

THE
BAKER'S
MAN

A NOVEL

JENNIFER MOORMAN



HARPER MUSE

The Baker's Man

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To Daddy and Ma, my family and friends, the Mystic Water Online Book Club, and all my rockstar readers who have supported this dough-boy dream for years and kept my hope alive, my spirit lifted, and my heart filled with joy.



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Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.

—MARY OLIVER



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PROLOGUE

THE OLDER GENERATION OF TOWNSPEOPLE IN MYSTIC WATER, Georgia, still talked about that night in late July when the south-bound 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 tornadoes. 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 the next morning in desperate need of a cup of Bea's Give-Me-a-Jolt Java, and that's when they saw him—Joseph O'Brien—looking

PROLOGUE

like a man who'd climbed out of an Irish novel, broad shouldered, red haired, and green eyed. He was working behind the counter alongside the bakery owner, Beatrice, like he'd been born to be her partner.

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



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CHAPTER 1

PEANUT BRITTLE

BEA'S BAKERY OFFERED CURE-ALLS IN THE FORM OF PASTRIES, chocolates, cookies, cakes, 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, figuratively, no matter the time of day. Everyone knew they could call Beatrice after hours, and she would have exactly what they needed: a twilight brownie for stargazers, a tropical white chocolate tart for those needing a vacation, or a peppermint dark chocolate cookie for settling an uneasy heart. They didn't even always have to call Beatrice; sometimes she would show up on their doorstep with the answer to a question they hadn't yet asked.

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 the folks of 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 outside, confused and unsure how to go about their days without treats or coffee or the famous Saturday morning brownies. Beatrice's son, Charlie, finally opened the doors with slumped shoulders and defeat in his eyes.

For three weeks after Beatrice's death, no one in Mystic Water could look at chocolate without feeling the drag of sorrow. Coffee tasted bitter on the tongue. Shoppers in the Piggly Wiggly glared at pastries.

Then news of Beatrice's granddaughter returning to Mystic Water blew through the town like a honeysuckle wind, sweet and nostalgic.

Anna O'Brien, a hometown girl, had moved away to attend the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City. While she was a student, she worked as a baking assistant in a fancy downtown hotel, and following graduation, she was promoted to sous pastry chef. Mystic Water locals spotted Anna in town only on major holidays, when she was seen wearing a robin's-egg-blue apron and laughing behind the bakery counter with Beatrice. She hadn't lived in Mystic Water in at least five years, but the front page of the *Mystic Water Gazette* alerted everyone that Anna would be returning to her Georgia roots, reopening the bakery, and following in her grandma's footsteps.

Opinions divided the town. Half said they would refuse to even try her creations when the time came because they feared the disappointment would be too great to bear. Their doubts were as plentiful as fireflies in July; there was no way a girl trained in NYC could satisfy their traditional Southern palates.

The other half prayed the ability to create delectable treats ran in Anna's blood, which hopefully hadn't been diluted by her brief stint up north. Within days of reopening the bakery, Anna quieted the doubters and validated the optimists with her grandma's well-loved recipes. Within a month, she'd charmed everyone with her own creations, and after two years of waking before dawn, sweating through south Georgia summers with the bakery ovens blazing, and using enough sugar to sweeten even the bitterest disposition, Anna reestablished Bea's Bakery as a wellspring of joy and deliciousness.



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 arrived. Her chocolate chip cookies made Jordan Hillman propose to Julie Farmer on their fourth date. Her OREO brownies caused Roger Jackson to think he could dance the Charleston like he had 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'd been honing since she was big enough to stand on a step stool and help her grandma in the kitchen.

While most children spent their after-school time watching

cartoons and their summers flying kites and playing pickup games of baseball, Anna spent almost all her free time helping at Bea's Bakery. Anna had a superior sense for knowing how to combine ingredients and flavors into delicious creations. She also had an unusually strong sense of smell, which gave her an incredible advantage for pairing ingredients in a way that enhanced the eating experience. Each treat she made engaged the eyes, the nose, the tongue, and every pleasing nerve in the body.

A spatula and a whisk became extensions of Anna's hands. Beatrice special ordered Anna's first apron with #1 Baking Assistant embroidered in looping white script across the watermelon-pink bib. As Anna grew, her aprons did too, and by the time she finished high school, she had a rainbow assortment, each one with different phrases stitched on it, hanging in her closet.

It was a natural step after high school for Anna to continue her culinary education, so she attended a local junior college and earned an associate's degree in business. If she wanted to one day own a bakery, she needed a solid foundation of skills to keep it running. Beatrice had shared management and leadership knowledge with Anna through the years, and she learned best with hands-on experience, but Anna's parents insisted she have a formal education. No daughter of theirs was going to skip out on college. Anna's mama, Evelyn, believed good Southern girls needed to follow certain "rules," and although receiving an acceptable education wasn't in the top slot, it definitely held a spot in the top five.

Evelyn resisted Anna's desire to attend culinary school, but not because she felt it was an unsuitable path for her daughter. The school of Anna's choice was located in New York, and

according to Evelyn, no decent Southern young woman up and moved that far north on purpose. But Beatrice had been the main supporter of Anna attending the Institute of Culinary Education because it was the top-ranked culinary school in the nation. Knowing she could brag about her daughter attending *the best* caused Evelyn to relent, but she made Anna swear she would move back to Mystic Water after graduation.

It was obvious to everyone that Anna had a special talent for pastries and baking, and her grandma knew there was much more for Anna to learn and see outside of Mystic Water. Although Anna believed she would most likely take over Bea's Bakery one day—because that's what everyone assumed would happen, especially her mama—Beatrice encouraged Anna to blaze her own trail, even if that meant never returning.

Anna had followed her grandma's advice. She excelled at the institute and received the award for Most Likely to Succeed, bestowed by classmates and instructors who believed she would make a name for herself. After graduation she continued to expand her skills while working with one of the most prestigious pastry chefs in New York City.

Every time they talked, Evelyn asked when Anna was moving back to Mystic Water and often texted random updates about townsfolk.

Susie Callahan had a baby boy. Named him Patrick.

