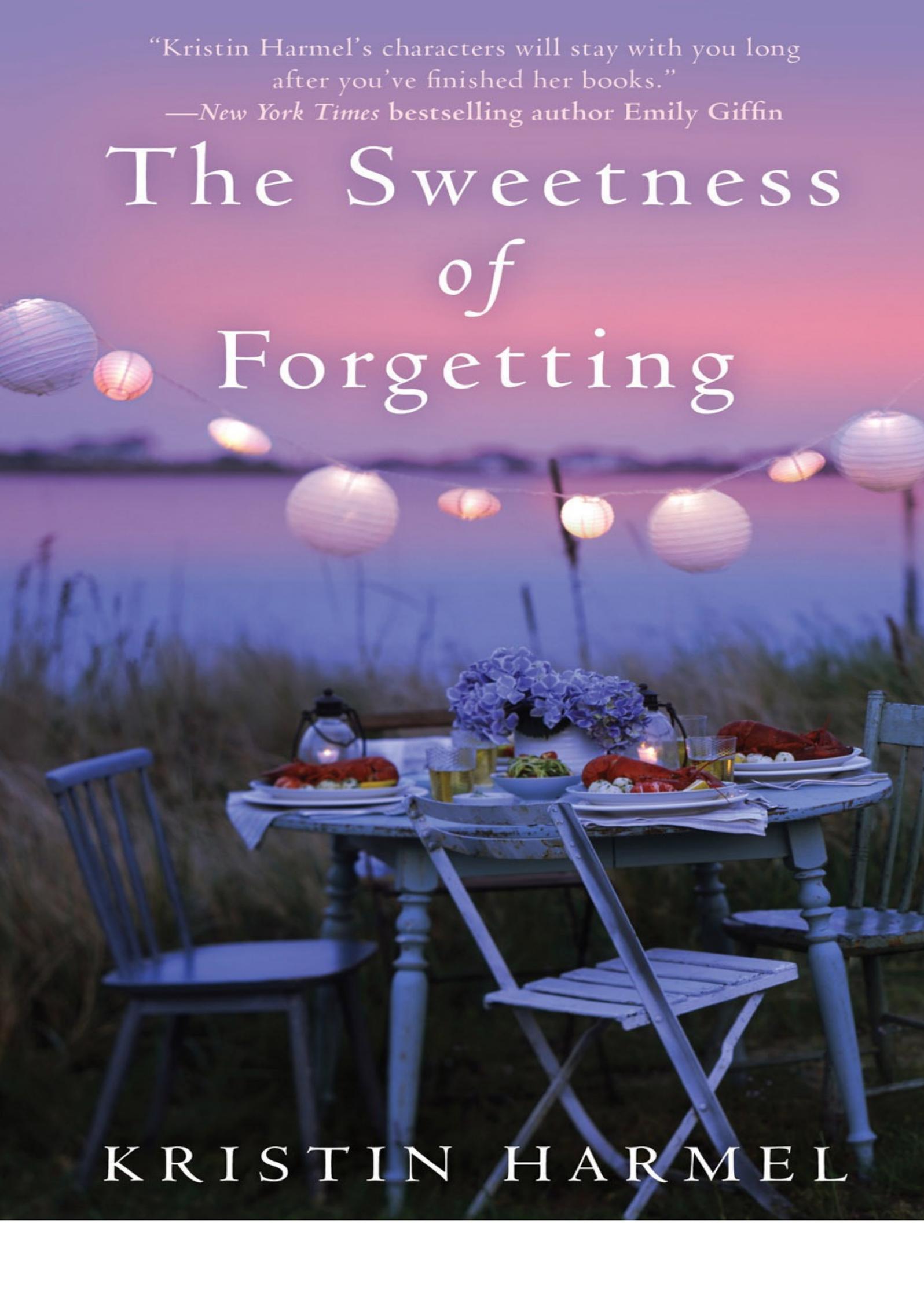


“Kristin Harmel’s characters will stay with you long after you’ve finished her books.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Emily Giffin

# The Sweetness of Forgetting

A romantic outdoor dinner table set for two at dusk. The table is round and white, with a white tablecloth. It is set with plates of lobster, glasses of beer, and a vase of purple hydrangeas. The table is surrounded by white chairs. In the background, there is a body of water and a string of white paper lanterns hanging across the scene. The sky is a mix of purple and blue.

KRISTIN HARMEL

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The Sweetness  
*of*  
Forgetting



KRISTIN HARMEL



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“God hath made of one blood all nations of men.”

—ACTS 17:26

“One man’s candle is light for many.”

—TRACTATE SHABBAT, *ORDER MOED OF THE TALMUD*

“All God’s creatures are His family and he is the most beloved of God who doeth most good to God’s creatures.”

—THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

# Chapter One

---

The street outside the bakery window is silent and still, and in the half hour just before sunrise, as dawn's narrow fingers are just reaching over the horizon, I can almost believe I'm the only person on earth. It's September, a week and a half after Labor Day, which in the little towns up and down Cape Cod means that the tourists have gone home, the Bostonians have boarded up their summer houses for the season, and the streets have taken on the deserted air of a restless dream.

The leaves outside have begun to change, and in a few weeks, I know they'll mirror the muted hues of a sunset, although most people don't think to look here for fall foliage. The leaf peepers will head to Vermont or to New Hampshire, or to the Berkshires in the western part of our state, where the oaks and maples will paint the world in fiery red and burnt orange. But in the stillness of the off-season on the Cape, the swaying beach grass will turn golden as the days grow shorter; the birds migrating south from Canada will come to rest in great flocks; the marshes will fade into watercolor brushstrokes. And I will watch, as I always watch, from the window of the North Star Bakery.

I can't remember a time when this place, my family's business, didn't feel more like home to me than the little yellow cottage by the bay that I was raised in, the home I've now had to move back into after the finalization of my divorce.

*Divorce.* The word rings in my ears, over and over, making me feel like a failure once again as I try to conduct the balancing act of simultaneously opening the oven door with one foot, juggling two industrial-sized trays of miniature cinnamon pies, and keeping an eye on the front of the bakery. It occurs to me yet again as I slide the pies in, pull out a tray of croissants, and push the door shut with my hip that trying to handle it all means only that your hands are always full. In this case, literally.

I'd wanted so much to stay married, for Annie's sake. I didn't want my daughter growing up in a home where she had to feel confused about her parents, like I had when I was a kid. I wanted more for her. But life never works out the way you plan, does it?

The front door chimes just as I'm lifting the flaky, buttery croissants from the baking sheet. I glance at the timer on the secondary oven; the vanilla cupcakes need to come out in just under sixty seconds, which will delay me in getting out to the front of the store.

"Hope?" a deep voice calls out from up front. "You back there?"

I sigh in relief. A customer I know, at least. Not that I don't know almost everyone who remains in town after the tourists have gone home.

"Be out in a minute, Matt!" I shout.

I pull on my oven mitts, the bright blue ones with cupcakes embroidered on the edges that Annie bought me for my thirty-fifth birthday last year, and pull the vanilla cakes out of the oven. I breathe in deeply, the sugary scent taking me back to my own childhood for a moment. My *mamie*—French for "grandma"—founded the North Star Bakery sixty years ago, a few years after she moved to Cape Cod with my grandfather. I grew up here, learning to bake at her knee as she patiently explained how to make dough, when breads rise, and how to turn both traditional and unexpected ingredient combinations into confections that the *Boston Globe* and the *Cape Cod Times* rave about every year.

