

A CUPCAKE  
BAKERY MYSTERY

# Going, Going, Ganache

“[McKinlay] continues  
to deliver well-crafted  
mysteries full of fun  
and plot twists.”

—Booklist

New York Times  
Bestselling Author  
of *Red Velvet Revenge*

Jenn McKinlay



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## Red Velvet Revenge

“You’re in for a real treat with Jenn McKinlay’s Cupcake Bakery Mystery. I gobbled it right up.”

—Julie Hyzy, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
the White House Chef Mystery

“Sure as shootin’, *Red Velvet Revenge* pops with fun and great twists. Wrangle up some time to enjoy the atmosphere of a real rodeo as well as family drama. It’s better than icing on the tastiest cupcake.”

—Avery Aames, Agatha Award–winning author of  
*To Brie or Not to Brie*

“[McKinlay] continues to deliver well-crafted mysteries full of fun and plot twists.”

—Book

“Wonderful . . . This is entertainment that’s as light and fluffy as Mel’s buttercream frosting.”

—CA Review

“[A] delectable treat . . . Jenn McKinlay has written another charming mystery with her usual cast of scrumptious characters. I enjoyed every morsel.”

—MyShelf.co

## Death by the Dozen

“It’s the best yet, with great characters, and a terrific, tightly written plot.”

—Lesya’s Book Critique

“Like a great fairytale, McKinlay transports readers into the world of cupcakes and all things sweet and frosted, minus the calories. Although . . . there are some pretty yummy recipes at the end.”

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## Buttercream Bump Off

“A charmingly entertaining story paired with a luscious assortment of cupcake recipes that, when combined, make for a deliciously thrilling mystery.”

—Fresh Fiction

“It is the characters and their interaction and dialogue that make this a standout mystery . . . *Buttercream Bump Off* is another tasty entry, complete with cupcake recipes, into what is sure to grow into a perennial favorite series.”

—The Mystery Reader

“A hilarious story with smart heroines . . . If this series doesn’t leave you hungry for more of Melani and Angie, or for a baker’s dozen of cupcakes, then shame on you!”

—The Romance Readers Connection

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“A tender cozy full of warm and likable characters and a refreshingly sympathetic murder victim. Readers will look forward to more of McKinlay’s tasty concoctions.”

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“A delicious new series featuring a spirited heroine, luscious cupcakes, and a clever murder. Jenn McKinlay has baked a sweet read.”

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“A sparkling setting, lovely characters, books, knitting, and chowder! What more could any reader ask?”

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the Bibliophile Mysteries

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*Cupcake Bakery Mysteries*

SPRINKLE WITH MURDER  
BUTTERCREAM BUMP OFF  
DEATH BY THE DOZEN  
RED VELVET REVENGE  
GOING, GOING, GANACHE

*Library Lover's Mysteries*

BOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING  
DUE OR DIE  
BOOK, LINE, AND SINKER

# Going, Going, Ganache



Jenn McKinlay



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GOING, GOING, GANACHE

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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For Annette (Nettie) Amaturu, the Mel to my Angie or the Angie to my Mel depending upon the day, your friendship is one of my greatest joys. Thank you for being the sister of my heart and for giving this book such a cool title. And, of course, to the rest of the Amaturu crew, Fonz, Dom, Mike, Andrew, and Alyssa, you inspire me in so many ways and are without a doubt the coolest family ever! I love you all!

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# One



“No, I’m not feeling it,” Amy Pierson said. “Do it again, and this time try to give it that southwestern city-girl flare. This photo shoot is for *Southwest Style* magazine, after all.”

Angie DeLaura looked at Melanie Cooper as if to ask if she could please hurl a cupcake at the boss butt in the couture suit. Mel gave a slight shake of her blond head in the negative. She didn’t want to move too much and have Amy yell at her again.

It was mid-October in Scottsdale, Arizona, and although the sun was hot the breeze was cool, keeping the inordinate amount of makeup Mel had on from melting off her face. She and Angie were outside their bakery in the small patio area, posing for a picture to run alongside the piece that had been written about them for an upcoming issue of *Southwest Style*, the premiere magazine about urban living in the desert.

What Mel had assumed would be a staff photographer snapping a picture of them behind the counter in the bakery had turned into a full-on spread, featuring Mel and Angie in poofy retro-fifties skirts, with crinolines, and starched cotton blouses with pearls.

Because Scottsdale’s heyday had been the fifties and because the bakery was decorated in a retro-fifties style, Amy Pierson, the magazine’s art director, had decided to run with the fifties theme, and thus Mel and Angie found themselves outfitted like June Cleaver in stilettos.