When are you moving home?

Derek Dunes bought the old Farmer house. Have you
booked a moving van yet?

Anna learned to respond with a heart emoji and nothing

more. During phone calls, Anna sidestepped the question by saying she was still receiving on-the-job training and Beatrice could handle the bakery perfectly well without her for a bit longer.

In truth, Anna wasn't ready to move back to Mystic Water. She had plans, the seed of which had been planted by Beatrice before Anna even moved to the big city. Working as a sous pastry chef at the hotel required long hours, and some days were so exhausting she'd stumble into her tiny apartment and collapse onto the bed fully dressed, sleeping the night away without moving until her alarm beeped the next morning. Every little bit of money that didn't go to living expenses was tucked away for Anna's one-day dream: owning her own beachside bakery. She didn't reveal this desire to anyone, especially not her mama, who would have flipped her lid if she thought Anna wasn't coming home.

That beachside bakery dream came to a full stop the Saturday morning Anna received a phone call from her daddy, Charlie, letting her know that Beatrice had passed away peacefully in her sleep. He asked Anna to come home for the reading of the will and for the funeral, understanding she might not be able to stay much longer than that. But Anna knew in an instant her life in the city was ending. Her daddy might have been okay with her returning to New York, but there was no chance her mother would be. Anna had a good idea of what her mama expected: Anna would move home and run Bea's Bakery. Maybe Anna expected the same of herself because *What will happen to the bakery?* ran on a loop in her mind.

She sobbed her way through packing up the few things she owned in her apartment, cried when she turned in her notice at work, and blubbered her good-byes to the few friends she had

in the city. Then she rented a car and made the two-day trip south to Mystic Water, blasting her grandma's favorite songs through the Bluetooth connection and crying into multiple bags of Doritos and bottles of Coca-Cola.

Most of her heartache came from the loss of her beloved grandma, her number-one supporter and one of the kindest, most loving people she had ever known. A sliver of the heartbreak was caused by letting go of the dream she'd been cultivating for years. At least she would still be able to bake and share her passion with others. It might not look the way she'd envisioned it, but when did life ever look the way anyone imagined?

During the reading of the will, Anna learned she had inherited not only the bakery but also a hefty chunk of money with a handwritten note and a hand-carved lockbox with a key inside.

For opening your own place one day, no matter what anyone says. Follow your heart and forge your own path, sweet girl, and sell this place with my full permission if that's what *you* choose. Bea's Bakery was always my dream. It doesn't have to be yours—not if your sights are fixed somewhere else. Open the box only when you need to. You'll know exactly when you do, and you'll know what to do with it. I love you.

Even without Anna telling her, Beatrice had known where the girl's heart was taking her. Anna hadn't shown anyone the letter, not even when her mama demanded to see it. Evelyn relented only when Charlie firmly asked her to leave Anna alone with her grief. After the funeral, Anna hesitantly asked her parents if they thought the bakery should be sold. Evelyn launched into a full-blown monologue about all the reasons that suggestion was absurd. Didn't everyone know, including Anna, that she was always going to take over the bakery? It was Anna's

responsibility, Evelyn declared, and her duty as a devoted granddaughter to continue the O'Brien legacy.

Guilt crept into Anna's heart as her mama's words pinched against her skin. Anna pictured herself standing in the bakery kitchen, watching her grandma pull fresh chocolate chip cookies out of the oven, the scents of vanilla and melted chocolate permeating the space. Bea's Bakery had been Anna's special place, a haven where she could let loose and create. With grief rolling her shoulders forward, Anna couldn't bear another loss. Closing the bakery forever felt like a betrayal of her grandma's hard work. No matter what Beatrice's letter said, Anna couldn't turn her back on her family—not now, and not with her mama's piercing gaze staring holes straight through Anna's forehead, daring her to disagree.

So Anna packed away her dream and hid it with Beatrice's letter, the locked box, and its key on the top shelf of her bedroom closet, then forgot about all of them.

Two years later an 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 shoppers flutter 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 would 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, one of her best friends, Lily Matthews, burst into a conversation as though they'd 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 today, and Baron said he has a *big surprise* to share with you. Jakob wouldn't say what the surprise is, but I think *we* know, don't we? It's about time. How long has it been? Three years—"

"Two."

"Yes, two, that's right, which is long enough, isn't it? Are you ready? What are you wearing? Tonight, I mean, not now. Baron told Jakob he was seeing you tonight. Are y'all going out? Mackie's Café?"

Lily stopped long enough to inhale, and Anna's eyes darted to the clock on the wall. The bakery officially closed in ten minutes.

Anna passed through the wide, arching doorway that led to the kitchen. "I'm making dinner for him, taking it over to his place." The aroma of crushed garlic, fresh tomatoes, and bubbling parmesan cheese and béchamel sauce filled the room. Anna was baking lasagna bolognese, Baron's favorite, for their anniversary dinner. 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.

"You think this is it? It *is* our two-year anniversary today."

"Then, of course, it's happening. We always knew he'd ask you. How could he not? He's been crazy about you since the first time he laid eyes on you. This is it, Anna. He's going to propose. I just know it."

Anna's free hand flew to her heart. It palpitated as if she were about to take a flying leap from the high dive into the country-club pool.

"Are you there?" Lily asked.

"Yes. I'm just . . . trying not to freak out." Anna lowered her hand and rested it against the cool stainless steel countertop. She inhaled a slow, deep breath. Her cell phone beeped in her ear, notifying her of another call. She glanced at the screen. "Baron's calling. I'll call you back tonight—unless we get carried away with all the excitement."

Lily squealed. "Don't forget to call me! I don't care what time it is. I want all the details."

Anna swapped calls. "Hello?" Excitement quickened her pulse.

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

Anna's heart pounded a *rat-a-tat-tat* against her ribs. "As soon as the bakery closes. I can be there in about twenty minutes. Does that work?"

"Perfect. I have a surprise for you."

Anna squeezed the phone in her hand and closed her eyes. "Yeah? Can I get a hint?"

