



Laura Briggs

Moonglow Fancies

with

Rose Petit Fours



Return to Cornwall

11

Moonglow Fancies with Rose Petit Fours

By Laura Briggs

Smashwords Edition

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Dear Reader,

We've reached the penultimate book in the series, and it's a story that combines two fan-favorite themes from past adventures: a celebrity wedding *and* a high stakes baking challenge. This Christmas season brings a wedding to test Julianne and Kitty's mettle like nothing has before.

Of course, we know the duo can handle almost anything (remember the so-called runaway bride from book one?). But Julianne will find herself battling an unusual ethical dilemma when it comes to this latest baker's behavior in the culinary world – and more likely to end with at least one person's professional reputation in tatters. Will it be hers – or her bride to be's?

Meanwhile, could there be a Cinderella moment in the works for Julianne and Kitty's bookish young assistant Paula? Her uni's annual winter ball is at hand, and a secret crush lingers in her past who may or may not prove charming, so she may require a little help from her fairy godmother-like friends to discover her glass slipper moment. But surprises – at the beginning or end of any fairy tale – abound.

With seasonal charm sprinkled throughout, the next-to-last installment in the series is filled with humor, heart, and hope for things to come. Happy reading!

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Chapter One

“I’ve had the perfect inspiration for the Women’s Institute seasonal fundraiser,” said Lady Amanda. “It came to me like a thunderbolt when I was having a clearout and I found some postcards my great-grandfather sent my great-grandmother when he was in the war. Suddenly, I thought, why not a World War II theme dinner dance? An absolutely authentic one.”

Those of us who were members of the W.I. exchanged glances. “Like the Victory Dances? The — the U.S.O. in films?” ventured Cherish. To me, she whispered. “Did you suggest this, Julianne?”

“No, I had no idea what she was presenting,” I whispered back.

“Yes, that’s precisely what I’m talking about,” said Amanda, enthusiastically. “A real G.I. Red Cross war bond-buying Donut Dolly sort of affair — in costume, even.”

A little ripple of interest traveled through the group. “I watched a documentary film on fundraising pie suppers for the war effort in the States,” said Kitty. “I reckon that would interest people. Maybe we auction puddings or something.”

Like me and Cherish, Kitty was a new member of the Institute, recruited over the past few months by Amanda, the most emboldened committee member. Having joined after she left the village council over too many headaches and infighting, she found the W.I. was — temporarily — a tame beast in need of a burst of enthusiasm.

Taking chairmanship and drumming up the rolls was nothing to Amanda. Organization and P-R was in her blood, which the success of the local business and tourism bureau could attest to, even if the tedious details of planning menus and choosing wines for hired dinner parties as lady of a tourist-loving manor didn't enthrall her always. As for me, planning events was now a nine-to-five (and beyond) professional role, so I preferred to take my place in the back rows of committees organizing charity sales and who runs the tombola drum.

"I have one better," said Amanda. "The cookery classes we sometimes have during the autumn? Why not devote them to the study of World War Two-era recipes? And I have the perfect book for learning, too — a real, absolutely-authentic guide to the period."

More murmurs followed, mostly enthusiastic. "Why not?" I said. "It sounds like it could be fun." My cooking skills were in need of polishing, although the manor's chef and caterer Michael had given me pointers. My friend Dinah had tried to improve my baking skills, but there was only so much I seemed capable of learning.

"Good," said Amanda. "Shall we put it to a vote? All in favor of having a World War Two dinner dance and authentic menu raise your hands."

It carried the day, because no one else had any ideas. The previous year's fundraiser had been a children's biscuit decorating contest, but the icing stains had proven to be too much for the W.I. centre's carpets and drapes. Something for grownups seemed like a much better idea.

“I’ll bring the book next meeting,” promised Amanda. “Someone donated new pots and pans to the Institute, fortunately, because it was high time some of them were replaced. I’m bringing some mixing bowls and a few extra things that Mrs. Norris stumbled upon on her yearly ‘sort and winnow’ among the cupboards.” She clapped her hands. “I’m so excited — it’s going to be lovely.”

