

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

JASMINE GUILLORY

*New York Times bestselling author
of *The Wedding Date* and *The Proposal**

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Cover,
and*

HOLD ON

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Daisy walked back home from the coffee shop, holding her double-shot oat milk iced mocha. The barista had drawn a little heart on top of it in honor of Valentine's Day, which Daisy thought was a nice touch. She didn't have a Valentine this year, so she was going to treat herself: first, with this coffee, and then she was going to take the afternoon off and do a spa day, and then she'd order in from her favorite restaurant and binge-watch all of her favorite rom-coms.

What she was *not* going to do was get herself pastries from Cook's Bakeshop. Even though they *would* be the perfect treat today. But no. No pastries for her today. Or doughnuts. Or, oh God, one of those little hand pies that were a different flavor every time she went in. Last week, they were nectarine with a hint of bourbon in the filling, and they were incredible. She'd love to have one of those again. But no, no, she wasn't going to do it. The head baker had been too awful to her the last time she'd gone in. She had her pride.

Daisy looked up at the sign outside of the bakery as she approached it. It was a huge, old-fashioned sign that just said BAKESHOP on it; it had been here as long as she could remember, far longer than Cook's. Maybe it was some sort of historic landmark? One of the chains holding the old sign onto the building was broken; she should tell them that when she went inside.

Wait. No. She wasn't going inside, remember?

She should have just gotten herself one of those pink heart-shaped cookies at the coffee shop. Maybe that would take away her temptation to go to the bakery. But the cookies at the coffee shop weren't any good. Not like the bakery, where every single thing she'd ever had made her close her eyes and moan in ecstasy.

She wondered what the flavors of the hand pies were today. What if they had blackberries in them? But no, she was sure they wouldn't have blackberries in them. Last week, when she'd mentioned to the woman behind her in

line that she hoped they'd have blackberry something soon because they were her absolute favorite, the owner and head baker had looked at her and actually growled. He hated her; she was sure of it. Now he'd probably never make anything with blackberries. Maybe he'd even put up a sign saying WE WILL NEVER HAVE BLACKBERRY HAND PIES, just so she'd stop coming in.

Which she planned to do. She wasn't going back there anymore; isn't that what she'd just told herself? At all. Even though they had a different savory croissant every day of the week, and she *thought* today was the day for the country ham and brie croissant, and she loved that croissant possibly more than she loved anything in the world.

Okay, well, maybe she would just look inside as she walked by. Just to see what they had today. Would that be so wrong?

Yes, it would! That growl had been the straw that had broken the camel's back. She'd been going into Cook's Bakeshop since the first day they opened. She'd been thrilled to hear that a bakery was opening up so close to her apartment—it was just a few blocks away—and happy to support a new local, Black-owned business. At first, her walk over there a few times a week, and then her walk home, holding a bag laden with delicious-smelling pastries, had been a bright spot in her work-at-home days. That was, until she realized that the owner hated her.

She had no idea why. Was it that she was too bright and friendly for someone as sour and rude as he was? How could anyone bake such delicious pastries and have that mean of a look on his face all the time? To be fair, bakers did have to get up super early in the morning; she'd probably be pretty irritable if she had to get up that early every day too. But it had to be more than just that. Whenever she walked inside, he would turn to look at her, and the scowl on his face got at least 50 percent scowlier. Yes, yes, some people might say "scowlier" wasn't a word, but only someone who hadn't seen that man scowl would say that.

She could see him now, through the front window of the bakery, his back to her, behind the counter. She couldn't see his face, but he was probably scowling at the wall. Rude jerk that he was.

Rude, depressingly attractive jerk that he was. That was one of the worst things about all of this: not only were all of his baked goods mouthwateringly good but he was also incredibly hot. He had smooth, dark-brown skin and a big, solid build, probably from kneading dough all the time or something. He always wore snug T-shirts under his apron, and okay, fine, it definitely brightened her day when he had to reach up on a high shelf for bread for someone and she got to see those muscles tighten.

Maybe he thought she was too fat to be eating his pastries? She didn't think it was that, because the two women who worked with him in the bakery were her size or bigger. And plus, she'd seen him be really nice to a very sweet and pretty, curvy teenage girl last week who was asking him a ton of questions about his career path to becoming a baker. Daisy had expected him to snap at the teenager and order her out of his bakery, but he'd given her a free pastry and told her to come back after closing time and he'd talk to her for as long as she wanted. So it must be something about Daisy, specifically, that he hated.

The chalkboard sign outside the bakery said that the special croissant of the day was country ham and brie. Oh God, her favorite. Couldn't she just . . .

No, she could not. Didn't she remember when she'd come back to tell them that they'd accidentally given her three pastries instead of two? She went back to the bakery and tried to pay for the third one after she'd realized what had happened, but he'd just barked "Never mind!" at her and turned away. He'd made mistakes like that a bunch more times, but she never bothered to tell him anymore, even though she sort of worried that his bakery must be losing a ton of money if he was messing up that much.

Why was she bothering to worry about him and his stupid bakery? She didn't like him, remember? Because he

hated her, and was always rude to her, and had growled at her the last time she was there! Maybe those extra pastries were because he was trying to fatten her up so he could eat her, like a fairy-tale villain. She wasn't going back to his bakery!

Why was she still standing on the sidewalk, staring at the chalkboard sign outside of the bakery? She should keep walking home!

The sign didn't say what flavor the hand pies were. That's all she wanted to know.

Maybe she'd simply peek through the door, just to see.

Huh, that was weird. There was usually a line out the door, especially at this time of day, but there wasn't today. Maybe it was because today was a weirdly hot and muggy day for the Bay Area, especially in February. Granted, it was only seventy-seven degrees, but it was supposed to get up to eighty-two later, and no one in the Bay Area knew how to deal with weather that hot, other than sitting in front of fans and eating a lot of ice cream. Daisy included herself in this; she planned to get home from this not particularly strenuous walk and drink her iced coffee in front of her fan.

