're not going, are you? That would mean I'd lose both of you," Tessa said.

"Both of who?" Lily asked, leaning her head back and funneling potato chip crumbs into her mouth. She thumped the edge of the bag to help them slide along.

"He told me he was leaving," Tessa said in a voice so quiet both Anna and Lily leaned closer. Tessa fiddled with a string on the quilt. "I don't blame him really, but I don't want to lose both of you. Even if he stayed, I know I'd still lose him. His heart is with you. Even *I* can't continue to ignore that—"

"Tessa—"

"He's been with you every day, helping you. I know he cares about me, but it's not the same way he cares about you. He *loves* you, and I'm sorry that I didn't think that love was real. I was wrong. And I'm sorry that he's leaving. It's all my fault," she said, blinking away tears.

Anna put down her sandwich and slid closer to Tessa. "Even if I moved to Wildehaven Beach, you aren't *losing* me. I told the same thing to Lily. It's a little more than an hour away, and it's on the beach. You could visit me any time, but that's null and void now. None of this is your fault, Tessa. I don't think that for one second."

Tessa swiped at her tears and tucked her hair behind her ears. "But I made that stupid thing that almost *killed* all of us. I burned down your bakery and your apartment."

"That's all true, but you didn't intend to kill us. You've never been a great baker either, so the results aren't entirely surprising," Anna said. When Tessa jerked her head up and stared open-mouthed at Anna, Anna gave her a playful shove on the knee. "I'm kidding, Tess. You had

no idea that the dough would turn into a psycho, best friend killer, and you were trying to help me—”

“I *was*,” Tessa agreed. “I didn’t know my man was going to be a homicidal dough boy. I mean, why was it so crazy?” Tessa asked through her tears, but her lips were curling up at the corners.

“He was probably pissed you made him out of your mama’s Italian bread,” Lily said. “He looked like someone burned cheese on his head. Plus he smelled like scorched raccoon fur.” She leaned her face toward the sun. “That’s enough to ruin anyone’s day.”

“And you know how that smells because...?” Anna asked, nudging Lily’s leg with her foot. Lily only laughed.

“I’m really sorry, Anna,” Tessa said, folding her hands together in her lap. “I don’t want you to leave because of me.”

“Even if I did go, it wouldn’t be because of you,” Anna assured her. “We’re going to rebuild, and it’s a chance for me to start over. Something good will come out of this mess. But the next time you bake something, you should ask for some assistance.” Anna smiled at Tessa.

“I promise,” Tessa said and held out her pinky finger. Anna looped hers around Tessa’s. “No more men for me. Not for a while.”

“Definitely no dough men,” Lily agreed. “Anna, remember the cake Tessa made for your tenth birthday?” Lily asked. “The one she found in the pet magazine?”

“I didn’t know it was for dogs!” Tessa said defensively, and all three girls burst out laughing.



Anna slid her new cell phone into her back pocket as she climbed out of her daddy’s truck. Baron’s car was parked in the driveway, and he sat on the front steps of her parents’ house. Smoke curled from their brick chimney. He gave her a small smile as she walked up, and he patted the spot beside him.

“Your mama knows I’m here,” he said with an easy smile. “I didn’t want her to think there was a lurker on her porch.”

The chill of the bricks seeped through her blue jeans, and she gave a little shiver. “I hope she offered you some of the baked goods from the

people in town,” Anna said. “I swear, if I have to hear her fuss at Daddy for eating another piece of cake, I’m going to go bonkers.”

Baron patted his stomach through his thick, fleece jacket. “Proud owner of four peanut butter cookies that are a little on the dry side and a slice of apple pie.”

Baron’s breath hung in front of his mouth in puffs of white before disappearing into the air around them. Anna wrapped her arms around her knees and looked at the sun hanging over the forest. It would be dark in another hour and too cold to sit outside without a warm drink or a wool blanket.

Baron exhaled loudly, and they both watched the long cloud of white travel toward the roofline. “When I stepped outside of the pub that night to take a phone call and saw the bakery glowing like a furnace, I couldn’t think. I stared for a whole minute because my mind wouldn’t register what my eyes were seeing. Then all I could think about was you sleeping upstairs in your cupcake pajamas, trapped in your apartment. Eli came running out of the darkness, and we didn’t even speak or ask questions. I didn’t care that he was the man I’d seen kissing you earlier. I only cared that I get to you. We were like one mind working to get into the bakery and save you.

“The whole downstairs was filled with smoke, and I swear I saw something burning and flailing around inside. I refused to believe it was you. We threw a bench through the front window.” He paused and shoved his hand into his hair. The scent of the ocean drifted around them, circling them. “I can’t even think about what would have happened if I hadn’t come outside. I was still so mad at you, but as soon as I thought you were in trouble, I felt sick with fear.” Baron stretched his legs out down the stairs and folded his hands together in his lap. “I wanted to say I’m sorry for being a hypocrite.”

Anna looked over at him. His hair was tousled, and his cheeks were pink from the chill in the air. She couldn’t deny he was handsome. Part of her still yearned for the comfortable routine they’d had before, but she knew there was nothing fulfilling left in that relationship. “What do you mean?”