The meeting dispersed afterwards. “I’m rather looking forward to it,” remarked Cherish. “It isn’t part of my heritage, per se, but I love a soppy wartime love story.”

“Amanda has a knack for picking interesting themes,” I said. “Remember the Old England Christmas tent? With authentic wassail?” Costumes had been involved then also, particularly for Amanda, who had rejected the usual ‘huswife’s’ drab dress for a resplendent ladies’ costume like the wives of Henry VIII would have preferred.

“Maybe she’ll bring along those postcards,” said Cherish. “Let us have a peek at some wartime love notes.”

“Unless they were a couple who kept the ‘stiff upper lip’ in place,” I pointed out. I could well imagine dry conversation in print, asking about the rain and the garden, and commenting that Paris seemed ‘unusually tatty’ after the Germans had invaded. Not every story had the epic romance of *Pearl Harbor* or *The English Patient*.

“We’d best go,” said Kitty, who was buttoning her jacket. “It’s already past three.”

“Is it?” I checked the time. “We’d better scurry, or we’ll be late.” We were meeting with our newest clients today at five, to begin plans for their wedding.

London baker Morgan Corky's latest cookbook was featured on the posters in the Penzance restaurant Bon Cuisine's window — which was only fitting, since she was half owner of the new Mediterranean Eurocuisine bistro, along with her fiancé, Michelin star chef Mark Stroper, the former presenter of *Britain Eats International*.

“Think she'll dazzle us with her gold leaf biccies?” Kitty asked. The cover, like all of the famed patisserie chef's creations, tended to ‘upcycle’ classic flavors and standard desserts.

“Maybe he's the one who does the baking at home,” I pointed out. “He did work in a French patisserie for a couple of years before he joined the program cast.”

As it happened, neither of our famous clients had brought anything to the table but themselves, in the private dining corner near the kitchen, which had obviously been created for them to both work and observe the staff as they went to and fro. Morgan did offer us tea, however, and dispatched one of the waiters for it after we were seated.

“So, tell us a little about what your vision is for your wedding — how it best expresses your dream, or your personalities,” I said, opening up my notepad. Beside me, Kitty quietly taking in the atmosphere, trying to get a better sense of our clients from the place which was clearly taking up most of their time. A busy staff was setting up the wine bar

and chalking out tonight's specials; a construction worker carried a skill saw up the stairs in the main dining room, which led to an upper story being renovated for the restaurant's expansion under its new owners.

"I feel we want it to be about us, really," said Morgan. "Food is our lives, making it sophisticated, posh, yet real. I think finding a way to make that accessible to our guests — who will expect a top-tier table, of course." She laughed, lightly touching her fiancé's arm at the same time.

Morgan wore a red jumper dusted with flour on the book's cover, but in real life, she looked much more glam. Her blonde hair had highlights, both to cover a little early grey and to add strawberry blonde streaks to her champagne shade to make it seem more vibrant. Her jewelry was gold, heavy but tasteful — much like her makeup and the blouse she wore, which I had seen for three figures in a women's fashion magazine.

"I think the food is pretty important," said Mark. "I think ... we'd probably like a good band. I think something with a bit of 'huzzah' maybe. Like fireworks at the close."

Mark was less glam, at a glance. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, both of which had traces of flour brushed off them recently, and a light dusting of it in his graying salt and pepper hair. A baker's apron was draped over the back of his chair.

"Something to see you off in style," I said, smiling. "That's something we can help with, yes. We've seen it all from limousines to petal cannons at a harbor farewell." I didn't mention that particular wedding, sadly, never set sail.

“You came very highly recommended,” said Morgan. “A friend of mine saw a bridal magazine feature on one of your weddings, and it was stunning. That’s why, when we decided to do the wedding here due to all the obligations at the restaurant, we wanted to hire you.”

“The pictures were great,” said Mark. “I liked what you did with the simple lily bouquets. It was really metropolitan. That was the sophistication I knew Morgan was looking for.”

“What are you looking for?” Kitty asked. “The same vision?” She glanced between them. “It’s good to know how much of it you share and how much of it either of you is compromising to make one vision.”