I put the cupcakes on the cooling rack and slide two trays of anise and fennel cookies into the oven in their place. Beneath them, on the bottom rack, I slide in a batch of crescent moons: almond paste flavored with orange flower water, sprinkled with cinnamon, enclosed in a pastry shell, and shaped into gently curved slivers.

I close the oven door and brush the flour off my hands. Taking a deep breath, I set the digital timer and ~~walk out of the kitchen into the brightly lit front room of the bakery. No matter how overwhelmed I am,~~ still makes me smile to come through the doors; Annie and I painted the bakery last fall, when business was slow, and she chose princess pink with white piping. Sometimes it feels like we're living inside a giant cupcake.

Matt Hines is sitting in a chair facing the counter, and when he sees me, he jumps up and smiles.

"Hey, Hope," he says.

I smile back. Matt was my high school boyfriend, half a lifetime ago. We broke up before heading off to separate colleges; I came back several years later with a bachelor's degree, the useless half of a law school education, a new husband, and a baby daughter, and Matt and I have been friendly ever since. He's asked me out several times since my divorce, but I've realized, almost with surprise, that we've outgrown each other. He's like a favorite old sweater that no longer fits or flatters. Life changes you, even if you don't realize it while it's happening, and it turns out you can't take back the years that have passed by. Matt doesn't seem to realize that, though.

"Hey, Matt." I try to sound neutral and friendly. "Can I get you a cup of coffee? On the house, since you had to wait." I don't wait for an answer; I'm already pouring. I know exactly how Matt takes it: two sugars and one cream in a to-go cup, so that he can get to the Bank of the Cape, where he's a regional vice president. To get his paperwork started before they open for business. Since he works just two blocks down on Main Street, he stops in once or twice a week.

Matt nods and takes the coffee from me with a smile.

"What else can I get you?" I ask, gesturing to the glass bakery case. I've been here since four, and although I'm not quite done with everything, there are already plenty of fresh pastries. I reach for a miniature pie-like confection, which features a phyllo-like shell filled with a lemony almond paste and brushed with rosewater and honey. "How about an almond rose tart?" I ask, holding it out to him. "I know they're your favorite."

He hesitates for only a second before reaching for it. He takes a bite and closes his eyes. "Hope, you were born to do this," he says with his mouth full, and although I know it's a compliment, the words hit me hard because I never intended to do this at all. It wasn't the life I wanted for myself, and Matt knows it. But my grandmother got sick, my mother died, and I no longer had a choice.

I brush the words away and pretend they don't bother me as Matt says, "Hey, listen, I actually came this morning to talk to you about something. Can you sit with me for a sec?"

His smile looks a little frozen, I realize suddenly. I'm surprised I didn't notice it earlier.

"Um . . ." I glance back toward the kitchen. The cinnamon pies need to come out soon, but I have a few minutes before the timer goes off. There's no one else here at this early hour. I shrug. "Yeah, okay, but just for a minute."

I pour myself a cup of coffee—black, my third of the morning—and slide into the chair across from Matt. I lean on the table and brace myself for him to ask me on another date. I'm not sure what to say; focusing on my husband and daughter for all these years has cost me most of the friendships I once had, and selfishly I don't want to lose Matt too. "What's up?"

From the way he pauses before answering, I have the sense that something's wrong. Maybe it's because I've grown accustomed to bad news lately. My mother's cancer. My grandmother's dementia. My husband deciding he no longer wanted to be my husband. So I'm surprised when what Matt says is, "How's Annie?"

I look at him closely, my heart suddenly racing as I wonder whether he knows something I don't. "Why? What happened?"

"I was just wondering," Matt says quickly. "I'm being nice. Making conversation."

"Oh," I say, relieved that he hasn't come as the bearer of some sort of bad news. I wouldn't have been

surprised to hear that my daughter had been caught doing something foolish like shop-lifting or spray painting her middle school. She's been different since her father and I split up: edgy, nervous, and angry. More than once, I've guiltily searched her room, thinking I'd find cigarettes or drugs, but so far, the only evidence the change in my Annie is the massive chip on her shoulder. "Sorry," I tell Matt. "I keep waiting for something else to go wrong."

He averts his eyes. "How about dinner tonight?" he asks. "Me and you. Annie'll be at Rob's again, right?"

I nod. My ex and I share custody equally, an arrangement I'm not happy about, because I think it makes Annie's life less stable. "I don't know, Matt," I say. "I just think—" I search for words that won't hurt. "I think maybe it's too soon, you know? The divorce was so recent, and Annie's really struggling. I think it's better if we just—"

"It's just dinner, Hope," Matt interrupts me. "I'm not proposing to you."

My cheeks are suddenly on fire. "Of course not," I mumble.

He laughs and reaches for my hands. "Relax, Hope." When I hesitate, he smiles slightly and adds, "You have to eat. How 'bout it?"

"Yeah, okay," I say, and it's at that moment that the front door of the bakery swings open, and Annie comes in, her backpack slung over her shoulder, her dark sunglasses on, even though dawn hasn't yet broken. She stops and stares at us for a moment, and I know instantly what she's thinking. I pull my hands away from Matt, but it's too late.

"Great," she says. She rips her sunglasses off and tosses her long, wavy, dishwater-blonde hair over her shoulder, fixing us with a glare that makes her deep gray eyes even stormier than usual. "Were you going to leave, like, start making out if I didn't get here?"

"Annie," I say, standing up. "It's not what it looks like."

"Whatever," she mutters. Her new favorite word.

"Don't be rude to Matt," I say.

"*Whatever*," she repeats, rolling her eyes for emphasis this time. "I'll be in the back. So you can, like, get back to doing whatever it is you're doing."

I look after her helplessly as she charges through the double doors to the kitchen. I hear her throw her backpack onto the counter, the weight of it rattling the stainless steel bowls I keep stacked there, and I wince.

"Sorry," I say, turning back to Matt. He's staring in the direction Annie disappeared.

"She's really something," he says.

I force a laugh. "Kids."

"Frankly, I don't know how you put up with it," he says.

I smile tightly at him. I'm allowed to feel annoyed with my daughter, but he's not. "She's just going through a hard time," I say. I stand up and glance toward the kitchen. "The divorce has been tough on her. And you remember seventh grade. It's not exactly the easiest year."

Matt stands up too. "But the way you let her talk to you . . ."

Something in my stomach tightens. "Good-bye, Matt," I say through a jaw clenched so tightly it hurts. Before he can reply, I turn away, heading for the kitchen, hoping that he takes the hint to leave.



"You can't be rude to customers," I say to Annie as I come through the double doors into the kitchen. Her back is to me, and she's stirring something in a bowl—batter for red velvet cupcakes, I think. For a moment I think she's ignoring me, until I realize she has earbuds in. That damned iPod.

"Hey!" I say, louder. Still no reply, so I walk up behind her and pull the earbud out of her left ear. She jumps and whirls around, eyes blazing, as if I've slapped her.

“God, Mom, what’s your problem?” she demands.