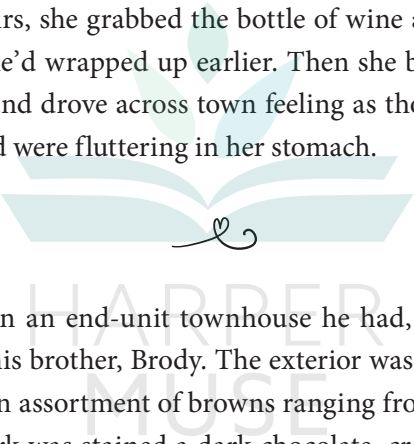
Baron laughed. "No way. See you soon."

"See you soon," Anna repeated, and Baron disconnected. She danced a jig around the kitchen and shoved on a pair of oven mitts. She tapped a happy rhythm on the countertop and then opened the oven. Melted cheese oozed and bubbled, and she let the scent wash over her. She held out a mittened hand, pretending to gaze at an excessively large diamond ring on her finger.

“Marry you? Why, of course I will, my darling!” she said in a melodramatic Southern-belle accent.

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 hurried upstairs to the second-floor apartment above the bakery to change out of her work attire. She’d already laid out a knitted dress the color of ripe plums, black leather booties, and her favorite pair of silver hoop earrings. She tossed her hair up into a messy but intentional bun, letting a few pieces of her auburn waves frame her face.

Downstairs, she grabbed the bottle of wine and the chocolate sweets she’d wrapped up earlier. Then she bundled herself into her car and drove across town feeling as though a trapped hummingbird were fluttering in her stomach.



Baron lived in an end-unit townhouse he had, until recently, shared with his brother, Brody. The exterior 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 facade. 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 a class A plant killer. Not to mention his travel schedule for work left very little time for keeping anything alive and thriving, especially plants.

She hiked up the brown-brick stairs to the small front porch, her arms loaded with dinner and dessert. The door was unlocked, and with careful maneuvering, she managed to turn

the knob without dropping dinner on the welcome mat she'd bought him when he moved in.

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.

Brody had decorated Baron's living room. It held an L-shaped couch with a solid pinewood frame and stainless steel feet. Its low round arms and stiff-pillow back, along with the button tufting on the seat, boasted a trendiness that Baron definitely did not adhere to. The meteorite-gray armchair with a black metal frame and the oval-topped distressed aluminum coffee table had also been left behind by Brody when he moved. Baron had hung a few artistic poster prints from his travels in Hawaii and Malaysia but had added very little else to the downstairs aesthetic.

Baron's minimalistic style spoke of his dislike for having too many possessions—because too much stuff inhibited picking up and moving at a moment's notice—and also his townhouse's use as more of a stopping place in between work and travel sites. As a travel marketer and adviser, he spent four to five days of every week, sometimes more, traveling all over the world. Baron's company sent him to scout out a destination area, participate in local or resort activities, and get a feel for the place and its surroundings to better market and sell packages to their clients.

Since landing in Mystic Water two years ago, Baron's work-related travel had been mostly contained to the United States, so he was often home for a long weekend, when he and Anna could hang out after the bakery closed. Over the few days they were able to spend together each month, Baron always had ideas for how they should fill their time. He'd convinced Anna to do

all sorts of activities she never would have tried on her own, like bungee jumping, indoor skydiving, and rock climbing.

When she could get someone to cover for her at the bakery, they'd taken day trips. They hiked through most of the Georgia state parks, kayaked the Oconee River, and learned to salsa at a well-known studio on the Georgia-Florida line. Anna liked to think Baron challenged her to try new things and take adventures that at first seemed scary, while she calmed him and kept him grounded and mostly reasonable. A part of Baron, though, could never be tamed—it was something a little too wild—but she appreciated that about him. No one would ever describe Baron as dull, not with that megawatt smile and twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

The kitchen in Baron's townhouse was nearly as bare and lacking in personality as the other rooms, but Anna didn't really mind. Baron's vivacious personality filled a room as soon as he entered it, and once he was present, she stopped noticing how generic and empty his townhouse seemed. How it felt like a place where *no one* ever lived—a home without a heart.

Anna put the lasagna on the stove top 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 bounding down the stairs, the table was set, and she had his favorite music—jazz—playing on the Bluetooth speaker in the kitchen.

Anna grabbed the bread from the oven and switched off the broiler. A breeze blew stray pieces of Anna's 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 blond hair was disheveled, as if he'd spent the day sailing or surfing. He grinned and scooped Anna 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 holding her to the earth.

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

"It smells like an Italian feast." With his hands resting on her hips, he leaned down and kissed her. He glanced over her shoulder at the bread and then noticed the set table. "What's with all the great food? You trying to win me over?" He winked.

Anna's smile faltered. "It's our anniversary. Two years."

Baron's eyes widened, and then he winced.

"You forgot." If he'd forgotten their anniversary, did that mean his proposal today was coincidental?

"I'm a jerk," he admitted. "I forgot. You know I'm not good with dates. But one of us is a decent human being. It smells great, like everything you make." He smiled, cupped her face, and kissed her again. "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 failed. She glanced at her left hand and managed not to look nervous as she smiled. "I can't wait to hear it."

She served squares of lasagna onto their plates, and her hands trembled. Baron noticed her struggling to cut through the bread, so he offered to help. "You doing okay?"

Her laugh squeezed out in staccato bursts. "Long day." She

willed her heart to calm down. "But I'm happy to be here now . . . for the surprise."

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

This was it! Anna clinked her glass against his, and they both took a sip. Baron slid his fork through 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 glanced down at her plate. How could he eat when she could barely keep her body from fidgeting?

"You're the best." Baron shoved another few mouthfuls of lasagna and bread into his mouth before he put down his fork. "You aren't eating. You must be more excited than I am. I thought I could wait until dessert to tell you, but let's just do this now." Baron pushed away from the table and turned his body to face hers.

Anna lifted her napkin from her lap and placed it beside her plate. Her heart pumped so wildly she could barely breathe. She patted her messy bun and adjusted her earrings, anything to keep her hands busy. Baron reached out and grabbed both her hands in his, and she held her breath.

Baron's grin widened. "I got the job," he said.