“Oh, I agree with her, of course,” he said, smiling. “That’s the right answer, isn’t it?” We both laughed.

“Uh, I think I’d feel comfortable with that level of sophistication on a day this important to both of us,” he said. He took Morgan’s hand and squeezed it. ” It’s kind of the image — we have a lot of major restaurateurs and wine buyers on our guest list. Some A-list people. Basically, we need our clients to feel comfortable and impressed.” He nodded. “That’s the basic part for me.”

“I agree,” said Morgan. “It’s so important to us. And this place is an absolute madhouse, as you can see. I hate to even mention it, but the publishers are pushing me to finish the manuscript for the next cookbook, so I’m on a tight deadline — that’s in addition to running the bakery for the new restaurant, so we can develop and test all my latest recipes.”

“What’s the focus of the new book?” I asked, curious. Amanda had a copy of her last one, and had made a delicious

cherry chip Swiss roll with a decadent cherry mousse filling and ganache drizzle with chocolate shavings.

“Couture mini cakes and other small desserts,” she answered. “Cupcakes, petit fours, filled mini patisserie. I love the gorgeous look of Paris shop window styles, but I want that same quality in home recipes that we all love. Don’t we all want that best of British in a sweet little French-style creation?”

“Sounds like a great concept,” I said. Morgan laughed, then rolled her eyes.

“It’s absolute murder to make all those ideas reality on a publisher’s timeline,” she said. She patted Mark’s arm. “He’s my rock through every stage of it. It’s like they’re squeezing the blood from my artistic veins. Every time I think I can’t give more, another brain flash saves me, and the publisher goes ‘we’re positively mad about it, Morgan, it’s amazing.’” She laughed again.

“And you’re running the main restaurant?” I said to Mark. I knew he was a patisserie chef in the past, but the program he had hosted featured both desserts and main dishes from around the world.

“I am,” he nodded. “It’s a bit of a challenge. I had a manager at the bakery I ran in Richmond, but I wanted to go it on my own here. Fortunately, we have a crack chef on staff, helping develop the main menu, so I’m basically taste boss.” His smile was affable — a little lopsided, like Matt’s when he was admitting to an occasional snafu in his garden designs.

“I reckon you’re doing the wedding’s menu?” Kitty cracked a smile around the edges of her lips.

“Actually, I’m off duty,” he said. “A friend of mine, he’s a two-star Michelin chef, he’s coming down to do the prep and execution, but it’s off the menu concept that the restaurant chef and I are designing.

“So let’s get down to colors and wedding style,” I said, as Kitty opened up the sketchbook she carried, in case a few quick lines would clarify the discussion. “And, of course, the venue. We need to know if you have a place selected — I think you said during our first meeting that you were thinking about having it upstairs?”

“Only if the renovations are finished,” said Morgan. “It’s going to be gorgeous, we just don’t know if it will be in time. We’ve put pressure on the contractors, but you now how professionals are. Always saying there’s another job ahead of you on the list, or whatever. So we’re considering a marquee as a second option. Mark has a friend with a field, so we could basically have it on the green.”

“That can work,” I said. “I can pay a retainer fee for the marquee, obviously. But we’ll need to see the space upstairs, and, more importantly, the plans for what the finished room will look like, so we can have a ‘plan A’ ready if it’s finished in time.”

“Today it would risk your lives, but come back another day and I’ll take you on the grand tour,” said Mark. “I’ll have a copy of the floor plan and the design scheme ready for you also, if that helps.”

“Great,” I said. “Now — colors and flowers. Kitty would like all the detail you can give her, because she’s generally the brains behind those arrangements.”

“Favorites are important,” said Kitty. “It helps to know if what you love about either happens to be two things which clash. Sometimes we have to figure out which one to choose.”

“Wow. I hadn’t even thought about it yet,” said Morgan. “I think — vibrant garden colors. The really deep-hued things attract me. Like that edible floral bouquet I created for the Quinns’ dinner party, from paste sugar — remember?” she said to Mark. “Lilac stalks in different colors and shades, with those little tiny asters.” She squeezed her fingers close in illustration, a winning smile for the memory. I had a feeling the design received a lot of adulation.