~~I’m taken aback by the anger in her face, and for a moment, I’m frozen, because I can still see the sweet little girl who used to crawl onto my lap and listen to Mamie’s fairy tales, the girl who came to me for comfort after every skinned knee, the girl who made me Play-Doh jewelry and insisted I wear it to Stop & Shop. She’s still in there somewhere, but she’s hiding behind this icy veneer. When did things change? I want to tell her I love her, and that I wish we didn’t have to argue like this, but instead, I hear myself coolly say, “Didn’t I tell you not to wear makeup to school, Annie?”~~

She narrows her overly mascaraed eyes at me and purses her too-red lips into a smirk. “*Dad* said it was fine.”

I mentally curse Rob. He seems to have made it his personal mission to undermine everything I say.

“Well, *I’m* telling you it’s not,” I say firmly. “So get in the bathroom and wipe it off.”

“No,” Annie says. She puts her hands on her hips defiantly. She glares at me, not yet realizing that she’s streaked red velvet batter on her jeans. I’m sure that’ll be my fault too when she figures it out.

“This isn’t up for debate, Annie,” I say. “Do it now, or you’re grounded.”

I hear the coldness in my voice, and it reminds me of my mother. For a minute, I hate myself, but I stare Annie down, unblinking.

She looks away first. “Whatever!” She rips her apron off and throws it on the floor. “I shouldn’t even be working here!” she yells, throwing her hands in the air. “It’s against child labor laws!”

I roll my eyes. We’ve had this discussion ten thousand times. She’s not technically working for a paycheck, this is our family business, and I expect her to help out, just like I helped my mom when I was a kid, just like my mom helped my grandmother. “I’m not explaining this to you again, Annie,” I say tightly. “Would you rather mow the lawn and do all the chores around the house?”

She stalks out, presumably heading for the bathroom on the other side of the double doors. “I hate you!” she yells back at me as she disappears.

The words hit me like a dagger to the heart, even though I remember screaming them at my own mother when I was Annie’s age.

“Yeah,” I mutter, picking up the bowl of batter and the wooden spoon she left on the counter. “What else is new?”



By seven thirty, when Annie is about to leave to walk the four blocks to Sea Breeze Junior High, all of the pastries are out and the shop is full of regulars. In the oven is a fresh batch of our Rose’s Strudel, filled with apples, almonds, raisins, candied orange peel, and cinnamon, and the scent is wafting comfortably through the bakery. Kay Sullivan and Barbara Koontz, the two eightysomething widows who live across the street, are gazing out the window, deep in conversation, while they sip coffee at the table closest to the door. Gavin Keyes, whom I’d hired to help me make my mother’s house livable again over the summer, is at the table beside them, sipping coffee, eating an éclair and reading a copy of the *Cape Cod Times*. Derek Walls, a widowed dad who lives on the beach, is here with his twin four-year-olds, Jay and Merri, each of whom is licking the icing off a vanilla cupcake, even though it’s only breakfast time. And Emma Thomas, the fiftysomething hospice nurse who’d tended to my mom while she was dying, is standing at the counter, trying to choose a pastry to have with her tea.

I’m just about to pack up a to-go blueberry muffin for Emma when Annie strides past me, her coat on and her backpack slung over one shoulder. I reach out and grab her arm before she can get by.

“Let me see your face,” I say.

“No,” she mumbles, looking down.

“Annie!”

~~“Whatever,” she mutters. She looks up, and I see that she’s put on a fresh coat of mascara and reapplied the hideous lipstick. She also appears to have added a layer of fuchsia blush that comes nowhere near the apples of her cheeks.~~

“Wipe it off, Annie,” I say. “Now. And leave the makeup here.”

“You can’t take it from me,” she retorts. “I bought it with my own money.”

I glance around and realize that the shop has fallen silent, except for Jay and Merri chattering in the corner. Gavin’s looking at me with concern, and the old ladies near the door are just staring. I feel suddenly embarrassed. I know I already seem like the town failure for letting my marriage to Rob end; everyone thinks he’s perfect and I was lucky to marry him in the first place. Now I appear to be a failure at parenting too.

“Annie,” I say through gritted teeth. “Do it now. And this time, you *are* grounded, for disobeying me.”

“I’m staying with Dad for the next few days,” she shoots back, smirking at me. “You can’t ground me. Remember? You don’t live there anymore.”

I swallow hard. I won’t let her know that her words have hurt me. “Fantastic,” I say brightly. “You’re grounded from the moment you step into *my* house.”

She curses under her breath, glances around, and seems to realize that everyone’s looking at her. “Whatever,” she mutters as she heads for the bathroom.

I exhale and turn back to Emma. “I’m sorry,” I say. I realize my hands are shaking as I reach for her pastry again.

“Honey, I raised three girls,” she says. “Don’t worry. It gets better.”

She pays and leaves, then I watch as Mrs. Koontz and Mrs. Sullivan, who have been coming here since the bakery opened sixty years ago, get up and hobble out the door, each of them using a cane. Derek and the twins are getting ready to go too, so I come out from behind the counter to pick up their plates. I help button Merri’s jacket, while Derek zips Jay’s. Merri thanks me for the cupcake, and I wave as they leave.

Annie emerges from the bathroom a minute later, her face blissfully makeup free. She slams a mascara tube, a lipstick, and a pot of blush down on one of the tables and glowers at me. “There. Happy?” she asks.

“Overjoyed,” I say dryly.

She stands there for a moment, looking like she wants to say something. I’m steeling myself for some sort of sarcastic insult, so I’m surprised when all she says is, “Who’s Leona, anyway?”

“Leona?” I search my memory but come up empty. “I don’t know. Why? Where’d you hear that name?”

“Mamie,” she says. “She keeps, like, calling me that. And it seems to, like, make her real sad.”

I’m startled. “You’ve been going to see Mamie?” After my mother died two years ago, we’d had to move my grandmother into a memory care home; her dementia had rapidly taken a turn for the worse.

“Yeah,” Annie says. “So?”

“I . . . I just didn’t know you were doing that.”

“Someone has to,” she spits back.

I’m sure the guilt plays across my face, because Annie looks triumphant.

“I’m busy with the bakery, Annie,” I say.

“Yeah, well, *I* find the time,” she says. “Maybe if you were spending less time with Matt Hines, you could spend more time with Mamie.”

“*Nothing* is going on with Matt.” I’m suddenly acutely conscious of Gavin sitting a few feet away, and I can feel my cheeks turning warm. The last thing I need is the whole town knowing my business. Or lack of business, as the case may be.

“Whatever,” Annie says, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, at least Mamie loves me. She tells me all the time.”

She smirks at me, and I know that I’m supposed to say *Honey, I love you too*, or *Your dad and I love you*

*very much*, or something along those lines. Isn't that what a good mother would do? Instead, because I'm a horrible mother, what comes out of my mouth is "Yeah? Well, it sounds to me like she's saying 'I love you' to someone named Leona."

Annie's jaw drops, and she stares at me for a minute. I want to reach out, pull her into a hug and say I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. But before I have a chance, she whirls on her heel and strides out of the store, but not before I see the tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. She doesn't look back.

My heart aches as I stare in the direction she disappeared. I sink into one of the chairs the twins vacated a few minutes earlier and put my head in my hands. I'm failing at everything, but most of all at connecting with the people I love.