That was another reason she absolutely didn't need to walk into the bakery. She should just walk to the next block and go to the grocery store for some ice cream or Popsicles, then go home and eat them and be happy she had them, and not stupid, delicious pastries made by a stupid, rude, hot man.

Despite all of these many good reasons not to do so, she opened the door to the tiny bakery. Only to be confronted with completely empty bakery cases. It served her right; she'd violated her pledge and walked inside the bakery, and they didn't even have any more baked goods. They always sold out pretty early in the day, but it was only eleven, and she didn't think they usually sold out this early. Granted, she usually came in closer to ten, so maybe that was it?

Oh, *right*. Valentine's Day. There must have been a run on the bakery for pastries and doughnuts and little cakes and

whatever people bought other people for breakfast in bed.

“Closed!” the stupid, hot, rude baker barked without looking up at her. “Sold out!”

Well, that answered her question. She shouldn’t have dragged her heels; she should have just come early.

No! She shouldn’t have come at all, remember? She had to turn around and leave immediately. That way she wouldn’t have to interact with him, and she’d never come back, for real this time.

He looked up just then. Of course.

“Oh,” he said. “It’s you.”

That’s when the ground started shaking. And shaking hard.

Earthquake!

Everything happened so fast. She moved quickly, inside the bakery and away from the plate glass windows at the entrance. She saw the big wire shelf behind him move, and the glass canister on the top shelf wobble.

“Watch out!” she yelled.

He stared, wide-eyed, at her but didn’t move. So she tackled him, tossing her coffee to the side in the process, and pulled them both under a big wooden table behind the counter, just before the canister dropped to the floor and shattered.

She tucked herself into a ball, and he threw his arms around her as the ground shook. It felt like everything in the bakery crashed down around them. Pots, pans, cookbooks, cardboard boxes—all fell like dominoes to the ground. The lights flickered and then went out. There was one big crash outside, then another. Finally, what felt like an hour later but must have been less than a minute, everything stilled.

Outside the bakery, car alarms were going off all up and down the street, but inside the bakery, they were in total silence. All she could hear was his breathing, right behind

her ear, his arms still wrapped around her. His very strong, warm arms.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, then immediately shook her head.

“I mean, yes, I guess I’m okay in that I wasn’t injured or anything, but no, wow, after that I am absolutely not okay.”

His arms tightened around her, and she relaxed back against him and tried to let her own breathing slow down.

Wait. What was she doing? This was the guy who hated her, remember? The one who was rude to her every time she came into the bakery? She pulled away from him and turned around, suddenly furious at him.

“Why didn’t you move? Why did you just stand there? Drop, cover, and hold on! That’s what you’re supposed to do! Do you not know the first thing about what to do in an earthquake? Look around you! You could have gotten hit on the head! Or worse!”

He smiled at her, long and slow. “It looks like you just saved my life, then. Thanks, Daisy. And no, I don’t know the first thing about what to do in an earthquake. I’m from New York.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re from New York. Now everything makes sense. You New Yorkers spend all of your time complaining about not having your pizza and bagels and bodegas, or whatever, but apparently spend absolutely no time learning the basics about how to live in California! You were just standing there! Not moving! In an earthquake! And that was a big one!” She suddenly registered one of the things he’d just said. “And how do you know my name?”

He smiled again. Why was he smiling so much? They were sitting here with broken glass all around them and alarms and sirens going off outside, and this man was smiling? He had a very nice smile. Even, white teeth, wide, soft lips. It made him look kind.

But she knew otherwise.

“You come in all the time,” he said. “I’ve seen your name on your credit card three times a week since we opened. Unless you stole the credit card of Daisy Murray a few months ago?”

She didn’t give him the satisfaction of laughing at his stupid joke. “Well, what’s your name, then, since you know mine?”

She already knew the answer to this, of course. She’d read numerous articles about the bakery before it had opened, but she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that.

He held out a hand to her. “Harris. Harris Cook. Nice to finally meet you, Daisy.”

She narrowed her eyes at him as she shook his hand. “Harris, is something wrong? Did you get hit on the head during the earthquake, or something?”

He laughed, a warm rumble that would have made her smile back at him if she hadn’t been full of adrenaline and rage.

“I don’t think so. My head feels fine. Why?”

She frowned at him. “Because you keep *smiling*. It’s unnatural. I’ve never seen you smile until two minutes ago, and I’ve seen you in this bakery at least a dozen times.”

“More than a dozen, I’d say,” he said.

She almost hissed, “Don’t remind me,” at him but stopped herself. It would probably just make him smile in that weird, friendly way again. She looked around. “What are we doing still under this table?” She started to kneel, so she could crawl out from under the table, but he stopped her.

“Wait,” he said. “There’s all of this broken glass, and you’re wearing that thin dress. Let me sweep some of this up.”

She sat down as he crawled out from under the table.

“I’m just going into the back to get a broom,” he said.

Why had he felt the need to tell her that? Had he thought she’d be stressed out, being here in the bakery without him? It would be a *relief* to be here without him!

Though . . . she had felt very grateful for him during the earthquake, as they’d sat there together under this table. As a native Californian, she prided herself on her calm attitude toward earthquakes. She even kind of liked them. At least, she’d always thought she had.

But she hadn’t been through one like this before. One where it wasn’t just a few aluminum cans that fell over, but almost everything around her falling to the ground and breaking. She would blame it on stupid Harris Cook, New Yorker, not earthquake-proofing his bakery, except that she could tell by how long and deep the shaking had been that it was a big one.

That’s what she said.

“What are you laughing at?” Harris said as he walked back over toward her.

“Nothing,” she said. “I got a text that . . . anyway, it was just . . . nothing.” She pulled out her phone to add some verisimilitude to that statement and glanced at the many notifications on her screen. “Six point eight. Oh, wow. I was right; it was a big one.” She forced herself to hold back another very inappropriate giggle. Maybe *she* had gotten hit on the head.