“So ... purple, maroon, bit of lavender,” guessed Kitty. “Bit summery, which is good since we’re talking about next year’s warm months. June, right?”

“Classic June wedding,” said Morgan, nodding. “That’s us. The only way we’ll be ready, at this rate, especially since they’re not guaranteeing the window replacements upstairs until next March. Oh, and we kind of want the guests to see a preview of it, like a downsized version, at the engagement party we’re planning in December. Some of our friends — no naming names — have obligations next summer and won’t be here for the ceremony, so we want to show off the basic beauty before the grand unveiling.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, are we planning that also?”

“Absolutely,” said Morgan. “We want it to be perfection, too.”

I had almost forgotten about the tea, when the waiter from earlier returned with a tray holding a teapot and some

cups. Behind him came a young blonde woman in a culinary jacket, carrying a little tray.

“I thought you’d like to let them try some of the cakes you finished this morning,” said the girl, setting them on the table. “Bon appetite.” She smiled at us.

A half-dozen tiny cupcakes were decorated with raspberry-streaked buttercream — or so I thought until I tried one, and discovered it was melt-in-your mouth white chocolate mousse. The little cake beneath was vanilla, with a raspberry cream filling with pureed berries incorporated.

I glanced at Morgan, who had been watching expectantly, now looking pleased. “Gorgeous, right?” she said. “There’s just a tiny little hint of walnut in the cake as well.”

“Amazing,” I said, when I could talk again. I glanced at Kitty, and saw total agreement in her eyes. “That’s one of the best things I’ve had in ages.” And this was with me having tasted Dinah’s latest pumpkin spice mini cupcakes.

“Are you doing the cake yourself?” Kitty asked.

“I plan to,” Morgan nodded. “I was thinking, bourbon cream frosting, fondant paste, very rustic but subtle flavors infusing vanilla and lemon. Very chic.”

“Do you want to send us a copy of your design?” I asked. Kitty and I were eyeing the two remaining cupcakes hungrily, trying not to reach for them.

“I can,” Morgan answered. “You need to see it for the decor, obviously. I can’t wait to see the design you have in mind, especially when you see the photos from Mark’s friend’s house. We’ve been thinking of having the ceremony in the

drawing room — he never uses it, it's just a formal space that sits there most of the year and it's stunning. He says we can have carte blanche to rearrange it, which is better than the church offered. You know how limited the decor opportunities can be at one."

"We need to see those photos, obviously, and we'll share our opinion on it versus the church," I said. "We'll begin working on it right away."

"Maybe it will be a stroke of luck that the carpenters probably won't finish upstairs," said Morgan. "I'm so looking forward to seeing your ideas. It's going to be another stunning creation, I have no doubt." She hugged Mark with one arm. "Just like us." She gestured between them, and both halves of the couple laughed.

"We'll do our best, we promise," I said. "We've never let a client down, so we guarantee satisfaction, or we'll make right the error. We put it into our contract."

I smiled at Kitty, who looked somewhat interested in this wedding, despite her usual 'polite professional unreadable me' expression. I thought the colors intrigued her, because Kitty loved incorporating nature into our work.

Another celebrity wedding scored — that was amazing to me, considering the gamble we had taken in starting our business in the first place. It had been almost a year since we had a wedding this grand on our plate, and I was eager to dive in. Even Kitty, who didn't love our biggest weddings, couldn't deny the satisfaction she felt over seeing her creativity showcased in a bigger venue — usually in all its glory, because her creativity was boundless.

Chapter Two

Paula was at the shop when I arrived on Monday morning, sitting behind our desk with one of her academic notebooks open. Her pencil was lingering above a long equation, and the look on her face was that of distraction.

“Morning,” I said, depositing my bag on the floor behind the counter — pushing a tiny squeaky toadstool toy back inside after it fell out, one of Lottie’s toys that had become mixed up with my things.

“Good morning,” she answered, coming back to earth. Her lips moved a little, but her usual smile didn’t form.

My brow wrinkled. “Everything okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Fine,” she said.