I don't realize Gavin Keyes is standing above me until I feel his hand on my shoulder. I jerk my head up, startled, and find myself staring directly at a small hole in the thigh of his faded jeans. For an instant, I have the strangest urge to offer to mend it, but that's ridiculous; I'm no better at using a needle and thread than I am at being a mother or staying married. I shake my head and pull my eyes upward, over his blue plaid flannel shirt to his face, which is marked by a thick shadow of dark stubble across his strong jaw. His thick shock of dark hair looks like it hasn't been combed in days, but instead of making him look unkempt, it makes him look really good in a way that makes me uneasy. His dimples, as he smiles gently at me, remind me just how young he is. Twenty-eight, I think, or maybe twenty-nine. I feel suddenly ancient, although I'm only seven or eight years older. What would it be like to be that young, with no real responsibilities, no preteen daughter who hates you, no failing business to save?

"Don't beat yourself up," he says. He pats me on the back and clears his throat. "She loves you, Hope. You're a good mom."

"Yeah, uh, thanks," I say, avoiding his eye. Sure, we'd seen each other nearly every day during the month he was working on my house, and when I returned home from work in the afternoons, I often fixed lemonade and sat on the porch with him, doing my best to avoid looking at the tanned swell of his biceps. But he doesn't *know* me. Not really. Certainly not well enough to judge me as a mother. If he knew me that well, he'd know what a failure I am.

He pats me awkwardly again. "I mean it," he says.

Then he too is gone, leaving me all alone in my giant pink cupcake, which suddenly feels very bitter.

## Chapter Two

---

I close the bakery early that day to run a few errands. Although the sun hasn't set yet when I get home at six fifteen, it feels dark and depressing inside the cottage I'm trying hard to think of as my own.

The silence inside is deafening. Up until last year, when Rob surprised me just before Christmas by announcing he wanted a divorce, I'd looked forward to coming home. I was proud of the life we'd made together in the solid, whitewashed Victorian overlooking Cape Cod Bay, just east of the public beach. I painted the interior myself, retiled the kitchen and hall, installed hardwood floors upstairs and in the living room, and planted a garden dominated by blue hydrangeas and pink salt spray roses that looked crisp and beautiful against the sail-white clapboard.

And then, just as I was finally done with everything, finally ready to relax in the dream home, Rob sat me down and announced in a soft voice, without meeting my eyes, that he too was done. Done with our marriage, done with me.

In the space of three months, while still reeling from my mother's death from breast cancer and the decision to put Mamie in a memory care home, I found myself moving back to my mother's place, which I hadn't been able to sell anyhow. A few months later, exhausted and discouraged, I'd signed all the divorce papers, eager only to have it all over and done with.

The truth was, I felt numb, and for the first time, I understood something I'd wondered about my entire life: how my mother had always been able to stay so cold about the men in her life. I'd never known my father, she'd never even told me his name. As she once crisply explained to me, "He left. A long time ago. Never knew you existed. He made his choice." And when I was growing up, she always had boyfriends whom she would spend all her time with, but she never let them get close. Not really. That way, when they'd ultimately leave her, she'd just shrug and say, "We're better off without him, Hope. You know that."

I always used to think she was heartless, even though I admit now that I'd looked forward to those brief periods of time between boyfriends, when I'd have my mom to myself for a few weeks. Now I wish I'd understood sooner, in time to discuss it with her. *I finally get it, Mom. If you don't let them in, if you don't really love them in the first place, they can't hurt you when they leave.* But like so many other things in my life, it's too late for that.

By the time I shower, washing the flour and sugar out of my hair and off my skin, it's a few minutes before seven. I know I should probably call Annie at Rob's and apologize for the way we left things earlier, but I can't bring myself to do it. Besides, she's probably doing something fun with him, and my call would only ruin it for her. Regardless of how I feel about Rob, I have to admit that he's good with Annie most of the time. He seems to get through to her in a way I haven't been able to in a long time. I hate that watching them laughing conspiratorially with each other sometimes makes me jealous first, happy for Annie second. It's like they're forming a new family portrait, and it no longer includes me.

After throwing on a gray cable-knit sweater and slim black jeans, I stare at myself in the mirror as I brush out my shoulder-length dark brown waves, which, blissfully, haven't started to turn gray yet, although they soon will if Annie keeps up this behavior. I search my own face for Annie's features, but as usual, I come up empty. Oddly, she doesn't look a thing like Rob or me, which led him to ask me once, when she was three, "Are you absolutely sure she's mine, Hope?" His words had cut me to the core. "Of course," I'd whispered through tears in my eyes, and he'd left it at that. Unless you counted her skin, which tanned evenly and beautifully just like Rob's, there was virtually nothing of her tall, brown-haired, blue-eyed father in her.

I examine my features as I put on a coat of nude lipstick and swipe some mascara onto my pale lashes.

While Annie's eyes are an uneven gray, just like Mamie's, mine are an unusual sea green flecked with gold. When I was younger, Mamie used to tell me that her looks—everything but the eyes—had skipped a generation and settled on me. While my mother's dark brown, straight hair and brown eyes made her resemble my grandfather, I look like a near carbon copy of some of the old photos I've seen of Mamie. Her eyes, I used to think, were always sad in old photos, and now that mine carry in them the weight of living, we look more alike than ever. My sharply bowed lips—"like an angel's harp," as Mamie used to say—are just like hers were in her younger days, and somehow, I'm fortunate enough to have inherited her milk complexion, although in the last year, I've developed an unfamiliar vertical line between my eyebrows that makes me look eternally concerned. Then again, these days, I *am* eternally concerned.

The doorbell rings, startling me, and I run my brush through my hair once more, then, on second thought, I run a hand through it to mess it up again. I don't want to look like I've made an effort tonight. I don't want Matt to think this is going anywhere.

A moment later, I open the front door, and when Matt leans in to kiss me, I turn slightly so that his lips land on my right cheek. I can smell the cologne on his neck, musky and dark. He's dressed in crisp khakis, a pale blue button-down with an expensive-looking insignia I don't recognize, and slick brown loafers.

"I can go change," I say. I feel suddenly dowdy, plain.

He looks me up and down and shrugs. "You look pretty in that sweater," he says. "You're fine as you are."

He takes me to Fratanelli's, an upscale Italian place on the marsh. I try to ignore it when the maître gives my outfit a not-so-subtle once-over before leading us to a candlelit table by the window.

"This is too nice, Matt," I say once we're alone. I glance out the window into the darkness, and as I do, I catch our reflection in the glass. We look like a couple, a nice one, and that thought makes me look quick to get away.

"I know you like this place," Matt says. "Remember? It's where we went before senior prom."

I laugh and shake my head. "I'd forgotten." I've forgotten lots of things, actually. I've tried for a long time to outrun the past, but what does it say about me that nearly twenty years later, I'm sitting in the same dining room with the same guy? Apparently, one's history can only vanish for so long. I shake the thought off and look at Matt. "You said you wanted to talk about something."

He looks down at his menu. "Let's order first."

We choose our meals in silence; Matt picks the lobster, and I choose the spaghetti Bolognese, the least expensive item on the menu. Later, I'll offer to pay for my own dinner, and if Matt refuses, I don't want to cost him a fortune. I don't want to feel obligated to him. After we've ordered, Matt takes a deep breath and looks at me. He's about to speak, but I cut him off before he can embarrass himself.

"Matt, you know I think the world of you," I begin.