“I don’t know what that means, but I believe you,” Harris said. “If that wasn’t a big earthquake, I might have to abandon this bakery and fly back to New York tonight. I don’t think I can handle anything bigger.”

As he swept the floor, she scrolled to her family group text chain.

that was scary but I’m ok, everybody else please check in!

After sending that, she shot off quick messages to her other frequent group texts and her local friends to confirm

that she was fine. Well, more or less.

“Okay, I think it’s safe for you to come out,” Harris said.

Before she could crawl out from under the table, Harris lifted it and moved it back against the wall, and then reached out a hand to help her up. She wanted to pointedly not take it and stand up all by herself, but she was still feeling a little unsteady, and it was helpful to have his hand to hold on to. She let go of it, almost reluctantly, once she was standing.

“Thanks,” she said. She didn’t want to be ungracious, like him, after all. “Um, well, this was great, thanks for the, uh, shelter, but I should head home, check the damage there, call my parents, all of that stuff.”

He let out that low, rumbling chuckle again, and pointed to the window at the front of the bakery.

“I think that’s going to have to wait a little while.”

She turned and looked where he was pointing, and let out a gasp. The huge old BAKESHOP sign had crashed to the ground right in front of the bakery. More accurately, right in front of the door to the bakery, blocking their exit.

“Oh no. We’re trapped in here? Wait, you must have a back door, right?”

He nodded, but she could tell from the look on his face that there was bad news there too.

“There is a back door, but there are some downed power lines right outside of it. I saw them when I went back to get the broom. I tried calling 911 to let the fire department know, but I just got a busy signal. I’ll call again in a few minutes, but . . .”

“But we’re stuck in here for a while,” she finished.

“Exactly,” he said.

Of course. Obviously, she would be stuck inside of her favorite bakery, with no baked goods and the baker who

hated her, right after a massive earthquake, on Valentine's Day. Just her luck.

She turned to look out the front window. There was broken glass everywhere on the street, a few big plants and their pots smashed on the ground, and a ton of people standing around outside, clearly trying and failing to make phone calls. It made sense that Harris hadn't been able to reach 911.

"I wonder how long it will take the power to come back on," she said. She automatically reached for her phone to check on that, but—of course—no website would load. Right. Hadn't she just seen all of those people not being able to use their phones? She hoped her texts to her family had gone through, though maybe not since she hadn't gotten any back yet. Her sister owned a bookstore, and after seeing so many things fall from the shelves here in the bakery, she shuddered to think of what it had been like in a bookstore during the earthquake.

She'd just send another quick text to get her to check in.

Dahlia, you ok? Let me know asap, all right??

-Not delivered-

Damn it. She tried two more times but got the same response. Then she tried calling her but got a busy signal. She would give it another minute or so, then try again. She dropped her phone back into her pocket. "Looks like something is wrong with the cell towers; my phone isn't working either. Well, I guess it could be worse."

He nodded and gestured to the bakery's windows. "At least these windows didn't shatter, unlike poor Julio from the flower shop."

Daisy looked across the street at what used to be Julio's windows, and then back at the heavy sign blocking the bakery door. Her eyes widened, and she dropped into a folding chair sitting next to the table that had shielded them so well.

“That, and also if that earthquake had been a few seconds earlier, or if I’d hesitated at the door a few seconds longer, I would have been outside underneath that sign when it fell down. It really could be worse.”

He smiled at her again. Why did he keep *doing* that?

“I’m even more glad you were here in the bakery with me.” Before she could find any way to respond to that, he went on. “Emergencies are no good on an empty stomach; let me get you some pastries.”

The earthquake really must have addled his brain.

“You sold out, remember?” she said, as gently as she could. “There’s nothing in the bakery cases.”

He didn’t quite look at her. “Oh. Well, um, I put a few things aside early in the day. I’ll get them now.”

He turned to walk toward the bakery case, and that’s when she saw the blood. She stood up with a gasp. “You did get hit in the head! You’re bleeding.”

“I did not,” he said, with a return of his normal grumpiness. That was more natural. At least she knew he wasn’t thoroughly messed up. He gingerly touched the back of his head, then looked at his fingers. “Oh.”

“Sit down.” She pushed him into the chair she’d been sitting in, and then looked around the bakery. “Hold on.” She ran over to the sink in the back, grabbed a clean dish towel, and dampened it with water. At least the water was still on, even though the electricity wasn’t.

She half expected him to have gotten up from where she’d left him, but he was still sitting there when she came back.

“I’m just going to get you cleaned up and make sure you’re okay. Look down.” He obediently looked down at the table while she gently wiped the blood from the back of his head, and from his close-cropped dark curls. “Oh, I see. It’s just a little cut, but head wounds bleed a lot. I think you’re going to be okay, but you’re right that you should probably eat something. And drink some water too.”

His eyes were half-closed, and he didn't seem to be paying her any attention.

“You're very good at that, you know,” he said. Then he straightened up and smiled at her. “But I get the feeling you're very good at lots of things.”

She smiled back at him, for just a half second, before she caught herself. And then she just stared at him. “Are you *flirting* with me? Here? *Now*?” Was she imagining this? If not, he *had* to be concussed or something.

He shook his head, and then winced a little. “No, of course not. That would be ridiculous, to try to flirt with you when we were trapped inside my bakery after an earthquake while I was bleeding from a head wound. I would never do something like that.” And then a glimmer of a smile appeared in his eyes. “But if I was, is it working?”

She wasn't imagining it.

“*No*,” she said, and tried to keep the frown on her face. She was very afraid she hadn't been successful. She turned away from him and walked back to the bakery cases. “Where did you say those secret pastries were? We both need something to eat; you're right.”

He stood up. “It's okay, I can—” She glared at him, and he stopped talking and sat back down. “Fine, you can get them. They're in that cardboard box, at the back of the bottom shelf.”

She slid open the door of the bakery case and grabbed the box.