“Tricky equation? My teacher always said to carry the one. I don’t know if that helps.”

I received a tiny smile in return. “Not exactly,” she said. She closed her notebook. “Kitty isn’t here yet, so do you want me to pull the notebooks for summer weddings?”

“I think we only need the ones on country and floral ideas,” I answered. “Blues, lavenders, and purples.” I poured myself a cup of tea. “The bride hasn’t dropped us an email with the cake’s design, has she?”

“No. Do you need me to email her and ask?”

“Not yet, we’ll see if it turns up before the day’s end,” I said. “I think Kitty’s been working on some floral ideas over the weekend, so we’ll start with those.” I cleared some work space in our little parlor seating area, where we sometimes sat and worked on ideas in our office space. “Want to join us?” I asked, as I put away the bridal magazines and some leftover materials from the gift bags that Kitty had made for the annual wine tasting at Cliffs House manor.

“Me? I don’t think I’d be very helpful,” said Paula. “I’m not artistic. I mean, I wish I was — but only maybe with small stuff.” She fiddled with one arm of her eyeglasses, looking sheepish.

“No pressure,” I said. “If you want something to do, I think Kitty was planning to tidy the floral sink and table in the back, but won’t have time this morning.”

“I can do that,” said Paula. She hopped down from the front counter’s stool. “Okay to pour the last cuppa to take with me?” she asked, lifting the kettle.

“Go for it. I’ll put on a new one.” I finished putting away the work basket materials, glancing up as Paula disappeared into the back of the shop.

The next jingle of the bell heralded Kitty’s arrival. She had her sketchpad and a sack that I could tell contained a soft fabric purchase.

“Apron for the W.I. classes,” she said. “Mine at home look like rubbish. Nathan would die if I wore one in public.”

“Show me,” I said. She rolled her eyes, but she pulled it out of the bag. It was green with applique roses across its

bodice. “It was all they had,” she said. “I should swap it for the one I wear when I’m doing the floral stuff.”

“No, I think it’s cute,” I said, coaxingly. “Besides, your floral one is stained, too. Probably going to be more so after today’s cleaning, because you left some plant food on the sink. Paula’s tidying it right now.”

From the back, we heard the sound of a crash — fractured terracotta on tile, unless I guessed incorrectly. That was the end of some of the old garden pots we used in our work.

“Sorry,” Paula’s voice called. “It wasn’t anything valuable, I promise. I’ll clean it up.”

Kitty glanced at me, and I shrugged. “I think the stress of this semester’s studies is already getting to her,” I said.

Kitty stuffed the apron back in its sack and sat down across from me, on the squishy chintz cushions piled in the wicker weave chair. She opened her sketch pad, and flashes of purple-hue wine reds and porcelain lavenders caught my eye.

“So what do you have for me?” I asked. “Did you spend your entire weekend brainstorming?”

She scoffed. “Please.” She opened her notebook. “I gave it some thought,” she answered. “I figure we’ll have to change things after we see the venue.”

“You mean the probable venue,” I corrected. “They still wanted to have it at the restaurant if at all possible.” Bon Cuisine didn’t look ready for a full-scale wedding, but we had months still ahead of us before the scheduled day.

“Did you peek upstairs? It was a ruddy mess,” said Kitty. “Nine months away from finish, probably, and that’s before the decorators come in.”

“Okay, you’re right. The actual venue,” I said. “That means indoors and outdoors are in play, so it’s a good thing they wanted the decor to be very summer floral.”

“That’s what I’m giving them,” replied Kitty, in her matter of fact way. “I had a list from Marian of what she can access, and I thought some of it might come from the big shop opened in Truro, a couple of miles from the garden center. They specialize in imported roses. A touch of class in the country bouquets.”

Kitty’s design was filled with hues of blue purples, with the deep brilliance of three kinds of lilacs, the feather touch of salvias, and roses like Paradise, Plum Perfect, and Blue Moon. The colors looked stunning, especially for the bridal bouquet, which had trailing floral panicles cascading from the gathered floral dome of roses and lavender.