The makeup artist had teased Angie’s long brown hair into an updo á la Audrey Hepburn, while Mel’s short blond locks had been styled in lush waves reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe. They were tricked out in an ultra-feminine chic style that made them positively unrecognizable.

“My head itches,” Angie whispered.

“My feet hurt,” Mel returned. The high heels they had been put in were arch-crampers, and Mel longed for her beat-up Keds, her comfy jeans, and a simple T-shirt.

“Okay, ladies, let’s see those smiles,” the photographer said. He was a young guy named Chad, who happily snapped away while Mel and Angie stood frozen, surrounded by tiers and trays of cupcakes, trying to look like they were having the time of their lives.

Fairy Tale Cupcakes, their bakery in Old Town Scottsdale, was in the heart of the tourist district, which was one of the many reasons for their success. They did loads of special orders, but their walk-in traffic kept them steadily busy with drop-ins who wanted to fortify themselves with a cupcake or

two before, during, and after a day of doing the tourist thing.

Mel observed the crowd gathering to watch and hoped that Marty Zelaznik and Oz Ruiz, their two bakery employees, were inside preparing for the crush once the magazine people departed.

The magazine had asked Mel to design cupcakes that would reflect the Southwest, so she had used bright fondant to create cupcakes devoted to cactus-flower blossoms. Each cupcake sported a flower, so magenta prickly-pear blooms blended with white and yellow saguaro flowers in several tiers of cupcakes that were festive and lovely and very southwestern.

Mel wasn't entirely comfortable with the dolled-up-babe look she and Angie were using to represent the bakery. But given that the magazine had a national subscription base of several hundred thousand, she was determined to do whatever it took to get in print. The coverage would go a long way towards making Fairy Tale Cupcakes the place to buy cupcakes in the Valley of the Sun.

Chad's camera clicked repeatedly as he moved, stepping closer and then backing away, dropping to one knee and then climbing onto a chair, all to get the shots he wanted. Mel smiled until her face hurt and her eyes began to cross. Angie was making small whimpering noises in the back of her throat as Chad paused in front of them. *Snap. Snap. Snap.*

"No!" Amy said, peering over his shoulder to study them. "I'm still not feeling it. Chad, let's discuss. Maybe it's the lighting."

"Relax, ladies, but don't move too far," Chad said as he went to confer with Amy.

"Every girl on every page of *Quality* has grace, elegance, and pizzazz. Now, what's wrong with bringing out a girl who has character, spirit, and intelligence?" Angie muttered to Mel.

Classic movie buffs, they had played this game with their friend Tate Harper since they were kids. Mel was about to identify the movie when a voice from nearby said, "That certainly would be novel in a fashion magazine."

Mel and Angie both turned to look at the man who had spoken.

"*Funny Face* with Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire," he said. "Good one."

"Looks like we found a new member of our tribe," Mel said. She held out her hand to him. "Melanie Cooper."

"Angie DeLaura," Angie said as she did the same.

The tall, red-haired man smiled as he shook each of their hands. He was dressed in all black and had the chiseled good looks of a male model. Mel noticed that his hand was soft to the touch and his fingernails were neatly trimmed and buffed. She sighed. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a professional manicure.

"Justin Freehold," he said. "Creative director for SWS."

"Is it just me, Justin," Angie asked, "or do there seem to be an awful lot of chefs in this photo-shoot kitchen?"

"Nice mixed metaphor," Mel said. "But she's right. Who are all of these people?"

Justin scanned the crowd.

"Good question," he said. "Pretty much anyone with their name on the masthead of the magazine is here, and that's why."

He jerked his head in the direction of a man standing apart. He was tall and fit but looked to be somewhere in his fifties as his dark hair was giving way to silver. He had laugh lines that creased the corners of his eyes, but he also sported a hard jaw that made Mel think he was accustomed to making tough decisions.

"That would be our new leader, Ian Hannigan," Justin said. "He just bought the magazine and saved it from an untimely death. Everyone is determined to shine under his ever-watchful gaze."

“So that’s why this went from a ‘say cheese’ to a ‘strike a pose’ layout,” Angie said. “I suppose in the end it will be better for the bakery, but when we get done, I may just shave my head. Honestly, fe this.”

She raised her right hand and patted her head. It didn’t move. Curious, Mel touched the loaf of hair on Angie’s head. Yep, it was as crusty on the outside as a baguette.

“Wow,” she said.

“More like *ow*,” Angie retorted.

Justin squinted into the crowd. “I know most everyone here, except for her. Does she work for you?”