His words made no sense in relation to what she'd been expecting, so she stared at him without responding.

He chuckled. "You with me, Anna-Banana? I got it. The job in California."

Anna's brain kicked into gear, and she pulled her hands out of his. She recalled a conversation they'd had months ago about a large travel agency in California that was looking for

experienced marketers and people willing to globe-trot to find the most elite destinations for clients. But the conversation, like most with Baron, had been all over the place and full of what-ifs and maybes and one-days. He hadn't talked about the job in California as though it was even a consideration, merely a stream-of-consciousness piece of information.

"The long shot, possible dream, never-gonna-happen *job*?"

Baron slapped his palms against his thighs. "Yes! You were paying attention. They emailed me two days ago, asked for an interview, which I did yesterday, and by this morning, they offered me the job."

Anna's heart fell into her plate of lasagna, and he continued.

"The agency is flying me out tomorrow for two weeks in Napa Valley so I can acclimate to the way things are done. They want me to start within the month. I'll find an apartment while I'm there and take in the sights. I'll need to put this place up for sale. God, can you believe it? Two weeks in California, in Napa Valley no less. While I'm there, I'll tour 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 leaned back in the chair to avoid doubling over with disappointment. She wished Lily hadn't called her. Now she felt deflated when she should be excited for Baron. He was obviously over the moon about this new opportunity, 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 sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Baron reached out for her hand. He twined their fingers together and tugged her up and 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. "I'll pack 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.

"Hey, I'm sorry I forgot it was our anniversary. I'll make it up to you when I get back, I promise. I wish I was better at this sort of thing because you deserve that." Baron 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 as if 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'll love it. The travel, the fun, the future. I guess I just thought that if this sort of life change came up, 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 between them. "There doesn't seem to be any *us* in your future in California. I . . . well, I don't know how I fit in. I hoped that you would have wanted me to be a part of it somehow. Lily called today and said

you told Jakob about a surprise you had for me, and since it's our anniversary, 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 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 uneaten 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 when she told him she wanted to open her own bakery somewhere else, 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. "This isn't about Mystic Water. This is about you taking a job in California. And I'd be . . . *here*. Did you not think about what would happen to us?"

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 sudden move 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. "This all happened so fast. 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, but ever since I got the offer this morning, my mind has been full steam ahead on next steps to get me out there and prepared for the job. You're the first person I wanted to share it with, but I didn't think about what that would do to us."

"You didn't think," she repeated. "And the first person you told was Jakob, not me." When Baron continued to stare at the table, she added, "I'm going 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 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 they could sort out this sudden weirdness. 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.

CHAPTER 2

RUM CAKE

ANNA LEANED HER FOREHEAD AGAINST THE STEERING WHEEL. She fought the tears, but they gathered in her chest until she felt like she was choking. “You win,” she whispered as they rolled down her cheeks.

She grabbed her cell phone and texted Lily: Tonight was a bust.

After tossing the phone on the passenger seat, she reversed out of Baron’s driveway and drove home, steadily wiping away tears. The weight of disappointment and confusion hunched her shoulders. “Walking on Sunshine” came on the radio, and Anna glared at the dashboard display.

“That’s just cruel,” she said as she turned off the music. Anna struggled to process the evening that had started as a celebratory anniversary dinner and ended with an unraveling relationship. Baron was moving across the country, leaving tomorrow to look for places to live. Did that mean they were breaking up? Did he want to try long distance? Did *she*?

Anna unlocked the bakery and dragged herself inside. She

shuffled through the dark rooms until she reached the kitchen and flipped on the lights. Her cell phone pinged with Lily's response: What happened?!? Anna texted that she'd talk to Lily tomorrow and turned off her phone. She wasn't in the mood to talk about how her two-year relationship with Baron had crumbled to cookie dust, that he hadn't even thought of asking her to go to California with him. The only thing Anna was in the mood for was being alone and eating cookie dough straight from the container.

She hefted a five-pound tub of homemade double chocolate chip cookie dough from the cooler. With an ice-cream scoop, she shamelessly doled out a healthy portion and promptly shoved it into her mouth, chewing slowly and trying not to drool on her knitted dress. Then she grabbed a small saucepot 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. Using a fork, she whipped the chocolate nearly to death, whipped it until the chocolate ganache clung to the tines and refused to let go.

Anna licked the fork and tossed it into the closest sink. She 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 western novel while staying at a dude ranch in Montana. Baron's latest adventure would take him across the country to one of the most-successful travel agencies in the nation, and he had made no plans for her to go with him—hadn't even thought of adding her to the equation. She squeezed her eyes shut, wrapped her arms around her bent legs, and sobbed into her knees.



Half an hour later, Anna was still sitting on the floor when she heard someone walking down the steps 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 crept down the stairs. "Anna . . . are you down here?"

"Unfortunately." 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 of the bakery. Her fluorescent-pink sweater made her look like a glow stick against the shadows. "I've been calling and texting you. Why are you ignoring me? I thought something terrible had happened, so I came straight over. I've been knocking upstairs at the apartment door. I thought you'd fallen asleep, but you know I couldn't go home until I made sure you were okay, so I used my key. What are you doing down here? Baking?" Lily paused at the archway and stared into the

darkness. "What did Baron say? What happened? Do you hate the ring? Where *are* you?"

Lily rounded the island and stopped so quickly she pitched forward, her blond curls spilling over her shoulders. She placed her coffee mug on the island. "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. Said he's going to find a place to live. They want him there before Thanksgiving."

Lily's brows furrowed. "Whoa, back up. Where is he going? Who wants him where before Thanksgiving?"

"California," Anna mumbled, considering whether she wanted to jab the spoon back into the ganache and eat the rest. "He accepted an offer for his dream job *across the country*, and he didn't even think about what that would mean for us. In fact, he didn't think about us at all. I want to be happy for him because I *know* it's a big deal, but . . . I'm sad for me."

Anna could see the wheels spinning in Lily's mind, working overtime to catch up. "He took a job? In California? When did this happen? Did you know he was looking for jobs out there?"