“So what are these pastries, anyway?” She set the box on the table and unfolded another chair.

“Oh, just some of my favorites from today,” he said, not looking at her.

Did he not want her to eat his precious pastries? Too bad, she was stuck in his bakery with him after a once-in-a-generation earthquake; she was going to eat them whether he liked it or not.

He flipped open the top of the box, and she closed her eyes to breathe in the incredible scents that came out of it. Butter and cheese and chocolate and something fruity, all mingled together. And then she had to open her eyes again so she could stare at those beautiful, perfect, flaky pieces of joy, all nestled in the box together.

“Um, there’s one each of the savory croissants of the day, the country ham and brie croissant, and the Swiss chard, artichoke heart, and feta croissant. Then one of the raspberry-chocolate Danishes, and one of the lemon curd-filled doughnuts. Oh, and two of the hand pies.”

Despite his mouthwatering descriptions of the pastries, his flat, hostile tone of voice was back. Okay, good, at least she wouldn’t have to worry that he was actually injured or anything. Back to normal. Whatever. She was stuck here with him, so she was going to eat these pastries and enjoy the hell out of them since this was absolutely the last time she would ever come to this bakery. Hadn’t the universe just given her an unmistakable sign to never come back?

“What flavor are the hand pies?” She only asked because she had to decide which pastry to eat first, obviously.

“Blackberry and yuzu.” He stood up. “I’m going to get us some napkins. And plates, maybe.”

Harris walked away, and Daisy sat there, her mouth wide open.

Blackberry? He’d made blackberry hand pies, when he knew they were her favorite? Maybe he hadn’t heard her say that? But no, he had; she was sure of it. Maybe he’d planned on making blackberry hand pies that week anyway, and so when she’d mentioned it, he was mad he’d already planned to make her favorite.

Well, if she had to be trapped inside the bakery with him after a frankly terrifying earthquake, at least she’d get to eat one of his blackberry and yuzu hand pies.

Speaking of the earthquake . . . She pulled her phone out of her pocket. Still no texts, which meant something was definitely very wrong with either her phone or the network. She tried to text her sister again, with no luck. She wanted to keep trying, over and over again, but she forced herself to put her phone back into her pocket to conserve the battery.

Harris came back and dropped two plates and a stack of napkins on the table, and then sat down across from her, that familiar scowl on his face.

She smiled at him. “Ah, that’s better,” she said.

“What’s better?” he snapped.

Excellent, back to normal. She wouldn’t miss that wide, friendly, even kind of sweet, smile of his one bit.

“That look,” she said, waving her hand at his face. “You usually make that look when I come in the bakery, like you’d rather burn the place down than have me step foot in here. You’ve been looking so weird and smiley ever since the earthquake that I was worried it did something to the space-time continuum, or something.”

He just glared at her again.

She laughed out loud, probably too loud and long—she was maybe slightly hysterical—but could you blame her? She was trapped inside a bakery with a man who hated her, there had just been a six point eight earthquake, the power was out everywhere, she had no idea if any of her loved ones were okay, and the man who hated her had just presented her with a box of the most beautiful pastries she’d ever seen in her entire life. That was objectively funny.

“You got any coffee to go along with these pastries?” she asked, and immediately let out another peal of laughter. She cracked herself up sometimes. The stony look on Harris’s face made it clear that he did not share her sense of humor, which just made her laugh harder.

This was definitely better than crying, which she’d come very close to doing for a moment when they were

under the table. And also when she thought about her sister, who still hadn't texted.

She finally got ahold of herself and reached for one of the hand pies. She usually liked to save her favorites until last, but hell, at this point, she should probably get any joy in as soon as possible.

She took a bite and had to close her eyes so she could savor it. The pastry was crisp on the outside, with just a sprinkle of sugar on top; it shattered when she bit into it, with layer after layer of flaky crust encasing a blackberry filling full of plump, sweet-tart, juicy blackberries, with that floral, citrus note of yuzu. Good lord, this man might be an asshole, but he could bake. She smiled down at the pastry and took another bite.

"You like it?" he asked her, clearly sarcastically, given the moans of ecstasy she was letting out. But hell, she'd answer him anyway, because *she* was a kind, generous human being.

"Not only do I like it," she said, "but right now, for the first time, I'm happy that I came to the bakery today."

He frowned at that. Obviously he did; the man could not take a compliment. Or maybe he was just grumpy that she liked his pastries and was worried that she'd keep coming back to the bakery. That, he didn't have to worry about.

"What do you mean, you're happy for the first time that you came here today? Didn't you just say that if you hadn't walked inside, you would have been under that sign outside when it fell?"

She waved a hand at him as she finished her third bite. "Yes, yes, of course I'm glad I walked inside instead of hesitating outside for a few more seconds, but I'd sworn to myself that I was never coming to this bakery ever again, so obviously the earthquake was my punishment for breaking my vow."

Now he looked even more angry. She would have thought he'd be happy that she wouldn't come around his

bakery anymore.

“Why did you swear to yourself you were never coming here again?” He scowled. Again. “You’re not trying to lose weight, are you?”

See? This is why she shouldn’t have come, life-altering pastries or not. “That’s an incredibly rude thing to say, even for you. And no, for your information, I’m not. I like myself just as I am.”

He nodded. “Thank God for that. Then why did you swear to yourself you were never coming here again?”

He couldn’t just shut the fuck up and let her enjoy the pastries, could he?

“Because you hate me, that’s why!” she said. “You know it and I know it. Every time I come here, you make it clear you wish I was anywhere else, and I was going to finally grant your wish! Now, can you please just let me enjoy the last of your pastries I’ll ever eat and then help me figure out how to get the hell out of here so I can go home and see if my apartment is still standing?” And call her parents, and try her sister again, and maybe drive over to the bookstore if her sister didn’t answer, and . . .