Mel followed the line of his gaze. Striding through the crowd with her stocky frame wedged into a polka dot blouse and a black poodle skirt with a pink poodle on it, and wearing black-and-white saddle shoes, was Olivia Puckett. She was also hoisting a tray of brightly colored cupcakes over her head.

“Please tell me I’m hallucinating,” Angie said.

“Okay, but you have to do the same for me,” Mel said.

Olivia owned the rival bakery Confections and, for reasons unknown to Mel, she had developed a pathological competitiveness with Mel and Angie. It seemed if there was baking attention to be had, Olivia wanted all of it.

“Oh, yoo-hoo, magazine people,” Olivia called. “If you’re having a hard time photographing these two, I’d be happy to fill in.”

“Is she for real?” Angie snapped. “I did not let them do this to me”—she pointed to her head—“so that woman could march in here in that ridiculous skirt and take over our photo shoot.”

“I’ll take care of this,” Justin said. “I can’t imagine Amy would do a switch-up like this at the eleventh hour.”

Mel watched as Justin approached Amy and Chad and the silver-haired Ian Hannigan, along with several other intimidatingly well-coifed people. They huddled together like players on a football team and Mel was alarmed when she saw Amy’s head break out of the circle and stare at Olivia with a considering look.

“This is unbelievable,” Angie said.

“What’s the holdup?” a cranky voice asked from behind Mel. “How long does it take to snap a few pictures?”

Mel turned to find that Marty and Oz had slipped out the front door of the bakery to join them.

“What’s she doing here?” Oz asked. He did not have to specify that he was talking about Olivia.

“Trying to horn in on our photo shoot,” Mel said. “Apparently, Angie and I are so un-photogenic that they’re actually considering it.”

“Aw, what’s the matter, princess?” Olivia sneered as she ambled over to the patio. “You don’t really think you’re model material do you?”

Mel heaved a sigh. She was pretty sure she was developing a bunion on her right foot, and the last thing she needed was a battle with Olivia.

“How did you find out about this?” she asked.

Olivia shrugged. “I have my ways.”

Her eyes shifted away, however, and the piercing truth hit Mel like a dart in a bull’s-eye.

“You have a spy!”

“What? No, I don’t!”

“Oh my god, look at her face!” Oz said. “She’s totally lying.”

“I am not,” Olivia huffed.

“Then how did you know to dress in that getup?” Marty asked as he moved in front of Mel and Angie, as if to protect them. “Someone tipped you off that they were doing a fifties theme.”

“Listen, old man,” Olivia said—

“Who are you calling old, gray beard?” Marty interrupted.

“Ah!” Olivia took one hand off the tray of cupcakes she was still holding to feel her chin for errant whiskers.

Feeling none, she snarled at Marty, grabbed a vivid pink cupcake off her tray and lobbed it at him.

Marty ducked, and it landed in Angie’s hair and got wedged there like a bird in a nest. Angie wobbled on her feet; obviously the weight of the cupcake in her already heavy hair had knocked her off balance.

“Ha! How’d you like that, princess?” Olivia cackled. “I’ve got one with your name on it, too.”

“Stop calling me princess!” Mel snapped, trying to steady Angie as she listed to one side.

“No?” Olivia asked. “How about I call you b—?”

A white cactus flower cupcake landed with smack-dab precision right in Olivia’s piehole. Mel whipped her head around and saw Marty looking at her with an innocent expression.

“What?” he asked. “I slipped.”

“Nice,” Oz said, and the two exchanged a knuckle bump. “Pitcher?”

“All-American,” Marty said. “You know, back in the day.”

Mel propped Angie against the table. Angie gave Marty an impressed thumbs-up, but Mel knew retaliation—

*Smack!* A cupcake slammed into the side of her head. The cake thudded to the ground, but she couldn’t feel the frosting ooze down her face as it slid out of her short blond hair and landed on her shoulder.

Now she was mad. Mel forgot about Ian Hannigan, the owner of the magazine. She forgot that they were supposed to be here to showcase their shop with a happy, peppy photo shoot. Without thinking of the consequences of her actions, Mel snatched up the spotlighted extra large cupcake in the center of the table and charged at Olivia with a roar reminiscent of Mel Gibson’s character in *Braveheart*.

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## Two



“What do you have to say for yourselves?” Tate asked. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?”

Mel, Angie, Marty, and Oz sat slumped in a booth in the bakery. They were covered head to toe in frosting and chunks of cake. They looked like they were the lone survivors of a cupcake massacre.

“But it wasn’t—” Angie protested, but Tate held up his hand.

“Don’t! I don’t want to hear it,” he said. “This thing with Olivia is out of control. It’s a turf war over cupcakes. Now I want you to figure out how you’re going to make peace with her once and for all.”