"Hope—" He cuts me off, but I hold up a hand.

"Let me finish," I blurt out, gaining speed as I go. "I know we have so much in common, and of course we have all this history together, which means a lot to me, but what I was trying to tell you this afternoon was that I don't think I'm ready to date anyone right now. I don't think I will be until Annie goes off to college and that's a really long time from now."

"Hope—"

I ignore him, because I need to get the words out. "Matt, it's not you; I swear. But for now, if we could just be friends, that would be so much better, I think. I don't know what will happen down the line, but right now Annie needs me focused on her, and—"

"Hope, this isn't about me and you," Matt interrupts. "This is about the bakery, and your loan. Would you let me talk?"

I stare at him as the waiter brings us a basket of bread and a little plate of olive oil. Red wine is poured for

each of us—an expensive cabernet Matt selected without consulting me—and then the waiter disappears and Matt and I are alone again.

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“What about my bakery?” I ask slowly.

“I have some bad news,” he says. He avoids my gaze, swirls a piece of bread in the olive oil, and takes a bite.

“Okay . . .” I prompt. It feels as if all the air is vanishing from the room.

“Your loan,” he says, his mouth full. “The bank is calling it in.”

My heart stops. “What?” I stare at him. “Since when?”

Matt looks down. “Since yesterday. Hope, you’ve been late on several payments, and with the market as it is, the bank has been forced to call in a number of loans with irregular payment records. I’m afraid yours was one of them.”

I take a deep breath. This can’t be happening. “But I’ve made every payment this year so far. Yeah, I had some rough months a few years ago when the economy collapsed, but we’re a tourist town.”

“I know.”

“Who didn’t have problems then?”

“A lot of people did,” Matt agrees. “Unfortunately, you were among them. And with your credit score . . .”

I close my eyes for a moment. I don’t even want to think about my credit score. It wasn’t exactly helped by my divorce, taking over my mother’s mortgage payment after her death, or juggling a large revolving balance between several credit cards just to keep the bakery stocked.

“What can I do to fix this?” I finally ask.

“Not a lot, I’m afraid,” Matt says. “You can try other lenders, of course, but the market’s tough right now and can’t guarantee that you won’t get anywhere with another bank. And with your payment history and the fact that a Bingham’s just opened down the street . . .”

“Bingham’s,” I mutter. “Of course.” They’ve been the bane of my existence for the past year. A small New England doughnut chain based in Rhode Island, they’ve been steadily expanding across the region in an attempt to go head-to-head with Dunkin’ Donuts. They opened their sixteenth regional location a half mile from my bakery nine months ago, just when I was climbing out of the financial hole I’d found myself in after the recession.

It was a storm I could have weathered if not for the financial impact of the divorce. But now I’m hanging on for dear life, and Matt knows it; all my loans are with his bank.

“Listen, there’s one option I can think of for you,” Matt says. He takes a long sip of his wine and leans forward. “There are a few investors I work with in New York. They’re always looking for small businesses . . . help out. I can call in a favor.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. I’m not sure I like the idea of having strangers invest in what has always been my family business. Nor do I like the thought of Matt calling in favors on my behalf. But I’m also aware that the alternative may be losing the bakery altogether. “How would that work, exactly?”

“They’d basically buy you out,” he says. “So they’d assume the loan with the bank. You’d get a cash payout, enough to pay off some of the bills you’re facing right now. And you’d stay on to manage the bakery and run the day-to-day operations. *If* they go for it.”

I stare at him. “You’re telling me that my only option is to entirely sell my family’s bakery to some stranger?”

Matt shrugs. “I know it’s not ideal. But it would solve your financial problems in the short term. And with some luck, I could persuade them to let you stay on as the bakery’s manager.”

“But it’s my family’s bakery,” I say in a small voice, aware that I’m repeating myself.

Matt looks away. “Hope, I don’t know what else to tell you. This is pretty much your last option unless you

have a half million dollars lying around. And with the debt you're in, it's not like you can just pick up and start over in another location."

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I can't formulate words. After a moment, Matt jumps back in and adds, "Look, these are good people. I've known them for a while. They'll do right by you. At least you won't wind up closed."

I feel like Matt has just dropped a grenade in my lap, pulled the pin, and then offered to clean up the carnage, all with a smile on his face. "I need to think about this," I say dully.

"Hope," Matt says. He pushes his wineglass aside and reaches across the table. He folds his hands around my much smaller ones in a gesture I know is supposed to tell me I'm safe. "We'll figure it out, okay? I'll help you."

"I don't need your help," I mumble. He looks wounded, and I feel terrible, so I don't pull my hands away. I know he's just trying to be a nice guy. The thing is, it feels like charity. And I don't need charity. I may sink. I may swim, but I'd at least like to do it on my own.

Before either of us can say anything else, I hear my phone ringing from inside my purse. Embarrassed, I pull my hands away and grab for it. I hadn't meant to leave the ringer on. I can see the maître d' glaring at me from across the restaurant as I answer.

"Mom?" It's Annie, and she sounds upset.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" I ask, already half standing up, ready to go to her rescue, wherever she is.

"Where are you?"

"I'm out at dinner, Annie," I say. I avoid mentioning Matt, lest she think it's a date. "Where are you? Aren't you at your dad's?"

"Dad had to go meet a client," she mumbles. "So he dropped me back at your house. And the dishwasher is, like, totally broken."

I close my eyes. I'd filled it with detergent and turned it on a half hour before Matt got there, assuming that the cycle would be nearly over by the time I left. "What happened?"

"I didn't do it," Annie says quickly. "But there's, like, water all over the floor. I mean like lots of inches. Like a flood or something."

My heart drops. A pipe must have burst. I can't even imagine how much it will cost to fix, or how much damage has been done to my old hardwood floors. "Okay," I say in an even tone. "Thanks for letting me know, honey. I'll be right home."

"But how can I stop the water?" she asks. "It's, like, still totally flowing. The whole house is going to be flooded."

I realize I have no idea how to shut off the water to the kitchen. "Let me try to figure it out, okay? I'll call you back. I'm on my way home."

"Whatever," Annie says, and hangs up on me.

I tell Matt what happened, and he sighs and summons the waiter to ask for our meals to be boxed up.

"I'm sorry," I say as we hurry outside to the car five minutes later. "My life is one disaster after another lately."

Matt just shakes his head. "Things happen," he says tightly. It's not until we're driving back toward my house that he speaks again. "You can't put this business thing off, Hope," he says. "Or it's all going to go away. Everything your family's worked for."

I don't reply, both because I know he's right and because I can't deal with it right now. Instead, I ask him whether he knows how to turn off the water supply to the kitchen, but he says he doesn't, so we ride in silence the remainder of the way home.

"Whose Jeep is that?" Matt asks as he pulls up in front of my house. "There's no room for me to park in your driveway."

“Gavin’s,” I say softly. His familiar dusty-blue Wrangler is parked beside my old Corolla. My heart sinks.

“Gavin Keyes?” Matt says. “The handyman? What’s he doing here?”

“Annie must have called him,” I say through gritted teeth. My daughter doesn’t know that I still haven’t paid Gavin in full for the work he did around my house over the summer. Not even close. She doesn’t know that one July afternoon on the porch with him, after getting a statement from the bank, I’d broken down in embarrassing tears, and that a month later, when he’d finished his repairs around my house, he’d insisted on letting me pay him in free pastries and coffee from the bakery for the time being. Annie doesn’t know that he’s the only person in town other than Matt who knows what a mess my life is, or that because of that, he’s the last person in the world I want to see right now.