She shook those panicky thoughts off. They didn’t help. Better to distract herself with antagonizing Harris and eating all of his pastries. She glanced back up at him. He stared at her with no expression on his face and said nothing. Fine, then, she’d just finish the wildly delicious hand pie that he’d saved for himself, and she’d even lick her fingers afterward. Why the fuck shouldn’t she lick her fingers if she wanted to? It’s not like she wanted to impress him. This guy didn’t matter.

It wasn’t until she’d finished the hand pie and reached for the ham and brie croissant that he finally said something. “You think I hate you?”

She looked up at him. She didn’t quite understand the look on his face.

“Well,” she said. “The first day I came in, which was on your opening day, you made a nasty face when you heard me say something to a friend in line and then laugh. I don’t even remember what it was I said, but I definitely remember the nasty face, and the way you glared at me as you made it. You have since been impossibly rude to me every time I’ve walked in the door—including today, might I add, right before I saved your life—and you almost yelled at me that time I tried to repay you for the pastry you gave me by mistake. So, yes, I’m not dim; I get it.”

He smiled that long, slow smile again. “I didn’t give you that pastry by mistake.”

He must not remember what she was talking about. “I mean that time you gave me three pastries, and I only paid for two, and I came back, and—”

“I remember. I didn’t give you that pastry by mistake. Daisy Murray—is Daisy your real name, by the way?”

So many people asked her this. They either asked her this or they told her they had a dog named Daisy.

“Yes, of course Daisy is my real name. It’s on my credit card and everything, remember? Anyway, you were saying?”

He laughed softly. “Oh, right, I forgot. And yes, I was saying, Daisy Murray, did it never occur to you to wonder why you always left this bakery with more pastries than you paid for?”

She shrugged. “I just figured you were really great at baking but bad at counting. Frankly, I was worried that your business wouldn’t succeed if you kept giving everyone so much free stuff.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t giving *everyone* free stuff. I was giving *you* free stuff. Because I fell for you that first moment I heard you laugh that day.”

He had to be joking.

“Oh, come on, you don’t need to—”

“And I remember what you said that day. I’ve thought about it an embarrassing number of times every day ever since then,” he said. “First you said, ‘I’ve been looking forward to the opening of this bakery like it was the Super Bowl or something.’ That’s when you laughed. And that’s when I looked at you and saw that glow on your face and that sparkle in your eyes. And then you said, ‘Oh my God, look at that row of pastries; this is like porn for me,’ and you laughed again. And that’s when I had to look away from you, because you saying that made me imagine so many things that I should not be imagining on opening day for my brand-new business. I guess I gave you a dirty look when I did. I didn’t mean to—my face just does that sometimes.”

Now she knew he’d been hit in the head. “You fell for me? Because I mentioned porn in the context of pastries? First of all, people do that all the time; I am absolutely not the first to do so. Haven’t you seen all of those shirtless bakers on Instagram, rolling pastry dough and moaning like someone is going to throw cash at them?”

She stopped and looked at him. God, those arms of his. So big and strong and solid. Maybe it was something about the rolling pin. “You should do that. I bet you’d get a ton of followers; you would sell out even faster every day. But secondly, even if I bought what you’re saying, which I do not, you don’t fall for someone after glancing at them in line and hearing them say two things. You just mean that you had the hots for me, which is surprising and flattering . . . though I was showing a lot of cleavage that day, but—”

He interrupted her again. “I have no idea why you’re either surprised or flattered by that, because you’re gorgeous, but also no, I do not mean that I ‘had the hots’ for you, nor was it just about your cleavage, which yes, was and is very impressive.”

He’d said she was gorgeous. Had he meant that? He’d said it in that furious voice of his; it hadn’t sounded like a compliment at all.

So maybe he did mean it?

Maybe *she* had gotten hit in the head during the earthquake? Was he really saying all of this?

He kept going. “I meant what I said: I fell for you, right then. I have good judgment about people, okay? But I’ve had so much going on, with opening the bakery and trying to keep it afloat and getting press and whatever, and I knew I couldn’t even try to date anyone. And definitely not a customer, because I didn’t want to make you feel weird about coming in here. So I did nothing. But you kept coming in, and you were just so fucking nice every time. You learned everyone’s name who works here, you tipped well, you always said thank you. One time, you ran outside the bakery and left your pastries when you saw those people forget to put their stroller in their car and drive away, and you caught up to their car at the light. Hell, you even came back and tried to pay for a free pastry I gave you, which, I promise you, is not normal behavior.”

He’d really noticed her, every time she’d come in. Just like she’d noticed him but had tried not to. Had pretended to herself that she hadn’t.

“I didn’t want you to lose money,” she said. “I really like your pastries; I wanted the bakery to succeed.”

“*See?*” he said in that angry voice again. “I can’t believe you. You’re ridiculous! That’s a compliment, by the way!”

She laughed at him. “You might need to work on your way of giving people compliments, if you have to tell them that it’s a compliment after the fact, you know.”

A warm, fluttery feeling bubbled up in her chest at the look on his face. At the way he looked at her: angry and puzzled and interested and . . . attracted? Yes.

“Good point,” he said. “I guess I also need to work on my face. Since you clearly got the wrong message from the hundreds of dollars of free pastries I’ve given you in the past few months.”

She looked at him for a long moment, and then she smiled. “I like your face. I like it a lot, actually. Especially now that I know that when you look furious it’s just like a normal person smiling.” She pursed her lips. “Hmm. But what I don’t understand is what it means when you actually smile.”

His face still looked stern, but she could tell he was making an effort not to smile at that. She could tell by the tiny crinkles around his eyes, by the way his face softened, just a little, and by that little dimple in his upper lip.

“I think it means it’s like a normal person smiling very big,” he said. “But also, that’s the thing: speaking of smiles, you smile far more than anyone I’ve ever known. I could tell the smiles weren’t fake, nothing about you seemed fake, but I also didn’t know what your smiles meant.”

She sighed. “I know; it’s a real problem for me. You see, I have resting smile face.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Resting . . . smile face?”