“It’s really beautiful,” I said, as I examined the sketches. “I like what you’ve done with the floral trail down the center of each table. And the bower for the top table is very subtle.”

“The maroon shades are what makes it pop,” explained Kitty. “It takes it from the blues to a richer place, brings out the reds in blue roses. It’s what makes it vibrant.”

“They’re going to love this,” I said, flipping through the final pages. “I think they plan to feature red wines at the wedding. Put that in contrast with those very pale lilac damask linens I have marked, and it’ll be spectacular for the photographs.”

“I didn’t see the linens,” she said. “The shiny ones with the rose motif?”

“Those are the ones, with a little silver threadwork in them,” I said. “I have a swatch in the planning notebook, I thought we’d take it along to the venue. Can you drive out there tomorrow?” I asked. “I’m free, after I take Lottie to Gemma’s mom’s.”

“Don’t fancy bringing her along to the country?” said Kitty, teasing.

“I’m not fond of changing nappies on the grass, no,” I answered. “Besides, I thought we’d take Paula along for instructional purposes, not for babysitting ones. I think she could use some fresh air, and the grounds are supposed to be pretty lush. The autumn foliage is probably at its height right now.”

“Doesn’t she have class?”

“No, something about a lab day, but I think she’s covered her latest assignment twenty times,” I said. “It’s only a half day. We might take the time to rearrange a little furniture in the drawing room to see if we can envision the seating for the ceremony. There were no good pictures of the mantelpiece side of the drawing room, ironically, which is what we needed.”

Kitty shrugged. “Those are always the ones people forget,” she said. “I could wager money on it.”

The house hosting the wedding reminded me of a French manor from a film: a massive garden filled with lilacs and roses, and lavender beds galore, with fountains that would be bubbling with water come summer. The drawing room which would host the ceremony was a large one, sparsely furnished, with a few antiques. A large impressively-carved white fireplace was at the far end, as I suspected, with a French countryside landscape in oil hanging above it.

The three of us — me, Kitty, and Paula — stood in front of it, surveying the room at large. I put my hands on my hips. “It’s big,” I said. “Plenty of room. I think we can get hired chairs in two sections without any problem.”

“Are they rich, the couple getting married?” Paula shoved her glasses up the bridge of her nose again. A new pair, not the old one that had been mended. Poor and thrifty students have to economize, I knew, but I had been tempted to buy her a new pair for Christmas until now.

“She’s famous,” said Kitty. “He used to be.” She glanced at our assistant. “I reckon that says it all.” She snapped some photos of the room. “We’ll need the drapes to be something a bit more fitting. White, maybe,” she commented.

“The bride is Morgan Corky,” I said to Paula. “You know, who wrote the book on British couture desserts. Invented the Cranberry Bran Brioche Tart?”

“Oh, yeah. My mum has that book,” said Paula. “Is he a cook also, or something else?”

“He used to host a show about international cuisine in England,” I said. “Mark Stroper, a baker. He and Morgan are

opening the new posh restaurant in Penzance, near the historic heart.”

“What do you think about maybe skipping the big flowers on the mantel, and the bowers, and doing something a bit more dramatic. They said they wanted simple and sophisticated, so we go with a big show piece and nothing else,” Kitty said, standing back from the room’s head, in front of the veranda doors leading to the terrace and the gardens.

“Like what?” I said. “A wreath, or some floral trails hanging from the chandeliers?” We had draped the hanging light in the barn with dangling chains of pink mini roses, moss, and baby’s breath heaped in the candelabra’s frame for a woodland-themed wedding last year, and the effect had drawn lots of compliments from guests.

“An archway, maybe,” Kitty pondered. “A big one, in front of the fireplace. We basically frame them and the parson in flowers, show off the fancy architecture. It could be simple construct of wood, with dried grapevine and willow weaving for the base — lots of green amaranth woven through, with rosebuds and lilacs. Sort of a soft, wild vine look, bit of moss on the grapevine, that would provide the twisty nature look, bit of architectural interest. What do you think?”

I gazed at the space in question. “I think it could be striking if we create it right,” I said. “So — no flowers on the mantel, no boughs or massive bouquet.”