“I was pissed when I saw you kissing Eli,” he admitted. “It still burns

me up. But I kissed a girl when I was in California.”

“Valerie?” Anna asked. Thinking of Baron kissing someone else caused an emotion akin to jealousy to slither through her stomach, so she swallowed and breathed in slowly.

Baron’s eyes widened. “How did you know that?”

“You called me from a disco. You were talking to her, about her actually.”

“I did?” he asked. He shook his head and chuckled. “What an idiot. I felt awful afterward. I knew it was wrong. Then I started thinking about what you said before I left. You were right. I wasn’t thinking about us. I wasn’t thinking about anyone but myself, and you deserve better than that.”

Anna nodded. “Wow. Guess that makes us even,” she said as she rubbed her hands up her shins, creating friction that warmed her legs.

“Nah,” he said. “I think you win. I always needed you more than you needed me. Now I have to try to find someone to put up with me, and you’re free from a selfish jerk.”

Baron grinned at her, and Anna laughed. The front door opened, and Evelyn poked her head out. “Goodness, it’s too cold for chatting out here. Y’all come inside. I’ve made Anna’s famous hot chocolate and turkey chili with extra kick like Anna likes, but heavens, it gives me heartburn. Now, come on in.” She closed the door.

“Wanna stay for dinner?” Anna asked, standing and stretching.

Baron stood and pulled her into a hug. “This is difficult for me to admit, but I wasn’t good enough for you.”

“So they say,” Anna said, hugging Baron and breathing in the green scent of grapes ripening on the vine.

He pulled away from her and raised both eyebrows. “Somebody else thinks I’m not good enough for you?” A briny breeze blew across the porch and fluttered the chrysanthemum blooms. “And I suppose Eli is good enough?”

Anna laughed at Baron’s expression. “Oh, relax,” she said, climbing the stairs to the front door. “And it doesn’t matter about Eli. He’s leaving too.”

Baron took the stairs two at a time and met Anna on the porch.

“He’s leaving you?”

“Must be a pattern,” she said, pretending it didn’t matter and trying to make a joke out of her heartache. She pushed open the door to walk inside, but Baron grabbed her arm.

“If he’s leaving you, he’s an idiot,” Baron said. He slid his hand down her arm and stopped when her hand was in his.

“Then, that’ll make two of you,” she said. She gave his hand a squeeze and let him go.

“Want me to beat him up?” Baron asked.

Anna laughed. She knew he was joking, but there was a seriousness in his light eyes that spread warmth through her chest. “Rain check,” she said with a smile.

“Are you two coming in or staying out?” Evelyn called from the kitchen. “This isn’t a barn. You’re letting all the warm air out. Baron, I made cornbread. I know how much you love it.”

“You cash that rain check in any time you need it,” Baron whispered. “I’ve been working out.” He winked at her and flexed his muscles before they walked into the kitchen where Anna’s daddy sat at the table folding the newspaper. Evelyn ladled spicy chili to the rims of their ceramic bowls.

18

Forget-Me-Not Cookies

Anna sat on the low brick wall the masons had finished the day before. The new wall framed an outdoor seating area and garden for which the previous bakery had not made space. Anna thought the patio was needed for those spring and fall months when sitting outdoors was preferred. She tapped her feet against the blue and gray flagstones. The masons had created a break in the wall big enough for two people to step through onto the patio. Anna was still debating whether or not to add a wrought iron swinging gate.

The men inside the bakery's new structure hammered and laughed. Tiles were laid, and clouds of fine white dust puffed across the floors and clung to everything. Country music drifted out through open windows, and Anna listened to one of the carpenters hanging cabinets and shelves in the new kitchen sing decidedly off-key and with a twang so sharp she couldn't help but laugh.

Anna decided to rebuild the apartment on top of the bakery, but she'd eliminated the interior stairs that once connected the two together. Now the apartment could only be accessed by an outdoor staircase. She knew she wouldn't live there anymore, but someone else might want to rent it, and she could use the extra pocket money for a vacation, or a new pair of jeans, or an industrial-size mixer.

A cool wind blew and toyed with Anna's long hair. She closed her eyes and inhaled. The air smelled of cinnamon and sugar with a distant hint of pine trees, reminding Anna it was only a week until Christmas.

"Every day I'm surprised by how much they've finished," a man's voice said behind her.

Anna opened her eyes and looked over her shoulder. Eli stood on the sidewalk with his hands shoved into his jacket pockets. She'd seen him every day for the past few weeks but only in short spurts. He'd been working odd jobs around town, which was another thing she loved about Mystic Water—the people never hesitated to extend a

helping hand. They knew she and Eli were out of work, and while Anna had family in town she could rely on, Eli was a wanderer. The townsfolk called him every day to ask for help putting up shutters or painting a bedroom or planting bulbs for the spring. Eli had become a jack-of-all-trades.

“It’s amazing how quickly this has been rebuilt,” Anna agreed. “No one can say the people in Mystic Water don’t work hard. I imagine by Christmas I could be inside baking again.” She could already see the smiles on everyone’s faces. She imagined standing behind the counter and welcoming them inside on her official opening day. Her mama would stand among the crowd and beam so brightly the cake plates would throw rainbows of light on the walls.