She nodded. “Yeah. You’ve heard of resting bitch face, right? I would assume so—your picture is right next to the definition in the dictionary. Well, you see, I have resting smile face. It’s not my fault, I can’t help it. My face is just like this. People ask me for directions constantly. It’s not because I look like I know where I’m going, it’s because I look friendly.”

“That’s probably because you *are* friendly,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, yes, but they don’t know that.”

He rolled his eyes right back, and she laughed.

“See?” he said. “This is why I didn’t know what your smiles meant! I didn’t know if you were smiling especially for my bakery—and, by extension, for me—or if you were smiling about something else and we just got the benefit of it. One day, you came in without a smile on your face at all, not even at the confetti cake with glazed-doughnut icing, which I knew you loved—”

“I do love that cake,” she said.

“And I almost ran out of the bakery after you that day to ask you what was wrong. But I thought you’d probably think I’d lost it, so I didn’t. I was worried until you came in two days later, smiling again.”

She breathed in deeply. “Oh. I remember that day. That was . . . I had a real shitty day that day.” She’d messed something up at work, and a friend had blown her off, and it was a day when she’d already been depressed and anxious, so she’d gone into a bit of a spiral about whether she was really good at her job, or anything at all, and if she actually mattered to anyone.

He’d noticed her that day. He’d seen that something was wrong.

“I came to the bakery that day because I hoped it would cheer me up a little,” she said.

“And did it?” he asked.

She smiled at him. “It absolutely did.”

She reached for the lemon curd doughnut and broke off a piece of it.

“I have a question for you,” she said. She took a bite of the doughnut and sighed with joy. “God, these are good. I love lemon curd.”

“I know you do,” he said. “So do I.” He took a piece of the doughnut too. “Ask me your question.”

“Did you have a plan for what you were going to do here? You know, other than to give me free pastries and hope I realized that meant you were into me?”

An embarrassed, wry look spread over his face. She enjoyed that.

“That was pretty much the plan, yeah,” he said. “I hadn’t really thought further than, like, ‘Keep her coming back to the bakery, give her lots of baked goods.’ Nope.” He wrinkled his nose. “In retrospect, probably not the best plan?”

She shook her head. “Not the best, nope. Especially since, you know, I thought you hated me.”

He nodded. “Right, right, there’s that.” He leaned toward her, a tiny smile on his lips. “Okay then. What *would* a good plan be? You have a captive audience here.”

This was, quite possibly, the strangest conversation she’d ever had. And that didn’t even take into account the trapped-in-a-bakery-because-of-a-natural-disaster element to it. But she was going to just go with it.

“Hmm. Well, to start off, you could have said early on, like even on opening day, ‘Thanks for coming in,’ maybe even with a smile on your face? And I would have said, ‘Oh, the pleasure is all mine; I’m thrilled to have you in the neighborhood,’ or maybe I would have ended that with, ‘I’ve loved everything I’ve had from here; can’t wait to try more,’ depending on when you said it to me.” She stopped to think. “Then the next time, you could have said, ‘You’re Daisy, right? I’m Harris, nice to meet you,’ and I would have said, ‘I am Daisy! Nice to meet you too.’ And you would have said, ‘See you next time,’ and I would have said, ‘Yes, definitely, see you next time.’ And then, after that first time you gave me a free pastry, and I came back to try to pay for it, you could have said, ‘No need, it’s on the house,’ maybe with a little wink?” She paused and then shook her head. “No, not with a little wink. You don’t seem like a little-wink kind of guy.”

“I’m not, no,” he said. “I’m glad you realize that already.”

She nodded. “Yeah, better without the wink. But the next few times you gave me free pastries—or, at least, some of the times that you did it—you would make sure I saw you slipping an extra pastry in my bag. And I would say, ‘Harris, you don’t have to do that.’ And you would say, ‘But I want to,’ and I would swoon a little.”

“You would?” He leaned a little closer. He smelled like blackberries and burnt caramel. She tried not to breathe in too obviously.

“Yeah, I would,” she said. “What can I say? I’m an easy swooner, I can’t help it.”

His eyes laughed at that. Why had she never noticed how big and warm and dark his eyes were?

“Go on,” he said.

She swallowed hard and went on. “But also you would be worried, this whole time, that you might be crossing a line, and you wouldn’t want to do that, because you wouldn’t want to make me feel like I would have to stop coming here. So you would pay attention and see if, like, I insisted on paying for the pastries, or how I reacted when you gave them to me.”

“The last thing I’d ever want to do would be to make you feel uncomfortable,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “I thought you were that kind of guy.” She smiled at him, and he smiled back. She took a deep breath and went on. “And then sometime when I came in, you could drop a note in the bag with my pastries that just said, ‘Hi,’ and that you’d love to get to know me better, and if I wasn’t interested, it was no problem at all, but if I was, here was your number and I should text you.”

He nodded slowly. “Putting the ball in your court. I like that. That’s a really great plan for what I could have done.” He put his hand on the table, so close to hers that she could feel the warmth from it. “Here’s the problem, though: those are all excellent ideas, but those are all ideas for what I could have done. I asked what a good plan would be, present tense.”

Her face must have showed her confusion. He kept talking. “Because,” he said, “I can’t go back and change what I did in the past, you see. But what I can do is try to do something right here. Right now.”

Oh.

Her mind went blank. All she could do was stare at him. “I . . . um . . .”

“I hope you have a good idea, because right now I’m sitting here, alone in my bakery with the woman of my dreams on Valentine’s Day, with a box full of pastries that I saved for her in the hope that she would come in today and they’d be waiting—”

“You saved these pastries for me?” She probably shouldn’t have interrupted him—he’d just called her the woman of his dreams—but she couldn’t help it.

He laughed, that low, rumbly chuckle that had been so unexpected to her when she’d first heard it less than an hour ago. Had it really been that little time since they’d been in here together? It didn’t feel like it.