I walk inside, with Matt a few steps behind, carrying my meal from Fratanelli’s. In the kitchen, I find Annie with a stack of towels and Gavin bent over with his head under my sink. I blink when I realize my eyes have gone directly to the thigh of his jeans, to see whether the hole I’d noticed this morning is still there. It is, of course.

“Gavin,” I say, and he starts, pushes back from the sink, and stands up. His eyes dart back and forth between Matt and me, and he scratches his head as Matt moves past him to put my food in the refrigerator.

“Hey,” Gavin says. He glances at Matt again and then back at me. “I came right over when Annie called and got your water turned off for now. Looks like the pipe that burst is in the wall, behind the dishwasher. I’ll come over and fix it for you the day after tomorrow, if you don’t mind waiting.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say softly. I make eye contact with him, hoping that he knows what I’m trying to say: that I still can’t pay him.

But he just smiles and goes on as if he hasn’t heard me. “Tomorrow’s packed, but the next day, I’m wide open,” he says. “I just have a small job over at the Foley place in the morning. Besides, this shouldn’t take too long to fix. It’s just a pipe repair, and you should be good as new.” His eyes dart to Matt again and then back to me. “Listen, I’ve got a wet-vac in the Jeep. Let me go grab it, and I’ll help you get some of this water up. We can see if it did any damage once the floors are dry.”

I glance at Annie, who’s still standing there with a huge pile of towels in her hand. “We can clean all this up ourselves,” I tell Gavin. “You don’t have to stay. Right?” I add, looking at Annie and then at Matt.

“I guess,” Annie says with a shrug.

Matt looks away. “Actually, Hope, I’ve got an early morning tomorrow. I’m going to have to head home.”

Gavin snorts and walks outside without saying another word. I ignore him. “Oh,” I say to Matt. “Of course. Thanks for dinner.”

By the time I walk Matt to the door, Gavin’s reentering with his wet-vac.

“I said you didn’t have to do that,” I mumble.

“I know what you said,” Gavin says, without slowing down to look at me. A moment later, as I watch Matt’s shiny Lexus pull away from the curb, I hear Gavin’s vacuum turn on in the kitchen. I close my eyes for a minute, and then I turn and begin walking back toward the one mess in my life that can actually be fixed.



The next evening, Annie’s at Rob’s house again, and as I mop up the remainder of the mess in the kitchen after work, I find myself thinking of Mamie, who always used to know how to fix disasters. It’s been two weeks since I last visited her, I realize. *I should be a better granddaughter*, I think with a swell of guilt. *I should be a better person*. Yet one more area in which I seem to be eternally falling short.

With a lump in my throat, I finish mopping, put some lipstick on in the hall mirror, and grab my keys. Annie’s right; I need to go see my grandmother. Visiting Mamie always makes me want to cry, because although the home she’s in is cheerful and friendly, it’s terrible to see her slipping away. It’s like standing on

the deck of a boat, watching the waves suck someone under, and knowing that there's no life preserver to throw in.

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Fifteen minutes later, I'm walking through the doors of Mamie's assisted living facility, a huge home that's painted buttercream yellow and filled with pictures of flowers and woodland creatures. The top floor is the memory care unit, where visitors are required to enter a pass code on a digital pad at the door.

I walk down the hallway toward Mamie's room, which sits at the far end of the west wing. The resident rooms are all private and apartment-style, although they eat all their meals in the dining room, and staff members all have master keys so that they can check on residents and give them their daily medication. Mamie's on an antidepressant, two heart medications, and an experimental drug for Alzheimer's that doesn't seem to be helping; I meet with the staff doctor once a month to get a status report. He said at our last meeting that her mental faculties have been going sharply downhill in the last few months.

"The worst part is," he'd said, looking over his glasses at me, "she's lucid enough to know it. This is one of the hardest stages to watch; she knows her memory will be all but gone soon, which is very unsettling and sad for patients in this state."

I swallow back a lump as I ring the doorbell beside her name: *Rose McKenna*. I can hear her shuffling around inside, probably getting up from her recliner with some effort, moving toward the door with the cane she's been using since she fell and broke her hip two years ago.

The door opens, and I resist the urge to throw myself into her arms for a hug, the way I used to do when I was a little girl. Up until this moment, I'd thought I'd come here for her, but now I realize it's for me. I need this. I need to see someone who loves me, even if it's an imperfect love.

"Hello," Mamie says, smiling at me. Her hair looks whiter than the last time I saw her, the lines in her face deeper. But as always, she's wearing her burgundy lipstick, and her eyes are rimmed in kohl and mascara. "What a surprise, dear."

Her words are tinged with the hint of a French accent that has all but disappeared. She's been in the United States since the early 1940s, but the traces of her long-ago past still shroud her words like one of the feather-light French scarves she almost always has wrapped around her neck.

I reach forward to hug her. When I was younger, she was solid and strong. Now, as she leans into the embrace, I can feel the bones of her spine, the sharpness of her shoulders.

"Hi, Mamie," I say softly, blinking back tears as I pull away.

She stares at me through gray eyes that are clouded over. "You will have to forgive me," she says. "I get a little forgetful sometimes. Which one are you, dear? I know I should remember."

I swallow hard. "I'm Hope, Mamie. Your granddaughter."

"Of course." She smiles at me, but her gray eyes are foggy. "I knew that. I just need a reminder sometimes. Please, come in."

I follow her inside her dimly lit apartment, where she leads me to the living room window.

"I was just watching the sunset, my dear," she says. "In a moment, we'll be able to see the evening star."

## *North Star Vanilla Cupcakes*

### CUPCAKES

#### INGREDIENTS

*1 cup unsalted butter, room temperature*

*1 1/2 cups granulated sugar*

*4 large eggs*

*1 tsp. pure vanilla extract*

*3 cups flour*

*3 tsp. baking powder*

*1/2 tsp. salt*

*1/2 cup milk*

#### DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line 24 muffin cups with paper liners.
2. In a large bowl, cream together butter and sugar using electric mixer. Beat until light and fluffy, then beat in eggs one at a time. Beat in vanilla extract and mix well.
3. Sift together flour, baking powder and salt, and add to the butter mixture, about a cup at a time, alternating with milk.
4. Fill muffin cups about halfway. Bake for 15–20 minutes, or just until a knife inserted through the top of a cupcake comes out clean. Cool for 10 minutes in pan, then move to wire rack to cool completely.
5. Wait until they've cooled completely, then frost with pink icing (recipe below).

### PINK ICING

#### INGREDIENTS

*1 cup unsalted butter, slightly softened*

*4 cups confectioners' sugar*

*1/2 tsp. vanilla extract*

*1 tsp. milk*

*1–3 drops red food coloring*

#### DIRECTIONS

1. Beat the butter in a medium bowl with an electric mixer until light and fluffy.
2. Gradually add the sugar and beat until well blended.

3. Add the vanilla and milk and continue to beat until well blended.

4. Add one drop of red food coloring and beat well to incorporate. If you'd like the icing to be a deeper pink, add one or two drops more, and beat after each drop to incorporate. Spread on cupcakes, as directed above.