“Walk with me?” he asked.

Anna threw her legs over the side of the low wall and faced him. His blue eyes carried a faraway look, and she inhaled slowly. Her heart pumped against her ribcage in slow, heavy beats, and then it quickened its pace. She stood and followed Eli down the sidewalk toward the park at the end of the street. They walked in silence, and uncertainty spread in her chest like an inflating balloon.

“I helped Mr. Parker install new faucets in his house yesterday,” Eli said as they stepped onto the dead winter grass. He walked toward a large, leafless oak tree. “His son is opening a sandwich shop in the Outer Banks.”

Anna nodded to show she was listening, but she wasn’t sure how to respond. The air felt charged, as if a thunderstorm was approaching. She shoved her hands in her pockets to keep herself from fidgeting. Eli stopped walking, and they stood beneath the great oak.

“James, Mr. Parker’s son, is looking for a partner—someone who has experience,” Eli said. “I talked to him last night for a couple of hours. We have a lot of the same ideas. He seems to really know what he’s doing. It’s what I’ve wanted to do for as long as I can remember.” He smiled ruefully at the sun shining down on them. “Which I suppose isn’t all that long.”

So, this is it. It’s over. Anna couldn’t speak immediately. She blinked down at the brown grass, shifted on her feet, and listened to the blades

crunch beneath her tennis shoes. Eli had found his dream, and he was following it. She tried to smile, but the motion pulled something deep in her chest, and she felt the sensation of suffocation. Eli put his hand on her arm, and she looked up at him.

“I wanted to tell you first,” he said. “I’m leaving this afternoon.”

This afternoon. Anna pressed her hands to her chest. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t look him in the eye. She tried to open her mouth to congratulate him, to tell him she was happy, but nothing came out. Eli pulled her into his arms and held her tight. She wanted to be strong, to show her support, but instead, tears filled her eyes, so she squeezed them shut. Her tears were aggressive and needy, and they forced themselves out the corners of her eyes and leaked down the sides of her cheeks. Her breath hitched. She tried not to choke on the sadness.

Anna pulled away from him and quickly wiped her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she said, feeling foolish. “I’m overly emotional today. With the bakery and starting over, there’s a lot going on. I don’t mean to ruin your excitement.” She cleared her throat. “It’s a great opportunity for you,” she added. “I’m sure you’ll love it. I love sandwiches. Sandwiches are good. Everybody loves sandwiches. Everyone will love you.” *Like I do.*

Eli grabbed her hand and grinned. “You’re cute when you babble,” he said. He wiped a stray tear from Anna’s cheek. “It’s not easy for me to leave either, but it’s for the best.”

For the best. Anna wanted to wrestle that phrase from the sky and beat it into the ground with a wooden spoon. “For the best” was what people said when something unfortunate happened, like being rejected from one’s college of choice, or when a boyfriend moved to California without discussing anything with his girlfriend, or when a bakery burned to the ground and a new start was needed. She nodded and lowered her head. Clouds covered the sun and tossed them into shadow. A shop door opened down the street, and “Blue Christmas” followed the customer out onto the sidewalk. Eli squeezed her hand and pulled her along beside him as he walked. The park was full of metal, plastic-coated outlines of elves, reindeer, gingerbread houses,

snowmen, and various Santa Claus figures that were covered in lights. During the evenings, the park was a festival of colors and Christmas music. They walked around the figures until they reached the parking lot on the far side where the orange Camaro waited for Eli. Anna noticed a packed bag in the passenger seat of Eli's new car.

Anna held out her hand as if to shake his. "Well, good luck to you," she said, amazed her voice sounded steady. Her insides were vibrating in a way that made her feel as though she was caught in a sifter.

Eli raised one eyebrow at her before putting his hands on her cheeks and pulling her up to him. When he kissed her, it lacked the urgency of their first kiss; the desperate need to connect was replaced with the bittersweet rush of goodbye. She balanced herself by placing her hands on his chest, but still she came undone. She couldn't save herself from falling into Eli, from breathing him in and letting him fill all the waiting spaces. When he pulled away, she felt lightheaded, and her eyes shone with tears.

"I'm going to miss you," Eli said, brushing her hair from her face.

She nodded because she didn't trust herself to speak. They didn't say anything as Eli climbed into the car. She stood and watched him put the car in reverse, and when he drove away, he hung his hand out the window. She watched his blue eyes fade from the side view mirror with her arms wrapped around her chest to ward off the chill.

"I'll miss you more," she said, and then she walked through the park toward the bakery, toward her new life. Candy canes hanging from the lamp posts along the sidewalk swayed in the December wind that smelled like fresh mint. Her daddy sat on the brick wall holding two to-go cups. He smiled when he saw her and held out a cup. She tried to smile in return.

"Thought you could use some company," he said.

Anna sat beside him and sighed, thanking him for the hot chocolate she could smell through the steam rising from the slit in the top of the plastic lid. "Did you make this?" she asked after a sip. He nodded. "Wow, Daddy, it's really good."