“What?” Mel hopped out of the booth she’d been sitting in. “But she’s got a spy. She practically admitted it. She’s infiltrated the ranks.”

Tate looked at her as if to say, “*So what?*”

“Everyone should take a lie detector test,” Marty said. “Mel, I’m sure your uncle can hook us up with one from the Scottsdale PD.”

They all stared at him.

“What?” he asked. “I’ll go first.”

“Marty, I think it’s safe to say that we all dislike Olivia as much as you,” Angie said, “but you’re kind of going around the bend on this one.”

“But he’s right,” Mel said. “We have a leak, and I want to know who is giving out our secrets. If Olivia hadn’t shown up today, none of this would have happened.”

“She has a point there,” Angie said to Tate.

He pushed back the sleeve on his Brooks Brothers suit and reached into her hair to pull out a chunk of cupcake.

“Saving this for later?” he asked.

“Funny,” she said.

The door to the bakery was pushed open with a jangle of bells. Tate glanced up and saw Ian Hannigan stride into the bakery.

“Let me handle this,” he said. “Do not move so much as a sprinkle.”

“Heh-heh,” Oz laughed. “T-man is on a roll today.”

Mel gave him a sour look. "That's because he doesn't have gobs of frosting in his underpants." Oz wriggled in his seat, and Mel knew she'd made her point.

"What do you think is going to happen to us?" Angie asked. "That Hannigan guy looks very unhappy."

"Who cares?" Marty asked. "I say it was worth it to chase off that harpy once and for all."

"Too bad she unloaded her tray on us first," Angie said, flicking a chunk of icing off her forearm.

"She did look pretty funny running down the street with Mel chasing after her with the ginormous cupcake," Oz said. Then he snorted.

"I would have caught her, too, if it wasn't for those stupid high heels. Honestly, platform high heels! I'm tall already; didn't the wardrobe people realize that heels on me are redundant?" Mel asked.

"He was a dude," Angie said. "They don't get it."

"Still, we got Olivia good," Marty said.

Mel and Angie exchanged a glance. It was true. Between Marty, Oz, and Angie, Olivia had been pelted with a rainbow of cupcakes until she was slip-sliding her way out of Old Town, around the corner, and out of sight.

"She looked like a B-movie monster," Angie said. "The Abominable Frosting Monster."

Angie let out an uncharacteristic giggle, which made Mel chuckle and set off Marty and Oz as well.

Mel tried to stop, knowing that it was bad form to laugh in front of the magazine people. Still, the harder she tried to block the mental picture of Olivia blinking bright yellow frosting out of her eyes, the more it tickled her funny bone and the harder she laughed.

She saw Tate whip around from his conversation and glower at them. She clamped her lips together trying to rein in her giggles. But then Marty let out a sound like a cork popping before he started wheeze-laughing, which set off Mel and the others again.

The giggle fit was contagious and, to Mel, it was the best therapy in the world. Her sides actually hurt from laughter spasms and, when she finally wound down, she felt relaxed for the first time since putting on those stupid heels.

Tate crossed the room towards them. He was loosening his tie as if it were strangling him.

"Having a good time?" he asked. It was clear that he was not. "Because you are looking at a major snafu here."

"Buzz-kill," Angie said.

Tate glowered.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

He was looming over the booth where they sat as if they were a line of kids outside the principal's office.

"Do you have any idea how much money you have cost the magazine in staff time, equipment, wardrobe, and so forth?" Tate asked.

"A lot," Mel said, trying to sound reasonable.

"Thousands," Tate corrected her. "Mr. Hannigan could easily sue us right down to our last paper cupcake thingy."

"Liner," Oz said.

"Whatever," Tate snapped. He was tugging on his ear, never a good sign, and his breathing was coming and going in sharp bursts, as if he'd run a race.

"Well, that seems a bit over-the-top," Angie said. "I mean, yeah, we made a mess—"

"A mess?" Tate said. His eyes practically bugged out of his head. "One or two dropped cupcakes a

a mess, but what you four did was like cupcake napalm. There is frosting all over the sidewalk, other storefronts, cars. You're damn lucky you didn't hit any pedestrians."

Mel hung her head. A quick glance at the others, and she saw that they did the same. Tate paced back and forth in front of them like a military commander disciplining the troops. Mel tried not to be annoyed, since it was his large financial investment in the bakery that was the sole reason it existed. Oh, business was good and they were turning a tidy profit, but without Tate's start-up scratch, Fairy Tale Cupcakes would have remained just that—a fairy tale.

"We'll take care of the cleanup," Oz said.

"Yes, you will," Tate agreed. "In fact, you and Marty need to get outside and get going on that. Now!"