"Not really," Anna admitted. "He mentioned it once a few weeks ago. They offered it to him this morning, and he accepted."

No discussion with me. No questions about what I'd think about living in Napa Valley, soaking up the sunshine and eating grapes . . .”

“Okay, so he didn't ask you to marry him tonight, but surely he's going to California to find a nice place for y'all to live. He wants to scope it out first, find the right place. Then he'll come back for you.”

“No,” Anna said. She closed her eyes and sighed. “He could have asked me to go with him, but he didn't. I think it's over. When I mentioned an engagement ring and that I thought we would go together, he looked like I'd sucker punched him. Honestly, he was 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.” Her bottom lip quivered. “I don't even know if we're broken up or not. It can't possibly work, can it? Him there, me here? It's a gazillion miles away.”

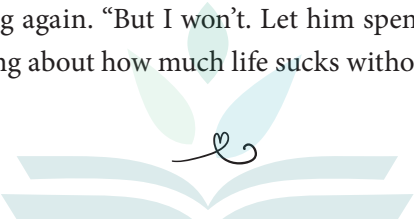
Lily sat down beside Anna and pressed her back against the bottom oven. “Well, this really sucks.”

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 wobbly feet. “You clean this place up, then go upstairs and take a shower. You've got chocolate all over your face, and that might be cookie dough in your hair. Did you eat dinner? Or is this . . . your go-to meal?” Lily held up both hands. “No judgment here. I just need to know if I should order food.”

Anna shook her head. “I lost my appetite at Baron's, and I doubt it'll return anytime soon.”

Lily huffed. "I'll see about that. Let's get upstairs, and I'll order pizza and drinks. I refuse to let you spend your anniversary alone and swimming in this pity pool. And turn your phone on. If, by chance, your mama calls tonight, she'll have a conniption if she can't reach you."

Anna nodded, but she felt like a puppet whose strings had been severed. Lily headed for the stairs. With one foot on the bottom stair, she looked at Anna and said, "I'm really sorry. I have half a mind to call Baron myself and give him the business. What a complete jack—" She clenched her jaw and released it before starting again. "But I won't. Let him spend the next two weeks thinking about how much life sucks without you."



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. 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 kitchen where the walls were painted a soft shade of vanilla buttercream. Oatmeal cookies snuggled quietly beneath a glass-domed cake plate on the antique, petite table for two.

Tucked onto bookshelves, stuck to the fridge with magnets, and displayed around the apartment were trinkets from all the times Anna spent at Wildehaven Beach with her family. Wildehaven Beach, located on the southern coast of Georgia,

was a short car ride from Mystic Water. Every summer Anna's grandparents would close Bea's Bakery for two weeks and take a much-needed vacation to a beachfront condo, and Anna always accompanied them. Some of her favorite memories were of building sandcastles with Beatrice, beating Grandpa Joe at Putt-Putt, and eating treats from the local beachside bakery while sitting on the pier. Anna's parents also enjoyed taking short weekend trips to the beach throughout the year, so she felt as though Wildehaven Beach was a home away from home.

A painting of a sailboat with its sails lifted by a summer wind as it coasted through blue-green waters had caught her eye at a local beach gallery and now hung in her living room. A cobalt-blue miniature sailboat sat between a cookbook on Southern cakes and a flavor thesaurus. Postcards from the beach decorated the front of the stainless steel refrigerator, and half a dozen photographs of her and her family at the beach were scattered through the apartment.

The beach and baking themes stretched into Anna's bedroom. Her queen-size bed was a marshmallow affair of soft blues and white with a riot of feather pillows in different shapes and sizes. An octopus-print pillow cuddled close to one stitched with a pair of dancing cupcakes wearing sneakers and polka-dot-wrapper skirts.

Anna stepped out of the shower and secured a towel around her body 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. She tugged a sweatshirt over her head as she shivered in the cool air. Then she sat on the edge of her bed and sank 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. How drastically would her life change? Her weekends would be freer, but her weekdays would look much the same. She would receive fewer texts, but he hadn't been the greatest texter either.

Her day-to-day routines wouldn't change much in his absence, but she had plugged him into every mental and emotional aspect of her life. Even though they hadn't seriously talked about their future—there had been no ring shopping or Pinterest wedding board making—she *had* imagined his knit with hers. But she fit only into his present, which was ever changing. 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 again.

A knock sounded at the front door, and Lily's voice combined with a man's muffled voice. The pizza had arrived. When Anna walked out of her bedroom, Lily was placing a large pizza box on the kitchen counter along with a two-liter bottle of Coca-Cola.

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.

"Dinner's here," Lily confirmed. "I made a pot of coffee. Want a cup?"

"No thanks. I'd be up all night," Anna said, thinking she might not be able to sleep well, anyway, with the way her mind was racing, intent on repeating her conversation with Baron and wondering if she could have done or said something different, something better.

Lily pulled down plates from the cabinet and got out three glasses. She opened the silverware drawer. "Fork or no fork?"

“No fork.” Anna slid out one of the kitchen chairs and sat. “Do you think this was bound to happen?”

Lily flipped open the pizza box, and looping ribbons of steam rose from the roasted vegetables and melted cheese. “Baron moving to California?”

“No. I mean us not working out. Was this inevitable? Because he’s so—”

“So Baron? Because he’s all over the place, literally and figuratively?”

“And I’m so . . . boring?”

Lily frowned deeply. “You are *anything* but boring. Dependable? Yes. Responsible? Yes. But boring? Never. You’re stable, and Baron”—Lily sighed—“Has never been.” She dropped a slice of pizza onto a plate and handed it to Anna.

Anna picked at a mushroom and stared at the indentation it had made in the cheese. “You’re not surprised this is happening then.”

Lily slid another piece of pizza from the box. “I *am* surprised,” Lily admitted. “I’ll be honest. When you and Baron started dating, I didn’t think it would last because of *him*, not because of you. He was just a click above being a bum. Albeit a good-looking bum, but he was a total couch surfer.”