He smiled. "I learned from the best," he said. "Want to take the afternoon off, grab a plate of meat-and-three to go, and head home

to watch old movies? Your mother is off doing last minute Christmas shopping with Sherry. They'll likely be gone until dinner."

Anna smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Sounds perfect."



Anna jumped off the couch and slid across the polished wood floor in her Christmas socks. She grabbed the ringing phone just as Evelyn asked, "Who on earth would be calling us on Christmas morning?"

"It's lunchtime," Anna's daddy responded as he tossed ripped wrapping paper into a black garbage bag.

"Merry Christmas!" Anna said into the phone. Anna covered the mouthpiece with one hand. "Daddy, could you turn down Dean, please?" she asked. Dean Martin crooned Christmas songs from the stereo system, and her daddy climbed out of his armchair and adjusted the volume. "Oh, hey, Mr. Brown. We're having a great day. You didn't have to go over there on the holiday. It would have been okay to wait. Oh, there is? Well, thank you for all you've done. I'll call if I have any questions. Thanks!"

Anna hung up the receiver and smiled at her parents. "The bakery's all done!" she announced.

Evelyn clasped her hands together and smiled. "You'll be open by the first of the year," she said. "Let's celebrate over waffles, grits, and scrambled eggs." Evelyn joined Anna in the kitchen and looked for pans in the lower cabinets. While rummaging through an assortment of cookware, she laughed. Evelyn pulled a wrapped package from the cabinet. "Looks like I forgot one for you."

Anna chuckled. "Why did you hide it in the cabinet? It's not like I try to sneak into my presents early." She plucked the red bow from the top and unwrapped the gift. The contents inside slid around, sounding like large puzzle pieces. When she opened the box, she saw a set of cookie cutters. There were outlines for seashells, a sailboat, a dolphin, and a fish. A light breeze whispered through the kitchen, and Anna's mind drifted to the rolling waves.

Evelyn took the box from Anna's hands. "Those are *not* what I

ordered,” she said with a frown. “I specifically ordered the garden set. It had the cutest little trowel cookie cutter.” She exhaled and filled a carafe with water so she could start another pot of coffee. “We can send them back.”

Anna reached for the box. “No, I like these.” She thought of the contract beneath her bed waiting for her to make a decision. But hadn’t she already? Wasn’t she staying in Mystic Water, opening the bakery in January, buying the Clarke House? *Yes*. “How long will it take you to make breakfast? Mr. Brown said there was a package on the front patio of the bakery. I thought I’d run and grab it just so it doesn’t sit out there all day.”

Evelyn glanced at the clock on the wall. “Half an hour at the most. You have time,” she said. “Leave the cookie cutters. I’ll package them back up and make sure they send us the right ones.”

Anna wrapped the box in her arms. “Mama, I like these.” She hurried to her room and changed out of her Christmas pajamas. Then she hustled out of the house and jumped into her daddy’s truck. As soon as she turned the ignition, the radio blasted her against the back of the seat. The Beach Boys sang about everybody surfing, and Anna reached to the turn the volume down. “Dang, Daddy, you were rocking out, weren’t you?”

Anna cranked on the heat and drove toward town. She passed driveways with children riding on new bicycles and families tossing around balls in their front yards as though it wasn’t too cold for hanging around outside in footie pajamas. Smoke curled from chimneys, and the whole town smelled like wood-burning fireplaces and Christmas cookies.

She parked in front of the bakery and climbed out. The streets were empty and quiet. Standing on the sidewalk, Anna smiled at the finished product. The bakery sparkled in the noon sunlight. The windows gleamed. The tiled floors were polished and ready for business. Anna stepped onto the patio and something crunched beneath her shoe. She bent down and lifted a small, plastic sailboat. “What are you doing here?” she asked and placed it on the brick wall, imagining for a moment it had fallen out of Santa’s red bag of toys.

A brown package waited for Anna against the far corner of the patio where Mr. Brown said he'd moved it. She grabbed it, and a bird squawked behind her. Anna turned to see a seagull sitting on the brick wall. It stared at her, and she stood quietly with the box in her arms. Then the seagull called again, grabbed the plastic sailboat in its mouth, and flew off. It circled above the bakery and caught a wind current headed east toward the ocean. For a few moments, Anna thought, *Take me with you.*

She climbed into the truck and turned the ignition to warm the cab. She slid her fingernails beneath the packing tape and popped open the flaps on the box. The smell of the salty air and the ocean rolled out over the edges, filling the cab.

The item inside the box was wrapped first in brown paper, then in parchment paper, and finally in plastic wrap. It was bulky and oddly formed. Anna unwrapped it and found a lump of dough had been shaped into the form of a body, like a giant gingerbread man. Two blue M&Ms were stuck on for eyes, the mouth was a thin red smile, and an indentation in the chest had been made in the shape of a heart. A piece of white chocolate dyed red had been placed into the spot. Anna lifted the attached note and read: *Merry Christmas! Wishing you smooth sailing on your next great adventure. Love, Eli (the Dough Boy).*

Anna lifted the man carefully from the box and held him in front of her. She smiled despite the ache in her chest and bit into the dough boy's arm. "Tastes as good as he looks," she said to nothing but the empty cab and the candy canes swinging in a Christmas breeze. She leaned her head against the window and stared up at the puffy white clouds. A seahorse drifted across the sky until his shape faded into wisps.