Both Marty and Oz scuttled out of the booth and headed out the door. Mel had a sneaking suspicion that they were relieved to have been excused from the firing squad, but she didn't say as much.

"We should go help, too," Angie said.

"No. You two, being the faces of the bakery, are going to go over to Mr. Hannigan right now and commence groveling," Tate said.

"Ooh," Angie said. "You know that's not my gift."

"Well, it had better start to be," Tate said.

"When did you get all alpha male?" Angie asked. She stood in front of him, glaring up at him. "I'm not sure I like it."

"Really?" Tate asked. "How would you feel if I told you I don't care?"

Angie gasped, and Mel echoed her. This was a heretofore unseen side of Tate, and she wasn't sure she liked it either.

"Do you have any idea who Ian Hannigan is?" Tate asked.

Mel and Angie exchanged a look and then looked back at Tate. Mel knew that Angie was thinking the same thing she was—that they'd show Tate they did, too, know who Hannigan was.

"He owns the magazine SWS," Angie said.

"And he saved it from ruin," Mel added.

Mel felt that, despite being covered in frosting they both could be quite smug about their knowledge base in regard to Ian Hannigan.

"Ian Hannigan is one of the richest men in the world," Tate said. "He is a media mogul. He doesn't just own SWS magazine. That's nothing to him. That's a plaything, a shiny new toy for the moment. He owns Hannigan Inc. Heck, he *is* Hannigan Inc."

"Never heard of it," Angie said.

"Really?" Tate asked. "Well, maybe you've heard of the It Channel?"

"Oh, I love that channel," Mel said. "It's very cutting edge, lots of shows about technology and new inventions."

"And maybe you've heard of Gan Productions? As in HanniGan?" Tate asked.

"Oh, they produce a lot of good movies," Angie said. "I particularly liked—"

"I'm sorry," Tate said. "I hate to interrupt, but there are about fifty more companies under the Hannigan Inc. umbrella that I have yet to mention."

Mel raised her eyebrows.

"Now do you see?" Tate asked. "This isn't just some chump who owns a magazine. This is one of the world's media giants, and you two have really ticked him off."

"Uh-oh," Angie said.

"So it's all coming into focus now," Tate said. "Great. My work here is done."

“You know, the sarcasm thing that you’ve got going,” Mel said. “I’m not really enjoying it.”

Tate just stared at her, doing a fair impression of a brick wall.

“It’s just a guess,” Angie said. “But I don’t think he cares.”

“Go. Make. Nice,” Tate said each word as if he’d ripped it off a bone with his teeth.

Mel pushed the frosting-sodden bangs off of her forehead and rose out of the booth to stand beside

Angie.

“I hope you’re feeling charming,” she said to Angie.

“With this hair?” Angie asked. “I look like a troll doll. All I need to do is show some belly.”

“Don’t!” Tate ordered.

Angie heaved a sigh. “As if I would. Unless . . . do you think it would work?”

Tate glared at them through eyes that were lowered into mere slits. His face was forbidding enough that Mel was actually happy to go and face the media mogul. Surely he couldn’t be much worse than Tate at the moment, could he?

Together Angie, Mel, and Tate crossed the bakery to where Ian stood in the corner. He had a group around him about three deep, so Mel and Angie stood patiently, waiting for the smack-down that they had no doubt would be delivered in short order.

A woman with blunt-cut gray hair and wearing pointy-toed heels, sheer black hose, and a form-fitting black chemise with a red bolero jacket over it, stood beside Hannigan. He was talking to her, but she had her body turned half away from him and looked to be refusing to make eye contact, which Mel found fascinating. The woman projected an aura of contempt and disdain that was palpable, and Mel felt infinitely more afraid of her than of Ian Hannigan.

Justin stood in front of Mel, so she grabbed his sleeve and tugged. He turned, and she whispered, “Who is the scary woman?”

A small smile played on Justin’s lips; he didn’t have to ask who she was talking about.

“That’s Brigit MacLeod,” Justin said. “Editor in chief.”

“That’s bad,” Angie whispered.

“Really bad,” Mel agreed.

“Do you hear me, Brigit?” Ian barked over their whispered conversation.

Brigit went rigid, crossed her arms over her chest, and studiously ignored him.

Ian turned and seemed to take notice of Mel and Angie for the first time.

“Ah, here they are,” he said. He rubbed his hands together as if in anticipation. “Everyone, I’d like you to meet your new bosses for the next week.”

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## Three



Mel looked behind her to see if he was introducing someone she hadn't seen. But no, when she turned back around, Ian Hannigan had his laser-like scrutiny centered right on her.