An unexpected laugh crept up Anna’s throat, and she defended Baron. “He wasn’t a bum. He worked freelance, and he’d been backpacking across Malaysia and Thailand for a year. He was crashing with his brother here until he found his own place.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, but he never intended to *stay* in Mystic Water,” Lily argued. “Until he met you, and then it was like *bam*, he couldn’t leave. Remember how he kept saying he was

probably going to be moving soon? After a few months with you, he stopped saying that. Then he bought his brother's place when Brody moved. That's when I believed he was really going to stick around. So, actually, I *am* surprised by this. And disappointed in him."

Anna rubbed her temple, then pointed at the glasses on the counter. "You got out three—" Her cell phone illuminated on the kitchen table, and she snatched it.

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

Anna shook her head. "It's Tessa. She says she'll be right up."

Lily nodded. "I texted her, told her we were having a girls' night and you needed us."

Tessa Andrews was the third part of their best-friend trio. Anna, Lily, and Tessa met while hanging from the monkey bars during fourth-grade recess and hadn't stopped hanging around one another since. Even through college, moving away, and eventually all finding their way back to Mystic Water, they had stayed close and involved in each other's lives.

Anna's brow wrinkled. "Didn't she have a date tonight with Tommy Carpenter? I hope you didn't make her leave early. They might have been having a nice time."

Lily chuckled. "Tommy the taxidermist? You're kidding, right? He's a nice guy, sure, but he's an odd bird. You know he likes to show girls his collection of dead animals, don't you?"

Anna's eyes widened. "He does not. That's just gossip."

Lily shrugged. "Ask Tessa. She'll set the story straight. Oh, and I also told her we needed booze tonight, specifically rum."

Tessa knocked on the door and Lily flung it open, making an exaggerated "come in" motion with her arm.

Anna groaned. "You can't be serious. I have to be up at five

a.m. 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."

Tessa closed the door behind her and laughed. "Man, that was awful. Why was it so *green*? Hey, y'all." She put a bottle of rum and a bottle of wine on the counter. She was dressed in a scarlet honeycomb long-sleeved shirt paired with fitted jeans. Her straight shoulder-length brown hair still held some curl from her date night. She kicked off her black ballet flats by the door. "This was unexpected. I love girls' night. We haven't had one in weeks. Thank you for helping me graciously end my date with Tommy."

Lily cocked an eyebrow. "Did he show you the wild boar? Was it everything you hoped and more?"

Tessa rolled her eyes. "The peacock was kinda pretty."

Lily pointed at Anna. "Told you! He takes his dates on a tour of his dead things."

Tessa eyed the pizza but didn't pick up a slice. Lily dropped ice cubes into the glasses, then she poured in the rum until the ice cubes rose to the tip-top before splashing in the soda like a garnish. She grabbed three colored straws from Anna's stash on the counter and gave the drinks a quick stir.

"I only want rum in my Pirate's Booty Bundtlettes," Anna said.

"Those are one of my favorites," Tessa said. "The ones with coconut flakes, white chocolate, and drizzled in a rum syrup, right?" She rubbed circles onto her stomach. "I could eat half a dozen of those."

Lily snort laughed. "I think you have. At the Fourth of July festival this year. Isn't that when Danny Lincoln saw you scarfing

them down and was impressed by your appetite and asked you out?”

Tessa groaned. “He’s such a good kisser too. If he wasn’t so into LARPing, I would have stuck that one out for his kisses alone. But when he insisted I learn Elvish so we could communicate exclusively with *his people*, I had to end it.”

“He made those pointy ears look sexy,” Lily teased. Looking at Anna, she added, “I promise you won’t be barfing on the homecoming queen after a few glasses of rum and Coke.” She handed Anna a glass. “You can add any leftover rum to your next batch of cakes. Humor me tonight, please. I haven’t felt good all day, and I need a breather. And *you* definitely need something to take the edge off.”

Tessa took the drink from Lily and they clinked their glasses together. “No more than two for me. I have a seven a.m. house showing tomorrow for a client who wants to see the place before work, so I gotta get home at a decent time sans hangover in the morning.” She met Anna’s gaze. “Lily said you needed us. Everything okay?”

Anna swirled the straw through the ice cubes in her cocktail and took a hesitant sip. Her face scrunched up. “Holy guacamole, Batman, this is strong.” She put down the glass and motioned for them to follow her into the living room, where she sagged onto the couch. Anna grabbed a pillow decorated with an oversize bright red apple filled with the words Big Apple NYC, the only remnant from her New York City days. She squeezed the pillow against her chest. Better to get everything out in one breath. So, without stopping for a response, she blubbered out the evening’s events, ending with the three best friends sharing the strongest rum and Coke Anna had ever had.

Tessa read Lily's expression before speaking. "Well, that just dills my pickle," she said, finishing off her cocktail. "I can't believe him. Up and moving away like, 'Oh, I'm just a hop and a skip away.' No, you're actually *not*, Baron. You're more than three thousand miles away. It's not like he doesn't travel a ton anyway, so why does he have to move? Can't he do the job from here?" Her eyes widened. "Wait, maybe he's going to find a place to live and then tell you to come out there! But then . . . you'd be leaving us."

Anna shook her head, and Lily confirmed she had suggested the same possibility. "Y'all didn't see his face. Me going with him or meeting him later hadn't crossed his mind."

"Lord, have mercy. I'm so sorry," Tessa said. "I'm almost speechless."

Anna's lip twitched up in one corner. "Almost."

Tessa grinned and reached over to give Anna's hand a squeeze. "Well, I *can* talk a gate off its hinges."

"You and me both," Lily said with a laugh.

"One of the many things I love about you both," Anna said. "Thanks for coming over. I know I'll get through this, but it helps to know I don't have to do it alone."

Tessa huffed. "I wouldn't be surprised if he comes back singing a different tune, wanting you to join him. He's not going to like a life without you. I can guarantee that. Who would? Not me."

Lily raised her empty glass. "I'll second that! Who needs a refill?" She pointed at the TV's screen saver. "Turn that on. I already have a movie cued up for us."

"*Pet Sematary*?" Anna said once the TV screen illuminated with the paused movie. "No way, José. You know I hate horror

movies. I'd rather burn a batch of cookies and sell them to children."