Anna poked the last bit of waffle into her mouth and chewed slowly. She listened to her parents talk about the easiest way to take down the Christmas tree and get it to the recycling yard before the year was over. It was a conversation they had every year because Evelyn insisted on efficiency and a clean house as soon as Christmas passed, and Charlie

liked to leave the tree up until New Year's Day.

Anna pushed her plate away and folded her hands in her lap. She watched her parents for a few seconds more, and then she interrupted their conversation. "I'm going to buy the bakery in Wildehaven Beach."

Evelyn snapped her head toward Anna. A tight laugh escaped through her pink lips. Dean Martin sang to his baby, telling her it was cold outside. "What are you talking about? You can't run two bakeries at once. You'll work yourself ragged," Evelyn said.

"I don't plan on running two bakeries, only the one there," Anna said. Her daddy was smiling, but Evelyn looked like she'd licked a sour lemon. "I'll sell the building here or rent it out if someone wants to open an eatery."

Evelyn dropped her green napkin onto her plate and turned in her chair to better see her daughter. Anna inhaled a whiff of overripe cherries. "I don't understand what you're saying," Evelyn said. Her words were slow and deliberate, pulled taut with admonition. The kitchen light twinkled off the pearls in her earlobes.

"She's saying she's moving to Wildehaven Beach," Charlie said. He continued to smile at Anna as though he was proud of her, and Anna's skin tingled with warmth.

Evelyn tossed a glaring look at Charlie before turning her dark eyes on Anna. "Why would you do that? You have the bakery here. It's what you've wanted. Nearly the whole town has helped you rebuild so you can continue the legacy your grandmother started."

Anna exhaled to dispel the guilt her mama could so easily shove into her face. She refused to let it absorb into her skin and taint what she truly desired. "I want to have a bakery," Anna said. "But not here anymore."

The air crackled around the table. A bulb in the pendant light over the island flickered. Charlie slid his chair back as a storm built around Evelyn, fluttering the lit candles in the kitchen window. Anna clenched her hands together, preparing herself for the conversation she knew would swell into an argument. Anna's heartbeat quickened, and she felt the storm splitting the room in half as it prepared to burst.

"Is this about that *boy*?" Evelyn asked. "You can't disregard what

your grandmother started because some boy ran off.”

Years of doing what was right, doing what everyone else wanted, and disregarding her own dreams finally unraveled inside Anna like a ball of yarn bouncing down the stairs. Simply mentioning Eli’s absence felt like lemon juice on a paper cut. She stood, her body vibrating with energy and frustration, her emotions threatening to explode. The Christmas china rattled on the table. “If you’re referring to *Eli*, then you’re wrong. This isn’t about him. This is about *me*, Mama. This is about me finally doing what *I* want to do. I can continue Grandma Bea’s legacy no matter where I am. She’ll always be a part of me,” Anna argued, pointing a finger into her chest. “I loved her, and she knew it. Leaving Mystic Water doesn’t mean I’ve stopped loving her. And I love you, but I’m not going to stay here in Mystic Water just because *you* think it’s what’s best for me. This is my decision and either you can support it or you can’t.” Anna shoved away from the table and stomped to her bedroom.

She’d never smarted off to her mama, not in all her years growing up. Sure, she’d stuck out her tongue when Evelyn’s back was turned, and she’d rolled her eyes a few hundred times, but she’d never gone against her mama’s wishes. She’d never disobeyed. Now Anna felt sick to her stomach but also proud of herself. For once, she’d been honest with her mama and with herself. What she wanted was Wildehaven Beach. Anna bent down and grabbed the contract from beneath her bed.

She sat on the floor and crossed her legs, placing the contract in her lap. It was ratty and wrinkled with burnt edges, but what it represented was a new start for Anna, doing what her heart wanted. A knock sounded on her bedroom door, and Evelyn walked in without waiting to be invited. She sat on the edge of Anna’s bed and motioned for Anna to join her. Anna pushed herself off the floor and eased onto the bed beside her mama. They sat in silence.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you,” Anna finally said.

“Honey, that’s not yelling,” Evelyn said with a small smile. “I yell. You simmer like a pressure cooker, and then you release your steam by yourself. That’s just the first time you’ve ever told me how you really

feel.” Evelyn pushed Anna’s hair from her shoulder. “I’ve only wanted what’s best for you your whole life. I know you’re a grown woman now, but I still look at you and see the little girl who was afraid to get on the school bus because she thought people would steal her lunch. Honey, no one wanted wheat bread and carrots.”

Anna chuckled. “Not when they had chocolate pudding and Fruit Roll-ups.”

“I won’t pretend that I’m happy that you’re moving,” Evelyn said. “But I do want you to be happy, and if that means having sand in your pants twenty-four hours a day, then I’ll support you. I could help you find a cute little apartment with two bedrooms because you know your dad and I will have to visit all the time just to make sure you’re okay. And I could help you decorate it.”

Anna smiled as tears glistened in her eyes. “I’d like that.” Anna put her arms around Evelyn’s neck and hugged her. “Thanks, Mama.”