Once upon a time, Mel had been a corporate minion. She had been a dynamo in the world of marketing in Los Angeles and had been scrupulously working her way up the food chain. When she realized that the only happy moments in her life were her daily stops at her local bakery, she had ditched it all to go to culinary school.

She had dealt with people like Ian Hannigan back in LA. They were cunning and ruthless and had the singular ability to bend people to their wills. But Mel wasn't in that world anymore, and Ian Hannigan was standing on her black-and-white tiles in her bakery. This was Mel's turf, and she called the shots here.

"Mr. Hannigan," Mel said. "I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Melanie Cooper, one of the owners of the bakery."

She extended her hand, pleased to see it was clean of frosting.

Hannigan studied her for a moment and then clasped her hand in his. Mel was surprised to feel callus-toughened skin along his palms, and his fingers were large and strong as if he actually used them for more than holding his cell phone to his ear.

"This is my partner, Angie DeLaura," Mel said, and they shook hands as well. "And you've already met Tate Harper."

Hannigan nodded and continued to study them. His gray eyes were like chips of steel, and he held his jaw out in a stubborn pose as if he's made up his mind about something and was determined to see it through.

"Ladies," he said. "This photo shoot turned into quite a production."

A chuckle sounded in the corner of the room, and Chad, the photographer, looked up from where he was working on his laptop.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "I was just reviewing some of the day's takes."

Under Hannigan's unwavering stare, Chad cleared his throat and looked back down as if hoping his laptop had an escape-hatch option.

"I came to this photo shoot to see how my staff worked as a team," Hannigan said. He looked at

Mel. "You own a business. You understand the importance of teamwork."

"I do." Mel nodded.

And she did. She had only hired people to work in the bakery who fit in with the irreverent outlook she and Angie maintained. Her team was a ragtag band of misfits bound only by a mutual love of cupcakes; still it was a criteria of sorts, and it seemed to be working.

"That fiasco out there showed me one thing," Hannigan said. "While my people did a lot of pushing and shoving, throwing one another into the line of fire, your people rallied around you and neutralized the threat."

"True," Mel said. "But it helps to have a common enemy. Olivia Puckett, the poodle skirt, has been a thorn in our backsides since we opened."

"I think we can certainly agree on a common enemy," Brigit said. Her voice was gritty and low-pitched, just as Mel would have expected it to be. Her venom-filled glance at Hannigan left no doubt as to whom she felt the enemy was.

Hannigan gave Brigit a look that Mel was sure would have frozen the blood in her veins. Brigit, however, merely shrugged and gave him a closed-mouth smile that carried more of a threat in it than a knife pointing at his chest.

Mel felt Angie lean against her, and she knew it was Angie's way of communicating that she saw what was happening as well. Obviously, there was tension at SWS, namely that Brigit MacLeod hated Ian Hannigan, and she didn't care if he knew it.

"Although a common enemy can be an excellent bond," Hannigan said, turning back to Mel, "a common goal can be an even stronger bond, because it requires a commitment to a desired outcome."

Mel glanced at Angie and saw her own confusion reflected back at her in Angie's warm brown eyes. What the hell was Ian Hannigan talking about?

"It is to that end, that my staff will be coming to work for you, Ms. Cooper," he said.

"I'm sorry," Mel said. "I must have misheard you. Did you say your staff was coming to work here?"

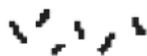
"Correct," Hannigan said. "These people need a common goal, something to work towards together, so I have decided that they will learn how to bake cupcakes together."

"So, like a corporate cupcake boot camp?" Mel asked.

"Exactly," Hannigan said. "The magazine's annual community outreach gala is this Saturday night. I think one thousand cupcakes ought to do it, and then we can consider the damage done to this photo shoot paid in full."

Mel glanced over her shoulder at Tate. He was standing in the corner with his arms crossed over his chest in a fair imitation of Hannigan. He gave her one small bob of his head.

"Well, when you put it like that, how can we refuse?" she asked.



Mel and Angie had taught classes before, so it wasn't the idea of teaching the staff of SWS magazine how to make cupcakes that had Mel in her bakery at two o'clock in the morning with her cat, Captain Jack, at her side.

A white cat with a black patch over one eye, Captain Jack looked and acted every inch the pirate he was named for. While he batted a paper cupcake liner across the floor, Mel scoured the tables and chairs and neatened and restocked the display cases that lined one wall.

No, the teaching part was easy, and the one thousand edible cupcakes by the end of the week was

doable as well. It was having several unwilling participants underfoot for a week that was giving her pause. She had no doubt that Brigit MacLeod would rather chew off her left foot than spend a week in a kitchen.