“Why did you think that, on one of our busiest days of the year, I had a box of pastries stashed away? You can’t think I do that every day as emergency prep, since you already know that I don’t know the first thing about preparing for an earthquake. And you seriously cannot think that it was just a coincidence that I made blackberry hand pies today, right after you mentioned that blackberry is your favorite. I picked and froze those blackberries last summer. I hadn’t planned to use them on Valentine’s Day, but then once you said that, I figured I had to.”

“Oh,” she said. She had no idea what else to say.

“I boxed up those pastries early today since I knew we’d be swamped and that we’d probably sell out early. You usually come in Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so I thought I’d see you today. At least, I hoped so.”

“Those are the days I work from home,” she said. “I can’t believe—”

“That I noticed?” He gave her that scornful look that she’d hated so much before today. “I notice everything about you, especially which pastries you like the best. So I put all of those in this box for you. But you didn’t come in when you usually do, and I thought you weren’t coming in at all. And I felt so stupid, especially since I actually shouldn’t even be here today. Some celebrity ordered a wedding cake from us, and I should have flown out there

with the cake to supervise the last-minute decorations, but instead I sent Ella, so I could be here, just in case.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I just admitted that out loud. Anyway, I guess that was my plan, to give you some of your favorite pastries on Valentine’s Day and hope that—”

She kissed him. He didn’t react at first, whether from surprise or unwillingness, she wasn’t sure. She started to pull away, but he wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close, and kissed her, hard. One of her hands went to the back of his neck, and one of her hands went to the front of his shirt, and she held on tight.

She let herself go into that kiss. She forgot about the world around them; she stopped hearing the sirens and alarms outside; she forgot to be worried about her sister, who still hadn’t checked in; she forgot about everything except for his lips on hers, his arms around her, the way he made her feel, those small noises that he made.

His lips were plump and firm, and good God, did they feel good against hers. He had remnants of sugar and lemon curd on them, and she licked them off. She felt his rumbling laugh, and he dove back in for another kiss. She ran her hand up his wide, solid chest, and he shivered. Her touch affected him that much. What an incredible turn-on.

He pulled her off her chair and onto his lap, and she turned to face him. He laughed again and dropped kisses onto her cheeks, her hair, her lips.

“Holy fucking shit, Daisy, you’re going to destroy me.” He buried his face in her neck, kissing her and nibbling at her skin until she cried out. He brought her face to his, and they kissed again, with their bodies intertwined and both of them breathing fast. She moved against him, and she could feel the length of him, right there, and he moaned against her mouth. That moan made her feel so powerful—she did that to him, she made him feel that way, she made him want her that badly.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve dreamed of this?” he said in her ear.

She shook her head as she looked at him.

“So many times,” he said. “But the reality is far better than my imagination.”

Was this really happening? Was he really saying all of this to her? He pulled her face back to his and kissed her again. The way his lips and tongue brushed against hers made her whole body shimmer. Well, that must have been the universe answering her question with a loud yes.

She bent down to kiss him again, but right as her lips touched his, her phone buzzed in her pocket.

No, ignore that, Daisy; this is much more important.

But then her phone buzzed again, and again, and she jolted to attention. Right, there had just been a significant earthquake. That could be her parents or her sister, checking in or letting her know that something was wrong.

She kissed his lips softly, then his cheek, and pulled back. “I should, um . . .”

He nodded. “Yeah, of course.”

She climbed off his lap and pulled her phone out of her pocket. He kept an arm around her as she sat down on the chair next to him.

Mom: We are both okay! Lots of stuff fell down but nothing major. Check in when you can please!!!

Dahlia: Can't tell if any of my other texts went through or not, I'm in the bookstore, everything's a real mess here and no power, but I'm fine and the staff is all fine. I sent everyone else home and I'm heading home soon

Daisy burst into tears. Harris immediately pulled her close to him.

“It’s okay, they’re all okay,” she said. “I was so worried. I tried not to be, but they’re all okay.”

He brushed her hair out of her face and kissed her cheek. “I’m so glad,” he said.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as she texted them back, then she scrolled through the rest of her messages. Apparently the cell towers were working again, and she'd gotten a bunch of texts in the however many minutes she and Harris had been making out like teenagers.

Though, making out with Harris was *much* better than making out with people had been when she'd been an actual teenager.

Amy: **Is everybody okay???** The cats freaked out, power's out, but I'm fine

Kayla: **Ditto to all of that. Well, except for the cats part, we don't have cats. pretty shaken, don't get me wrong, but ok**

Kayla: **I really didn't mean to make a "shaken" pun about an earthquake but you know, it's true**

Daisy laughed at that as she wiped her eyes. She desperately wanted to text her friends, *Guess what I've been doing with that hot baker while we've been trapped in the bakery???* But it was too risky to do that with Harris literally right next to her, so she just texted them back that she was fine and replied to a few other people who had checked in with her.

She closed her eyes for a second and took a long, deep breath. She hadn't realized just how scared she'd been. She looked at Harris and smiled up at him. She looked around at the bakery, where it felt like her whole life had changed in such a short time. Then her eyes widened. *Oh shit.* What had they been doing?

She stood up. "I, um. Harris, I hate to say this, but—"

He stood up, too, that frown back on his face. He took a step away from her. "I know what you're going to say. It's okay. Everything got out of hand, the earthquake and everything, you weren't thinking; I get it. Don't worry about me. No harm done; I can get over it. And please, I really don't want you to feel awkward coming back to the bakery,

truly. Let me see if I can get Julio to come help me move that sign so you can get out of here.”

She had no idea where he was going with that whole speech until it was almost done. Then she laughed. “Did you think I regretted this? Or that I wanted to stop? Oh, God no. I was just going to say that we were sitting here, making out with me on your lap, straddling you in full view of everyone on the street.” She gestured to the big window at the front of the bakery, which, yes, was partially blocked by the sign, but only partially. “I’m glad we could give people who just went through a disaster a little show, but that’s taking food porn a little too far, don’t you think? I was going to ask if there’s a way that we can take this somewhere a little more private? My apartment is just a few blocks away, once we manage to get out of here.”