Evelyn rubbed Anna’s back. “Now, go hug your dad. He’s about to burst with excitement for you. I could barely be in the same room with him. It was too contagious.”

Evelyn sounded annoyed, but Anna could see the glint in her mama’s eyes. Anna smiled, hopped off the bed, and gave a loud whoop. She heard the sound of her mama’s quiet laughter as she rushed out of the room calling for her daddy. Merry Christmas, indeed.

Epilogue

Anna balanced a box full of bubble-wrapped cupcake holders on her hip before she shoved it onto the countertop. She unpacked each holder and found a place to shelve it. Then she returned to the front of the bakery and assessed which box she should grab next.

Mint and sage greens ribboned the bakery's walls in fat, vertical stripes. An oversize, whimsical mirror surrounded by a pale blue frame hung from one wall and reflected the ocean in the distance. Blue cake plates of various designs and sizes decorated the shelves. Anna's eyes drifted past the "Help Wanted" sign tucked into the front window. Her gaze rested on the white sand and the dark blue waters rolling toward the shoreline. Her cell phone vibrated a happy tune in her back pocket. She smiled at the picture and name flashing on her screen. She pressed the button for speakerphone and placed her cell on the front counter.

"Are you now officially a homeowner?" Anna asked.

On the other end of the line, Anna could hear the sound of the wind blowing into a car driving down the road. Lily made an excited noise in her throat. "Yes," she said. "We're moved in. Looks like we've tried to make a fort out of boxes in every room, but I suspect that by the time I get home, Jakob will have everything unpacked. He's so OCD about cleanliness."

Anna laughed and waded through the cardboard boxes and crinkled newspaper used as packing material. The mess spanned half the space in the bakery's front room. "It could be worse. He could be a frantic dad-to-be who insists on reading pregnancy books out loud to you and asking you awkward questions. Oh, wait—he does that too. Jakob used to be so cool."

They both laughed. Anna lifted a box labeled *baking utensils* and hefted it onto her hip. She watched a young woman jog down the boardwalk toward the beach. Early April had arrived with unseasonably warm weather and a spring breeze that made people want to fly kites and laugh loudly. Gulls called to each other and played chase, diving

into the waves and skittering across the wet sand.

“We’re going to have you over to the Clarke House as soon as it’s all sorted,” Lily said.

“It’s the Connelly House now,” Anna said, balancing the box on her hip and shuffling toward the backroom.

“It’ll probably always be the Clarke House to me. I still can’t believe we’re actually living in it. Thanks to you.”

Anna smiled and imagined Lily hosting parties in the kitchen with people spilling into the backyard all abloom with lavender and roses. “Thanks to life,” she said.

“Listen, I left later than I thought I would. I’ll probably be there within forty-five minutes. Want me to bring lunch?” Lily asked.

Anna’s eyes drifted to the spot on the wall where the clock would hang, but it was still empty. “Is it already lunchtime? No wonder I feel weak. That would be great. Mama and Daddy won’t be here until tomorrow, and my refrigerator is completely empty. You should bring us food unless you want to eat butter and heavy cream.”

“Tempting, but no thanks. I’ll grab sandwiches or whatever I happen upon. See you soon,” Lily said.

Anna disconnected and carried the box to the back island. She sliced through the tape and began unpacking the utensils. She continued this steady process of grabbing boxes and unpacking them for the next half hour. The tiled floor of the bakery was almost visible in its entirety as the boxes dwindled. There was a small, unassuming box labeled *Postcards*. Anna grabbed it and hopped onto the front counter as she opened it. Inside laid postcards from Eli. There weren’t many, but they were all different, displaying images of lighthouses, seashells, and the ocean. He’d also mailed outrageous ones that seemed to be plucked from dive bars or truck stops. Her favorite was an image of the Marshmallow Man made famous in *The Ghostbusters* movie. On the back, all he’d written was: *It could be worse. I could be fat and gooey and have rolls instead of these rock-hard abs. Love, Dough Boy.* Eli’s scrawled messages were short, and Anna had read them so many times, she’d memorized them like a cherished bedtime story.

She slid off the counter and carried the postcards to the backroom,

where she pinned them to a corkboard. If she couldn't have Eli with her, at least she'd have something of his in the bakery to keep her company. The front door opened, jingling the newly hung bell. The breeze from the ocean rushed inside, and Anna smelled a mixture of briny air and chocolate. She smiled and bounded into the front room saying, "That didn't take you forty-five minutes. Something smells like chocolate."

Anna's feet skidded to a halt, and her mouth dropped open. Eli stood in the bakery grinning like he had a secret to share. His blue shirt highlighted his tanned skin and bright eyes. He looked better than a perfectly iced chocolate cake. Anna self-consciously reached up a hand and tried to smooth down her hair. She'd been unpacking boxes all day and sweating in the spring heat. She wanted to say something, but she only managed to close her slack jaw and stare at him in surprise.

"Damn, you look pretty," Eli said, still grinning.

Anna's cheeks flushed, and she felt warm all over like she was lying on a towel in the sun. She pushed her hands down her tank top and fiddled with the hem of her shorts. "I look like a throwaway," she said.