Mel wasn't much for confrontation. Her adolescent years had been spent on the plus side of plump making her the target of bullies and mean girls. Typically, the head cheerleader in her high school, Cassidy Havers, had been the nastiest of the lot and had followed Mel in the hallways and chanting, "Give me an *M*. Give me an *E*. Give me a *L*. Give me an *E*. Give me a *P-H-A-N-T*. What does it spell? Melephant! Hey, want a peanut, Melephant?"

Then Cassidy would pretend to hold out a peanut to her. Truly, the act was a work of cheerleader genius that made the entire student body laugh at Mel. And, of course, Cassidy was a tall, thin redhead, whose parents had given her a boob job for her sweet sixteen.

Mel found it a cold comfort that her own family loved her for what was on the inside and not for the size of her bra cup.

They loved her so much, in fact, that when Mel's brother, Charlie, spent a Saturday writing odes to Cassidy's faux front on all of the walls in all of the public men's bathrooms in South Scottsdale, including Cassidy's phone number in his poetry, and Mel's father caught him red-handed, or rather with marker in hand, Charlie was given a raise in his allowance, and the matter was never spoken of again.

On the upside, Cassidy was so busy dealing with her crop of new admirers, she had quite forgotten to torment Mel anymore.

Brigit MacLeod, editor in chief, reminded Mel of Cassidy. Brigit was the sort of woman who knew what sort of response she wanted from people and exactly how to get it. Mel had a feeling Brigit was going to resent Mel for this situation, which was not unwarranted, and that she was going to make Mel miserable for it.

The kitchen door swung open and in stepped Joe DeLaura. He was wearing his gray T-shirt and plaid pajama bottoms. He looked sleepy, and he scratched his head as he watched Captain Jack race across the floor in front of him.

"I had a feeling I'd find you down here," he said. "Couldn't sleep?"

"No, I—" Mel began, but he interrupted her.

"I was talking to Jack," he said.

"Oh," she said.

She watched as Joe crouched down and made kissie noises and wiggled his fingers. Captain Jack did not even try for typical cat aloofness. Instead, he abandoned the cupcake liner and ran at Joe, who scooped him up with one hand and cradled him to his chest. Lucky cat.

"What's the matter, buddy?" Joe asked as he scratched Jack's chin, eliciting a purr that sounded like an idling racecar engine. "Are you worried about the mean magazine people coming tomorrow?"

Jack's purr got louder.

"You know it will be fine," Joe said. "They will be so impressed with your culinary brilliance that they will be just as captured by your spell as I am."

Mel felt her heart do that ridiculous fluttery thing that it did whenever Joe was around. He was the middle of Angie's seven older brothers, and Mel had pined for him from afar from the first time she'd seen him when she was twelve and he was sixteen.

It had taken twenty years for him to notice her in *that* way—not his fault, since law school and being an assistant district attorney had kept his calendar full. But they'd been dating for a year now, and Joe had seen Mel through several scary times. He was her rock. He'd recently asked her to marry

him, and Mel had said yes.

~~She had asked him to keep their engagement a secret, however. It was silly, she supposed, but she wanted to keep it just for them for a while. Through her work at the bakery, she'd seen enough engagements and weddings to know that once the intention to marry became public knowledge, the engaged couple no longer owned it.~~

Mel loved her mother to pieces; truly, there was no finer woman alive than Joyce Cooper. But if Joyce had one wish to make in this life, it would be that Mel marry dear Joe—Joyce always called him “dear Joe”—and settle down, preferably on the same street as Joyce, and commence with the baby making. Mel wasn't ready yet.

“Come here, Cupcake,” Joe said. He held out his available arm, and Mel stepped into his embrace. He planted a kiss on her lips, and asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Mel thought about it. Would it help to blather on about her fat childhood and low self-esteem and how Brigit terrified her and brought it all back in its full Technicolor glory? No.

“Nah,” she said. “But I appreciate the offer.”

“What I said was true, you know.” Joe squeezed her tight. “I am completely under your spell, and they will be, too.”

Captain Jack worked his way across Joe's chest and into Mel's arms.

“And I'm not the only one,” Joe said.

Captain Jack tucked his head under Mel's chin while she held him close, and started to snore.

Joe checked the lock on the front door and shut off the lights. He ushered Mel through the kitchen and out the back door, locking up as they went. They climbed the stairs to her apartment above the bakery, and Mel turned to face Joe on the landing.

“I'm so glad I have you two in my life,” she said.

His brown eyes were like melted chocolate and his smile was crooked as he asked, “So, when are you going to make an honest man out of me and marry me?”