A huge grin spread across Harris’s face, bigger than she’d ever seen.

“Ohhhh. That’s much better than what I thought you were going to say.” He turned to look at the window and grimaced. “I hope none of my employees walked by just then. I am very glad I let them all go once we sold out.” His eyes danced at her. “I also hope no other customers were around. I don’t want to have to explain to them that they won’t get the same treatment.” He stepped closer to her. “But also, my apartment is right upstairs, if that suits you better?”

She slid her hand into his. “Lead the way.”

He took her to the back of the bakery, where there were two doors. He pulled keys out of his pocket and opened one of them. “The other door goes outside. This one goes upstairs.”

He let her precede him up the stairs, and then unlocked the door to his apartment.

“Um, sorry if it’s kind of a mess; I wasn’t expecting visitors today,” he said as he stepped back to let her enter.

She walked inside, then burst out laughing. “I don’t think you created this mess, Harris.”

Books, dishes, various plants, and more were strewn all across his living room and kitchen.

He shook his head at the sight and laughed too. “At least the TV didn’t fall off the wall. Here, let me give you a tour.” He took her hand again. “There’s the kitchen, um, obviously.” They both looked at the broken dishes on the floor. “I’ll deal with that later. And then this way is the bedroom and bathroom.”

His hand felt nice in hers. It was big, warm, strong. The skin on his palm was soft and supple, but he had small calluses on the tips of his fingers. The roughness on his thumb felt nice as it brushed back and forth against the back of her hand.

A wave of nerves hit her as they walked toward his bedroom. Everything had been so easy, so fast, so good downstairs in the bakery. What if it wasn’t like that up here? What if that had been just fifteen minutes of magic and the magic was over? What if their chemistry disappeared, and he decided he wasn’t interested in her anymore? What if—

She laughed out loud and let go of his hand as they walked into his bedroom. “Oh, wow, you really aren’t from California,” she said.

He looked down at her, his eyebrows raised. “What, do real Californians only have linen sheets or something?”

She kicked off her shoes and walked over to the head of the bed. “Not that—though I do love linen sheets very much. Look at all of these things you have hanging above your bed! No one who lives in earthquake country should hang *anything* above their bed. Someone must have told you that.” She climbed up onto his bed. “Three framed prints? All wooden, with glass in them? These could have killed you.”

He walked over to her. “My grandmother gave me those.”

She took the first print down and handed it to him. “That’s nice. But they’ve got to come down. I can’t do anything in a bed with things hanging on the wall above it. Not even on a normal day, but especially not right after an earthquake.”

He took the second print from her. “Did you . . . um, were you . . . were we . . . going to do something in this bed?”

She took the third print off the wall. She usually didn’t jump into bed with someone this quickly. Not because she thought there was anything wrong with it, but mostly because it usually took her a while to decide if she trusted another person with her body and her emotions. She’d tried having casual sex when she was younger, but after too much heartache, she realized that she always caught feelings. She had to give herself time to decide if someone was worth her feelings before she slept with them.

She didn’t know why she already knew that Harris was. But she did. “I hoped we would. That is, unless you—”

He grabbed the third print from her with alacrity. “Oh no, there’s no ‘unless’ on my part.” He set the print on the floor and then knelt next to her at the head of the bed. With one movement, he pulled her down on top of him, and she let out peals of laughter.

“*Hmm*, where were we?” she asked him, her mouth just millimeters from his.

He cupped one of her breasts and moved his thumb back and forth across her nipple. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“If I remember correctly—and I know I do—I was being driven wild by your breasts.” He moved his hand to her knee and then slid his hand up under her dress to her thigh. “I was also fucking losing it because I realized that when I touch you, you close your eyes, with that look of ecstasy on your face, and that’s the same way you look when you bite into a pastry that you really love.” He moved his hand up higher and hooked his thumb around her underwear. “And it made me think that I desperately wanted

to touch you everywhere—with my hands, my lips, my tongue—so I could see if you look like that at other times.” His lips brushed hers. “Can I do that? Please?”

She didn’t hesitate for a second. “God, yes.”

He leaned forward and kissed her hard and in one motion, pulled her underwear off. For half a second, she regretted not wearing cuter underwear on her walk to the bakery this morning, but since he didn’t even look at them as he dropped them onto the floor, she figured it didn’t matter.

He reached for the hem of her dress, and then paused. “I need this off.”

She nodded her assent, and he pulled her sundress off and dropped it next to the bed. And then before she had a chance to get self-conscious, his hands were all over her. On her thighs, her hips, her belly. And he followed up his hands with his lips.

“You are just so beautiful,” he said into her skin. “You’re so soft, my God, how are you so soft?”

Her whole body shivered from his words, his touch. Her nipples were hard peaks underneath her bra, and she couldn’t stand the constriction of it anymore. She reached back and unhooked it and pulled it off.

He looked up at her and grinned. “Oh, do you want me to touch you there?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Please.”

His hands moved up to cover her breasts, and she let out a deep sigh at the joy of his strong, gentle fingers on her.

“Do you want me to kiss you there?” he asked.

“Absolutely, yes,” she said.

He let out that low chuckle again and moved up her body. He dropped a soft kiss on first one nipple, then the other, and sat back. When after a few seconds he didn’t do anything else, she opened her eyes and glared at him.

“Oh, you want me to *keep* kissing you there? I get it.”

She grabbed his shirt and pulled him closer. He threw the shirt off and laughed again. “Don’t worry, I’ll stop teasing you.”

She pulled herself up to kiss him, but stopped when she heard a rumbling noise.

“What’s that?” he asked, just as the shaking started.

“Aftershock!” she said. “Aren’t you glad I moved those prints above the bed?”

“For that, and for so many other things,” he said. “I’ll cover you. Now, hold on.” And he rolled on top of her.

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