"The best-looking throwaway I've ever seen. I missed seeing you." He maneuvered through the boxes in the front room, looking at the cake plates on her shelves and the few items she'd hung on the walls. "Place looks great, like you. It *feels* like you in here. You were expecting someone?" he asked, leaning his hip casually against the front counter.

The room smelled like sugar and home. Anna felt her heart fluttering wildly in her chest because she was so close to Eli again. Her eyes tracked him as he moved. He seemed so calm, so unaware of how his proximity unraveled her. "Lily," she said and cleared her throat. "She's bringing lunch and going to help me unpack."

Eli moved his hand over his belly. The sunlight shifted on the floor, stretching long beams toward their feet. "How's she doing? Look pregnant yet?"

Anna's body relaxed. She exhaled slowly. Talking about someone else helped to take her mind off the fact that Eli was mere feet away from her, looking at her, smiling at her. "She does," she answered. "But she's not huge. She'll be one of those lucky women who suddenly look super pregnant at nine months and leading up to that, she'll just like

she's had a bit too much cheese."

"And Tessa?" he asked. His eyes wandered over the few unpacked boxes and then back to her.

Anna looked for a spark in his eyes, for the curiosity that would drive her to think he had missed Tessa too. "She's great," Anna said. "Been dating a pediatrician who just moved to town. Richard is his name. We call him Ricardo for fun. He's a nice man."

Eli's expression didn't alter when he said, "Good for her."

She wanted to ask what he was doing there or how long he was going to stay. But she was afraid of what he might say. Instead she asked, "How are the Outer Banks? Do you like working with James at the deli?"

"It's windy," he said with a smile, "but the winter was short. The business took off. James had to hire more workers just to keep up with demand. But it's not Mystic Water." He shoved his hands into his pockets and pushed off from the counter. He kicked a stray piece of newspaper into the air. They watched it float and descend.

Anna chuckled. "It's better than Mystic Water, I'm sure." She busied her hands by collecting the newspapers and smashing them into one large ball. She looked around for her box of trash bags. She held the ball in one hand and shook out the flat trash bag with her other hand. Then she shoved the paper into the bag.

"Different, not better," he said. "Definitely not better." He gathered newspapers with her. "You weren't there."

Eli's words surprised her and tugged a shy smile from her lips. She held the trash bag open so he could drop in the papers. His fingers brushed against hers—a move he'd done on purpose—and Anna felt a new wave of heat shimmer over her. The air-conditioning unit clicked on.

"How have you been?" he asked as he took the bag from her hands and placed it beside the counter.

Lonely, getting by, starting over, excited, happy, missing you, passing time, thinking of you, trying to get over you. "Busy," Anna said because it was the least complicated answer she felt comfortable admitting.

He nodded his toward the backroom. "Show me around?"

When he stepped closer to her, Anna's breaths shortened. The temperature rose in the room. The edges of the crinkled newspapers wilted in the wash of heat. Anna pushed her hair behind her shoulders and fanned her face. Eli had already seen the kitchen when they'd visited Wildehaven Beach together months ago, but she stepped into the backroom anyway.

"Here's the kitchen," she said. "I kept pretty much everything how it was before. The layout was already efficient. I added those shelves. I need a bit more storage," she said and pointed. Something hanging on the wall caught Eli's attention, and he walked to it. *The corkboard.* Anna groaned inwardly. Now he would likely think she was a stalker or obsessed with him. Was she obsessed with him? Did missing him every single day count as an obsession? *Probably.*

"This is new," he said, and a slow smile stretched across his face, deepening the dimple in his cheek.

"I, uh, decided to hang postcards from friends up there," she said, feeling the heat flush her cheeks. "Only no one else has written me. Yet."

Eli chuckled. "You missed me too," he said without arrogance. He sounded relieved. He pushed one hand through his hair and then patted it down again.

He turned to face her and close the distance between them. Anna's head felt light. The pull between them intensified, and she felt her feet moving toward him. Then he stopped moving, and his eyes drifted over her head to the far counter.

"What's that here for?" he asked.

The sugary haze faded from Anna's brain. Eli was an arm's length away, and her fingers tingled at the thought of touching him. But she turned to see what he was asking about. A deli meat slicer sat on the counter gleaming in the light. She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment.

"It's for slicing meat," she said, swallowing and feeling a slow burn start up the back of her neck. She tried to rub it away.

"I know what it is. Why do you have it in a bakery?" he asked.

Anna started to say that Timothy and Mel Cornfoot had left it for

her because they'd found it in their stock room and it was polished and ready for the right hands, but that would have been a lie. The meat slicer had been an expensive impulse buy at a restaurant supply store.

"I bought it," she admitted, turning to look at his face. "Because I had hope."

Eli stepped toward her. His fingers found hers, and he twined them together. "Hope for what?"

Embers flamed to life inside her. "That you might want to use it," she said, staring at his chest and aching all over.

Eli dropped her hand and walked out of the kitchen. Anna's heart slammed against her chest and then shuddered, making her stomach clench. Had she said something wrong? Was he upset that she'd been stupid enough to want him to come back? She stood alone in the backroom for a few seconds before she followed him.