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## Four



Mel stepped into her tiny apartment, letting Joe shut and lock the door behind her. She put Jack down in his cat bed and turned to face Joe.

“Soon,” she said. “We’ll announce it soon.”

Joe rubbed a hand over his eyes, and Mel could see that he was tired.

“You know there’s been talk about me going for the district attorney position when my boss retires,” he said.

“You’d make a great one,” Mel said.

“I’d like you by my side when I do it,” he said.

“I will be,” Mel promised. “Every step of the way. I’ll even bake cupcakes.”

He gave her a small smile. “I’d like you there as my wife.”

“Because it’s politically advantageous?” Mel asked. She knew as soon as the words left her mouth that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Is that what you think?” he asked.

He spoke in the same reasonable tone he always used when mediating a dispute amongst his siblings. Mel was not sure how she felt about being on the receiving end of his negotiating skills.

“No,” she conceded. Although, deep down she wondered if there was a part of Joe that had decided cupcake baker was a pretty inoffensive political ally.

“Listen, I won’t rush you,” he said. “But I want to be sure that this is still what you want.”

“Yes,” she said. She wondered if he had noticed her slight hesitation. If he had, he didn’t show it. “I just don’t want to share it with anyone yet.”

He looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it. For the first time in their relationship, Mel felt as if there was a chasm between them, a rift rent by words not spoken, and she knew it wasn’t just Joe who was holding back, it was her, too. And yet she didn’t know how to say what she was feeling, so she said nothing.

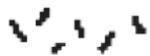
They climbed back into Mel’s futon. Joe lay flat on his back and Mel curled up on her side, facing away from him. Joe reached out and put his hand on her hip, as if trying to bridge the gap between them. Still, Mel said nothing.

There was a quiet little voice inside her head telling her that there was more holding her back than

not wanting to share their good news with the world, but she refused to hear it.

For now, she had the cupcake boot camp to get through, and she couldn't be distracted by a handsome man with soft brown eyes who wanted to make her his wife.

Mel sighed and fell into a doze with Joe's hand still warm upon her and Captain Jack snuggled up on the pillow between their heads.



Boot camp started at seven in the morning. Despite being a baker, Mel was not a morning person. Per usual, a hot cup of coffee had been left on her nightstand by Joe, who had already left to start his day.

Mel scratched Jack's head and took her coffee into the bathroom, where she prepped for her day. Given the scouring she'd had to give herself yesterday to get all of the frosting off, today's shower was more of a repeat rinse, and she was on her way in minutes.

Captain Jack ate a hearty breakfast, and she left him to return to his sweet dreams with a pang of envy. After her midnight cleaning bender, she really would have loved to get some more shut-eye.

Angie was just walking through the front door when Mel arrived. Mel stared at her for a second, and Angie held up her hand, indicating that she did not want to hear it.

"Your—" Mel said, but Angie shook her head and interrupted. "I am aware of my hair. Thank you."

"But—" Mel began, but Angie said, "Uh-huh. Not open for discussion. Rest assured, I have tried everything and let it go."

"Oh, okay," Mel said.

"I'm going to go and make coffee now," Angie said, and she disappeared into the kitchen, taking her loaf of hair with her.

While Angie put on the big pot of coffee, Mel gathered the books they used to show customers who wanted special orders. She figured Brigit and company would want to choose what sort of cupcakes they would make, so if she gave them the books to peruse, they could pick how they were going to spend their week.

She stacked the books on the steel table in the kitchen, as it was the largest space to have a meeting in the bakery. She then went out to open the front door and await their boot-camp attendees.

Justin Freehold was the first to arrive. Mel noted that he was again dressed in all black, but a decidedly more casual version, in jeans and a T-shirt.

He and Mel exchanged good mornings, and then Angie came through the kitchen door bearing a tray full of coffee with sugars and creamers.

"Angie, your ha—" Justin said, but Mel shook her head, and his voice trailed off.

"What?" Angie asked. There was no good morning for Justin from her.

"You're a goddess to have fresh brewed coffee at the ready," he said.

"Yes, I am," she agreed.

The door opened again, and in strode Amy Pierson in a gray pinstripe jacket and matching pencil skirt—not exactly baking wear. She was chatting on her phone and sat down in the corner booth of the bakery without so much as nodding at the rest of them.

The door opened again, and in strolled Sylvia Lucci, the woman in charge of the fashion portion of the magazine. Yes, it had been her people who'd dressed Mel and Angie up in the retro fifties outfits. Sylvia was a stunner with exotic features, almond-shaped eyes, and thick, glossy dark brown hair that hung past her shoulders, framing her heart-shaped face, giving her a fragile look. Her figure was a

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