## Rose

Rose gazed out the window, searching, as she always did, for the first star on the horizon. She knew it would appear, as twinkling and brilliant as an eternal flame, just after the setting sun painted the sky in ribbons of fire and light. When she was a girl, they'd called this twilight *l'heure bleue*, the blue hour, the time when the earth was neither completely light nor completely dark. Rose had always found comfort in this middle ground.

The evening star, which appeared each night during the deep velvet twilight, had always been her favorite, although it wasn't a star at all; it was the planet Venus, the planet named after the goddess of love. She had learned that long ago, but it hadn't changed anything, not really; here on earth, it was hard to tell what was a star and what wasn't. For years, she had counted all the stars she could see in the night sky. She was always searching for something, but she hadn't found it yet. She didn't deserve to, she knew, and that made her sad. A lot of things made her sad these days. But sometimes, from one day to the next, she couldn't remember what she was crying for.

*Alzheimer's*. She knew she had it. She heard the whispers in the halls. She had watched her neighbors in the home come and go, their memories slipping further with each passing day. She knew that the same thing was happening to her, and it scared her for reasons no one would understand. She dared not speak them aloud. It was too late.

Rose knew that the girl with the glistening brown hair, the familiar features, and the beautifully sad eyes had just told her who she was, but she had already forgotten. A familiar panic rose in her throat. She wished she could grab the memories like lifelines and hold on before she went under. But she found them slippery and impossible to grasp. So she cleared her throat, forced a smile, and hazarded her best guess.

"Josephine, dear, look for the star on the horizon," she said. She pointed to the empty space where she knew the evening star would make its appearance, any second now. She hoped she had guessed right. She hadn't seen Josephine in a long time. Or maybe she had. It was impossible to know.

The girl with the sad eyes cleared her throat. "No, Mamie, I'm Hope," she said. "Josephine isn't here."

"Yes, of course, I know that," Rose said quickly. "I must have misspoken." She couldn't let them know, any of them, that she was losing her memory. It was shameful, wasn't it? It was as if she didn't care enough to hold on, and that embarrassed her, because nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps if she pretended a little longer, the clouds would go away, and her memories would return from wherever they'd been hiding.

"It's okay, Mamie," said the girl, who looked far too old to be Hope, her only granddaughter, who couldn't be more than thirteen or fourteen. Yet Rose could see the lines of worry etched around this girl's eyes, far too many lines for a girl that age. She wondered what was weighing on her. Maybe Hope's mother would know what was wrong. Maybe then, Rose would be able to help her. She wanted to help Hope. She just didn't know how.

"Where is your mother?" Rose asked Hope politely. "Is she coming, dear?"

Rose had so many things she wanted to say to Josephine, so many apologies to make. And she feared time

was running out. Where would she begin? Would she apologize first for her many failures? For her coldness? For teaching her all the wrong lessons without meaning to? Rose knew she'd had many opportunities to say she was sorry in the past, but the words always caught in her throat. Perhaps it was time to force herself to say them, to make Josephine hear her before it was too late.

"Mamie?" Hope said tentatively. Rose smiled at her gently. She knew Hope would grow up one day to be a strong, kind person. Josephine was that type of woman too, but her character was cloaked in so many layers of defenses, spawned by Rose's mistakes, that it was hard to tell.

"Yes, dear?" Rose asked, for Hope had stopped speaking. Rose suddenly had an inkling of a feeling that she knew exactly what Hope was about to say. She wished she could stop her before the words did the damage. But it was too late. It was always too late.

"My mom—Josephine—died," Hope said gently. "Two years ago, Mamie. Don't you remember?"

"My daughter?" Rose asked, sadness crashing over her like a wave. "My Josephine?" The truth came rolling in with the tide, and for a moment, Rose couldn't catch her breath. She wondered at the tricks of the mind that washed away the unhappy memories, carrying them out to sea.

But some memories, Rose knew, couldn't be erased, even when one has spent a lifetime trying to pretend they are not there.

"I'm sorry, Mamie," Hope said. "Did you forget?"

"No, no," Rose said quickly. "Of course not." Hope looked away and Rose stared at her. The girl reminded her for an instant of something, or someone, but before she could grasp the thought, it fluttered away, just out of reach, like a butterfly. "How could I forget such a thing?" Rose added softly.

They sat in silence for a while, staring out the window. The evening star was out now, and soon after, Rose could see the stars of the Big Dipper, which her father had once told her was the saucepan of God. As her father had once taught her to do, Rose followed the line of the star called Merak to the star called Dubhe and found Polaris, the North Star, who was just beginning to open his sleepy eye for her in the endless sky. She knew the names of so many stars, and the ones she didn't she had named herself, after people she had loved long ago.

How strange, she thought, that she couldn't hold on to the simplest of facts, but the celestial names were written on her memory forever. She'd studied them secretly over so many years, hoping that one day they might provide a pathway home. But she was still here on earth, wasn't she? And the stars were just as far away as ever.

"Mamie?" Hope asked after a while, breaking the silence.

Rose turned to her and smiled at the word. She remembered her own *mamie* fondly, a woman who had always seemed so glamorous to her, a woman whose trademarks were red lipstick, high cheekbones, and a smart, dark bob that had gone out of style in the 1920s. But then she remembered what had happened to her own *mamie*, and the smile faded. She blinked a few times and returned to the present. "Yes, dear?" Rose asked.

"Who is Leona?"

The words stole Rose's breath for a moment, for it was a name she hadn't spoken in nearly seventy years. Why would she? She did not believe in resurrecting ghosts.

"No one," Rose finally replied. But that was, of course, a lie. Leona *was* someone. They all were. Even denying them once again, she knew she was weaving the tapestry of deceit a little tighter. She wondered whether one day it would be tight enough to suffocate her.

"But Annie says you've been calling her Leona," Hope persisted.

"No, she is wrong," Rose told her instantly. "There is no Leona."

"But—"

"How is Annie?" Rose asked, changing the subject. Annie, she could remember clearly. Annie was the third

generation of American in her family. First Josephine. Then Hope. Now the little one, Annie, the dawn of Rose's twilight. Rose was proud of very few things in her life. But this, this she was proud of.

"She's fine," Hope replied, but Rose noticed that the line of Hope's mouth was set a bit unnaturally. "She's been spending a lot of time with her dad lately. They spent the whole summer going to Cape League games."

Rose searched her memory. "What sort of league?"

"Baseball. Summer league. Like the games Grandpa used to take me to when I was a kid."

"Well, that sounds nice, dear," Rose said. "Do you go with them?"

"No, Mamie," Hope said gently. "Annie's father and I are divorced."

"Of course," Rose murmured. She studied Hope's face when the girl looked down, and she could see in her features the same kind of sadness she saw every time she looked at herself in the mirror. What was she sad about? "Do you still love him?" she ventured.

Hope looked up sharply, and Rose felt terrible when she realized that it probably was the wrong thing to have asked. She forgot, sometimes, what was polite and what was not.

"No," Hope murmured finally. She didn't meet Rose's eye as she added, "I don't think I ever did. That's a terrible thing to say, isn't it? I think there's something wrong with me."