Lily brought Anna's cocktail and pizza into the living room. Then she made Tessa and herself another drink while Tessa placed the pizza box on the coffee table. Lily lifted the cake dome, then scraped the oatmeal cookies onto a plate and added them to the buffet.

"First of all," Lily said, "it's impossible for you to ruin a batch of cookies. Second, we're not watching something sappy like *Sleepless in Seattle*—"

Anna's hands clasped together. "I love that movie."

Lily took a healthy bite of pizza. Mozzarella cheese stretched from the slice to her lips. "Yeah, I know, but we're not watching that tonight."

Tessa made a fish face and sucked her cocktail through a bright yellow straw. "She has a point."

"You're right." Anna reached for her slice of pizza and took an unenthusiastic bite. Watching a romantic comedy was probably a rotten idea. Her cell phone illuminated next to the pizza box, and she grabbed it. "It's a text from Baron."

Lily shoved her blond curls out of her face, and she and Tessa both asked, "What's it 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. So eloquent," Lily grumbled. "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 window sash, she stood on her tiptoes and slid it closed. While Lily started the movie, Anna rejoined her friends 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 unseen. Tessa forced herself to go home, hating to leave what might turn into a slumber party, but she couldn't afford to miss her appointment or show up looking bedraggled. She promised to stop by the bakery tomorrow to check in.

Anna stood in the kitchen, finishing 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. "I think I'm toast."

Lily grabbed the last oatmeal cookie and giggled. "You were toast an hour ago, and was I right or was I right? No homecoming barfing. Speaking of gross ideas, let's talk about *Pet Sematary*. Who would you bring back from the dead?" Lily shoved the cookie into her mouth.

Anna shuddered. "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, play along. Would you bring back Elvis? Maybe Tom Sawyer?"

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

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

"And incredibly underage for you. He'd be twelve or thirteen."

"Yikes!" Lily agreed. "I'll stick with Jakob."

Anna closed the pizza box and carried it to the kitchen. "Besides, you can't bring people back to life, not physically at least."

"Too bad you can't bring back the perfect man for yourself. Someone like Cary Grant or Paul Newman. Or better yet, too bad you can't *make* one."

"I thought Baron was the right guy for me," Anna said with a heavy sigh. "Maybe I just wanted him to be. Maybe I was forcing it." She tried three times to fold the pizza box in half and shove it into the trash can.

"Like you're forcing that pizza box?"

Anna frowned and left it on the counter.

Lily propped her legs on the coffee table. "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." 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. "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. "I used to hop up on the back counter in the kitchen when everyone was gone for the day and she was closing up. She'd warm up a chocolate chip cookie for me and pour a big glass of

chocolate milk. Then I'd beg her to tell me the story. She must have told me a million times, but she always acted like she was telling me for the first time. 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 Joe. How much flour, sugar, that sort of thing. And the secret ingredient too."

Lily snorted into her fourth rum and Coke. "What was the secret ingredient?"

Anna shrugged. "No idea. Every time I asked about it, she changed the subject." An image of a locked box and its key sitting on a shelf in her closet popped into her foggy mind. "You know . . . Grandma left me a few things besides the inheritance money. A lockbox and a letter. She said I'd know exactly when to open the box and what to do with it."

Lily sat up and put her glass on the coffee table. "What was inside?"

"I never opened it."

"Why not?"

"I haven't needed it, and she said not to open it *until* I needed it."

"How can you possibly know if you need it if you don't even know what's in it? It could be full of ancient artifacts or jewels."

Anna laughed. "Seriously, Indiana Jones? Ancient artifacts?"

"Where is it now?"

"In my bedroom closet."

Lily's brown eyes widened. She 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.

Lily flung open the closet doors. "Let's break it open."

"I have the key."

"You have the key," Lily repeated dully. "How could you not have opened it? Weren't you curious?" She tucked her unruly curls behind her ears.

"She said not to open it until I knew it was the right time. But when I say it out loud now, it sounds super lame. Why *didn't* I ever open it?" Anna stood on her tiptoes and pulled down the box. She had taped the original letter and the key to its top. "In my defense, with the funeral and trying to figure out how to run the bakery, I forgot about it."

Lily bounced onto the bed. "Well, bless your heart. You are such a rule follower. Have you ever stepped out of line?"

"Yakking episode, twelfth grade. Real low point in my life." Anna shrugged. "Otherwise, no. I prefer to stay in the lines."

Lily laughed. "Open it!"

Anna gently removed the taped letter and set it aside on her nightstand. She detached the key from the tape and crawled onto the bed beside Lily. She slid the key into the keyhole. "Wanna guess what's inside? Dead Sea Scrolls? Or maybe a crystal skull?"

Lily snorted and then hiccupped. “Open it before I jerk a knot in your tail!”

After she released the 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 Anna flipped open the lid, she saw a yellowed, bulging envelope with her name written across the front sitting atop granules that sparkled like golden sugar caught in the sunlight.

“Wow,” Anna breathed. She removed the envelope and popped the fragile seal. Inside were folded pages of a letter written in Beatrice’s cursive handwriting. “She wrote this to *me*?” Anna put the letter on her nightstand, then reached out to touch the glittering substance, but Lily slapped her hand away.

“Don’t touch it.”

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

Lily leaned forward to examine the contents. “What the hell is that stuff? My heart feels funny. Why is it all sparkly like that?”

“It looks lit up from the inside. Maybe it’s a special kind of sugar.”

“Locked in a box?” Lily scoffed. “Why would anyone lock up sugar?”

A crazy idea started forming in Anna’s mind. The golden sugar twinkled and beckoned to her. She felt a prickle skip down her spine, and the granules whispered to her. *Use me. Take me.* “Do you think . . . is it possible *this* is the secret ingredient?” She stuck her fingertips into the granules and felt a rush of warmth rocket up her arm.

Lily stared, transfixed. “You might be right. Where would

she get this stuff? I doubt she ordered this off Amazon. Black market?”

A chuckle echoed up Anna's throat. “The black market of baking? Doubtful.” Anna lifted the letter. “Maybe the answer is in here.”