Eli snatched the "Help Wanted" sign from the front window and spun around on his heel. He smiled at her and tossed the sign across the room like a Frisbee. It bounced against the remaining boxes, and he held his hands out to her.

"What do you think about having a combination bakery and deli?" he asked, smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

Anna's mind burst with possibilities and hope for a future with Eli. *Yes, yes, yes!* She smiled in return and held her hands together in front of her, afraid that if she moved, she'd wake up and Eli would be gone. "You want to come here?"

"If you'll have me," he said. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be. You're home to me."

Anna's body shivered, and she smiled so wide a laugh slipped out. Then she ran toward Eli, and he opened his arms, catching her and lifting her feet off the ground with a hug. When Eli placed her down, he didn't let go. He pulled her against him and kissed her. Anna felt the sunlight on her cheeks, the ocean breeze blowing through her hair. The air was heady with the scents of sugar and spice. She felt like candle wax melting in Eli's flame. She burned from the inside and folded into him. She slid her hands up his back, pressing her fingers against him, clutching him. Eli put one hand on her neck, warming her skin,

sending pulses of energy down her spine. Then he moved the hand into her hair. Anna's heart pounded an excited rhythm. Her entire body quivered as though she had laughter trapped inside, and it couldn't wait to burst out.

The bell jingled when the front door opened. In her conscious mind, Anna knew she should stop kissing Eli, but her brain asked, *How?* Then it asked, *Why?* Whoever it was could see they were busy, could see she wasn't yet open for business, and could come back later. Or never. Anna wasn't concerned with anything other than the way her lips were tingling and how Eli felt warm and safe and *perfect*.

"Should I come back in fifteen?" Lily asked.

Anna tried to pull away, but Eli held her close. He kissed her cheeks and forehead. Then he kissed down her neck. "Maybe an hour," he mumbled.

Anna laughed and pushed on his chest. He held tight, and she giggled more until he released his grip and smiled down at her.

"You back for good?" Lily asked.

"Oh, I'm sticking around," Eli said. "As long as Anna will have me." He looked down at her and grinned.

Anna's face flushed. She couldn't stop smiling even though her cheeks started to ache. She pushed up on her tiptoes and kissed him. Happiness swirled around them like a breeze.

Lily held up two brown bags that were stamped with the logo from a local taco shop. "I didn't know we'd have company. I only bought two meals. Now that you're sticking around, we'll be forced to share. I volunteer Anna's half." Lily smiled at them both.

Anna rested her hand on Eli's chest and leaned her head against his shoulder, feeling his warmth flush her skin and wrap her heart with heat and love. She thought of the morning she'd first met him and how he'd smiled at her then just as he was smiling now. She thought of the patrons of Bea's Bakery, who had walked into the shop that October morning and seen him—Elijah Long—looking like a man who'd strode out of a Hollywood movie: broad-shouldered, sun-kissed, and blue-eyed. He had helped Anna behind the counter like he'd been born to be her partner. She wondered what they would say if they could see him now.

Some might say he'd hitchhiked hundreds of miles to see Anna again. Others would say he'd appeared like magic. Everyone would agree they'd never seen a man look more in love with any woman than Eli was with Anna.

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About the Author



While growing up in southern Georgia, where honeysuckle grows wild and the whippoorwills sing, Jennifer became a writer in elementary school. She crafted epic tales of adventure and love and magic. She wrote stories in Mead notebooks, on printer paper, on napkins, on the soles of her shoes.

She considers herself a traveler, an amateur baker, and a dreamer. She can always be won over with chocolate, unicorns, or rainbows. She believes in love—everlasting and forever.

Jennifer has published six enchanting novels based in Mystic Water, *The Baker's Man*, *Little Blackbird*, *Honeysuckle Hollow*, *The Legend of James Grey*, *Wednesday's Child*, and *Finding May*, and all are available in print and as ebooks. *Full Moon June*, *Average April*, and *Starry Sky July* are short stories available as ebooks.

To learn more about Jennifer, visit her website at www.jennifermoorman.com and follow along with her on Instagram @jennifer7478 and Facebook at @JenniferMoormanBooks.

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All month long she posts delicious recipes based on books she's reading, including recipes inspired by the Mystic Water series. Her Cooking Through Fiction literature-inspired dishes will transport you into the pages of some of your favorite novels and wrap you in nostalgia for our most-loved stories.

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CONTACT JENNIFER

Connect with Jennifer on Instagram [@jennifer7478](https://www.instagram.com/jennifer7478).

If you're interested in hiring Jennifer for a speaking engagement, please send an email to info@jennifermoorman.com.

Thank You!

Yay! I had so much fun introducing y'all to Mystic Water, and I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

If you did enjoy this story, please consider writing a review. I appreciate any feedback, no matter how long or short. It's a great way of letting other magical realism fans know what you thought about the book.

Being an independent author means this is my livelihood, and every review really does make a super-big difference. Reviews are the best way to support me so I can continue doing what I love, which is bringing you, the reader, more stories from Mystic Water!

Thank you for spending time in Mystic Water, and I hope to see you on our next adventure!