Rose felt a lump in her throat. So then, the burden had been passed to Hope too. She knew that now. Her own closed heart had repercussions that she had never imagined. She was responsible for all of it. But how could she tell Hope that love did exist, that it had the power to change everything? She couldn't. So instead she cleared her throat and tried to focus on the present.

"There is nothing wrong with you, dear," she told her granddaughter.

Hope glanced at her grandmother and looked away. "But what if there is?" she asked softly.

"You must not blame yourself," Rose said. "Some things are simply not meant to be." Something lurked at the edges of her memory again. She couldn't remember the name of Hope's husband, but she knew she had never liked him much. Had he been unkind to Hope? Or was it just because he always seemed a little too cold, a little too together? "He has been a good father to Annie, has he not?" she added, because she felt she needed to say something good.

"Sure," Hope said tightly. "He's a great father. Buys her anything she wants."

"But that is not love," Rose said tentatively. "Those are just things."

"Right, well," Hope said. She looked suddenly exhausted. Her hair tumbled in front of her face like a sheet, obscuring her expression. In that moment, Rose was sure she saw tears in her granddaughter's eyes, but when Hope looked up again, her achingly familiar eyes were clear.

"Have you gone out with other men, then?" Rose asked after a moment. "After the divorce?" She thought of her own situation, and the way that sometimes you had to move on, even if you'd already given your heart away.

"Of course not." Hope hung her head and avoided Rose's gaze. "I don't want to be like my mother," she mumbled. "Annie comes first. Not random guys."

And then, Rose understood. In a flash, she remembered bits and pieces of her granddaughter's childhood. She remembered how Josephine had searched endlessly for love in all the wrong places, with all the wrong men, when love was right there, in Hope's eyes, all along. She remembered countless nights when Josephine left her daughter with Rose so that she could go out. Hope, who was just a little girl then, would cry herself to sleep while Rose held her tight. Rose remembered the tearstains in her blouses, and the way they always made her feel empty and alone long after Hope had fallen asleep. "You are not your mother, my dear," Rose said gently. Her heart ached, for this—all of this—was her own fault. Who could have known that her decision would reverberate for generations?

Hope cleared her throat, looked away, and changed the subject. "So you're sure you don't know a Leona?"

she asked.

~~Rose blinked a few times as the name pierced another hole in her heart. She pressed her lips together and shook her head. Maybe the lie wasn't as wrong if it wasn't uttered aloud.~~

"Weird," Hope murmured. "Annie was so sure you'd called her that."

"How unusual." Rose wished she could give the girl the answers she sought, but she wasn't ready, for to speak the truth would be to open a floodgate. She could feel the water surging up behind the dam, and she knew it would spill over soon. For now, the rivers, the tides, the floodwaters were still hers, and she sailed them alone.

Hope looked for a moment like she wanted to say something else, but instead, she stood and hugged Rose tightly, promising to return soon. She left without looking back. Rose watched her go, noting that darkness hadn't entirely fallen yet; Hope hadn't even stayed for the entire *heure bleue*. This made Rose sad, although she did not blame the girl. Rose knew that this, like so many other things, was her own fault.

Some time later, after all the stars were out, Rose's favorite nurse, a woman whose skin shone like the *pa au chocolat* Rose used to bring home for her brother David and her sister Danielle so long ago, came to make sure she'd taken her evening doses of medicine.

"Hi, Rose," she said, smiling into her eyes as she poured a small glass of water and opened Rose's pillbox. "Did you have a visitor tonight?"

Rose puzzled this over, trying hard to remember. There was a flash of something, glinting in the background of her memory, but then it was gone. She was certain that she'd watched the sunset alone, as she did every night. "No, dear," Rose told her.

"Are you sure, Rose?" the nurse prodded. She handed Rose her pills in a Dixie cup and watched as Rose swallowed and washed them down. "Amy at the desk downstairs said your granddaughter was here. Hope."

Rose smiled, for she loved Hope, who must be thirteen or fourteen by now. *How quickly time flies*, she thought. *Before I know it, she will be all grown up.* "No," she told the nurse. "There was no one here. But you must meet her one day. She is a very nice girl. Maybe she will come visit with her mother."

The nurse squeezed Rose's arm gently and smiled. "All right, Rose," she said. "All right."

## Chapter Four

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I never intended to come back here, to the bakery, to the Cape, to any of this.

At thirty-six, I wasn't supposed to be the mother of a teenager, the owner of a bakery. When I was in school, I dreamed of moving somewhere far away, traveling the world, becoming a successful attorney.

Then I met Rob, who was in his last year of law school just as I'd started my JD. If I thought the magnetic pull of the Cape was strong, it didn't compare to being pulled into his orbit. When something went wrong with my birth control midway through my first year of law school, and I had to tell him I was pregnant, he proposed the next week. It was, he said, the right thing to do.

We'd decided together that I'd take a year off to have the baby before returning to school. Annie was born that August; Rob got a job with a firm in Boston and suggested I stay home with our daughter for a while longer now that he was making more money. At first, it seemed like a good idea. But after the first year, the gulf between us had opened so wide that I no longer knew how to cross it. My days, filled with diapers, breastfeeding, and *Sesame Street*, held little interest for him, and I was admittedly jealous of him going out into the world each day and doing all the things I'd once dreamed of. Not that I regretted having Annie; I'd never for that way for a second. I just regretted that I'd never had a chance to live the life I'd thought I was supposed to.

When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer for the first time, nine years ago, Rob agreed, after many nights of arguments, to relocate to the Cape, where he'd realized he could set up shop and be one of the only personal injury lawyers in the area. Mamie watched Annie at the bakery during the day while I worked as Rob's legal assistant, which wasn't exactly what I'd dreamed of, but it was close enough. By the time Annie was in first grade, she was frosting cupcakes and fluting piecrusts like a pro. For a few years, the whole arrangement was almost perfect.

Then my mother's cancer returned, Mamie's memory began to ebb at the edges, and there was no one to save the bakery but me. Before I knew what had happened, I had become the keeper of a dream that was mine, and in the meantime, I'd lost my hold on everything I'd ever dreamed of.

It's nearly five in the morning, and dawn is still two hours away. When I was in grade school, Mamie used to tell me that each new morning was like unwrapping a gift from God. This used to confuse me, because she wasn't a big churchgoer. But in the evenings, when my mother and I would visit for dinner, we'd sometimes find her on her knees at the back window, praying softly as the light fell from the sky. "I prefer to have my own relationship with God," she told me once when I'd asked her why she prayed at home instead of at Our Lady of the Cape.

This morning, the smells of flour, yeast, butter, chocolate, and vanilla dance through the kitchen, and I breathe in deeply, relaxing into the familiarity of it all. From the time I was a little girl, these scents had always reminded me of my grandmother, for even when the bakery was closed, even after she'd showered and dressed at home, her hair and her skin still carried the perfume of the kitchen.

As I roll out piecrusts and add more flour to the industrial mixer, my mind isn't on the tasks at hand. I'm thinking about Mamie's words last night as I methodically go through the motions of the morning preparations. Check the timer for the chocolate chip meringues in oven 1. Roll out the dough for the almond rose tarts Matt Hines likes so much. Layer the baklava and slide it into oven 2. Put the softened cream cheese for the lemon-grape cheesecake into my second bowl mixer. Fold the layers of croissant around little squares of dark French chocolate for the *pains au chocolat*. Braid the long ropes of whole wheat challah, sprinkle

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