“Do you really think Grandma Bea made your grandpa out of that stuff? I mean, it sounds pretty ridiculous,” Lily 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 grains, Anna began to seriously question her grandma's story. “It sounds far-fetched, but what if it's possible?” She closed the box. “You're right. We've had too much to drink. Let's go to bed.”

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

Anna giggled but she stopped when she realized Lily was serious. Suddenly an image of Frankenstein's monster flitted through her brain. An oversize stomping giant with a scarred, stitched face made from the body parts of corpses. The image lifted a moldy hand and waved. She grimaced and blinked away the vision. “Bad idea. No, *terrible* idea.”

Lily squeezed her arm. “You look like you're going to be sick. Come on. Get the sugar and let's make your man. I'll grab the rum.”



JENNIFER MOORMAN

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

JOSEPH O'BRIEN

Notes on the basics: Flour, sugar. Only the best ingredients. Quarter to half cup of confectioners' sugar to make him just sweet enough, but not too much. Salt to complement the sweet. A good balance is essential. High-quality yeast. Vanilla extract because it goes well with just about everything. Royal icing to make him stick and never wander away. A pinch here and there of favorite herbs or spices (basil, oregano, anise, cinnamon, turmeric). Warm water, not too hot or you'll create a scalded man, angry and hard to live with. High-quality olive oil for helping him move through life with ease, never getting stuck or losing pieces of himself. 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 anyone's hands. Not a good man. Creativity, dreams, love: crucial ingredients, always.

Ingredients

1/4 cup confectioners' sugar, more or less if needed
2 1/4 teaspoons yeast
3 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/2 cups warm water
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons of favorite herbs or spices
A couple dabs of royal icing
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1 tablespoon secret ingredient

2 tablespoons olive oil

A dash of creativity

A pinch of dreams

A shimmer of love

Directions

In a large bowl, combine water, sugar, and yeast. Let sit for five minutes until yeast foams and releases its pungent odor. Next add flour and salt to the bowl. If desired, add herbs and spices. Use a wooden spoon to gently combine ingredients. Add royal icing and vanilla. Combine and add secret ingredient. Make sure to incorporate the ingredient throughout the dough. Finally add olive oil. Toss the dough to coat. The dough will be slightly sticky but manageable with your hands. Lightly flour hands and counter. Knead for an acceptable time. No rising time needed, as secret ingredient enhances the finished product well enough. Press dough into a heart shape, approximately two inches thick. Bake for fifteen minutes at 425 degrees Fahrenheit. Make sure to give him a name before you close the oven door. After fifteen minutes, turn off the oven, but do not open it. Leave dough in oven for at least two hours, longer if needed.

Anna looked at the ingredients scattered across the counter. 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. She debated with herself about what her boyfriend, Jakob, would be made of. “Whiskey or bourbon? Marshmallows—no, s’mores. Beef jerky . . . sour apple Blow Pops . . .”

Anna wrinkled her nose. “Jakob sounds gross.”

“Hey!” Lily protested.

“This is stupid,” Anna said in a huff. “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. And these are the most random ingredients I’ve ever heard of for a dough recipe. No way this is going to work.”

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. 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 and preheated the oven. “Man, this ranks way up there on the list of stupidest things I’ve ever done.”

She grabbed a large bowl. The recipe directions were ordinary enough, but the combination of ingredients, such as royal icing paired with strong herbs or spices and vanilla extract, was bizarre. Using yeast but not allowing for proofing time went against Anna’s instincts. If the secret ingredient didn’t work, then Anna’s dough ball would be denser than Lori Beauchamp’s Christmas fruitcake, which Mystic Water townspeople regifted every year.

Anna poured lukewarm water into her bowl and added a half cup of confectioners’ sugar, hoping the result would be a somewhat romantic man. She scooped yeast from its oversize glass jar and sprinkled it over the sugar-water mixture. After allowing the yeast to bubble and foam, Anna tossed in a cup of all-purpose flour followed by a cup 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. She tossed in a teaspoon of sea salt so he might love the ocean too.

“What will make him good and wholesome and kind?” Anna 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 woodsy scent would hopefully make him a lover of the outdoors. If she was making the most absurd recipe ever, why not go big with her additions? So 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 added a cashew-size glob of purple royal icing to the mix to make him loyal, then poured in a teaspoon of vanilla extract. She dipped a tablespoon into the sparkling, golden sugar. When she leveled it with her finger, warmth spread up her arm until it reached her head, where it tugged her lips into a smile. She added the special ingredient and shoved her hand into the dough to incorporate everything. Rather than olive oil, Anna 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 flipped the dough ball around a few times in the bowl to ensure the oil coated the dough. 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 heart shape as directed and put it on a baking stone.

As an afterthought, Anna rolled out a piece of white fondant. She let her mind wander over a list of possible names before scribbling on the fondant rectangle with an edible black-ink marker.

Dearest Elijah,

I don't know that soul mates exist or that true love finds everyone, but I've heard anything is possible. I'd be willing to give love another try if you are.

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

"Bedtime," she said.

Lily was tilted over on the island at 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 and taking the bottle. "Let's get you up and into bed. I can't possibly carry you."

"Call Jakob," Lily said, pushing herself into a sitting position and nearly tipping off the island.

"I'll text him and say you're sleeping over," Anna said. "You can drive home in the morning."

Lily shook her head, releasing a wave of curls in her face. "I can't sleep without my super-special-squishy pillow and my white noise machine." She pointed a finger at Anna. "No, not even if I'm totally hammered. I'll toss and turn and be *more* of mess in the morning."

"It's late, Lily," Anna argued.

"Call him," Lily said. "He doesn't care. Promise."

Half an hour later, the bread was baked, and the oven was off with the dough heart waiting inside for its big reveal. Jakob retrieved Lily with a sleepy grin, and Anna turned off the lights in the bakery. After returning the locked box to her bedroom

closet and tucking the letter into her nightstand drawer, she drank an enormous glass of water, took two ibuprofens, and collapsed onto her bed without even pulling down the sheets.



HARPER
MUSE