“Nope. Keep the rest simple. Maybe put a couple of corresponding French terracotta pots on either side of the terrace doors here, or some potted pencil cypress. Roll a maroon shade of carpet to make a path from the mantel down

to the end of the garden path where the reception's being held."

We walked out through the garden where the reception was tentatively slated. The pencil cypress trees Kitty mentioned were potted throughout, along with wispy, Mediterranean herbs that had the delicacy of the copious lavender plants, now on the verge of seasonal sleep. Soon all of these would be mulched over to survive until next year, but even without their glorious colors shining, I knew many of them would be impressive come summer, thanks to Matt's tutelage.

"This courtyard is pretty big," said Kitty, as we looked at the open green lawn surrounded by border beds and pots, with the fountain near the enclosure wall. "Grass looks good. Paving stone paths would make great dividers if we were sectioning off for tables."

"I guess this is where they want the marquee," I said. "But I wish we could have open tables instead. Maybe we could raise the sides of the marquee if the weather's good — have half the tables outside, and emphasize the marquee for the food and the bar?"

Kitty quirked one eyebrow. "That might look good," she said. "The decor would look better in open sunlight — top table could have that side of the house with the climbing grapevine for its background."

"We could do a big floral arrangement for the cake table," I said. "Something that compliments her design, once we see it."

I could picture it easily, and it would be sophisticated and elegant, yet rustic. It was exactly what they asked for, and the floral colors would easily compliment the wine and menu — it had to look photographically picturesque, I knew, because I suspected pictures of the cuisine would be as important to the bride and groom as pictures of themselves. It sounds strange, but it was part of their professional environment. Their lifestyle was part of the wedding, as it had been for more than a few of our posh clients in the past.

“That would give them a view of the fountain, right?” said Paula. “From top table. It’s really pretty.” She was making backup notes as we talked, trying to be helpful and learn something, although it was true that Paula’s talents didn’t lie in event decor despite her efforts to absorb some of our ways.

“That, and the wall with the roses,” I said. “It’s perfect. We’ll have to talk to the marquee company about tent size, but we’re reserving one anyway, so we might as well use it, rain or shine. Let’s walk to the end, to see it from the tent’s perspective. If it rains, we need a good top table view, and enough room to pack in the rest of the guests, plus caterers.”

We moved further down the stone path, until we reached the end of the formal garden, where some gardening projects were clearly in the works this week. A garden cart was parked by the flower beds, and fresh earth was mounded in one of the large French terracotta urns near the end archway.

“Is that a vineyard?” I stepped through the opening, feeling as if I was stepping from an Italian garden into Burgundy farmland, with rows of vines trained on trellises in uniform rows on the hillside. “This place has one, right?”

Maybe that's why the wine is going to be one of the stars of the menu."

"They bottle their own Pinot," said Kitty. "And a Cabernet that won third place at last year's U.K. wine tasting."

"How did you know that?" I asked.

"Brochure." She held it up. "They had some in the front hall. I reckon they hand them to tourists when the public comes in."

The view of the vineyard in autumn was as picturesque as the rest of the place had been, with leaves of yellow gold just turned and ready to fall from the woody vines. I thought of Lothlorien, of birch woods in postcards, treading them under my feet between the rows, along well-worn paths that were probably for the workers more than for visitors.

Even if the restaurant was finished in time, it wouldn't be as perfect as this place, which looked like something out of a wedding planner's brochure. Maybe we should tell them to abandon the other idea altogether. We were already booking the marquee, so it would be more economical in some ways, not that I thought they cared. Morgan Corky's last book was a runaway success, and Mark had operated a successful bakery until recently.

Near the garden's gateway, I could see Kitty taking some photos, and talking to one of the gardeners responsible for the in-progress maintenance. I walked that way, thinking I could ask some questions, too, about the types of grapes growing here.

To the right of the gate was an old stone seat in an alcove that looked readied for an ancient Italian statue, where I found Paula instead, sitting with her notebook, looking distracted again.

I felt instinctively that something was wrong, although she had reassured me otherwise. She was unusually preoccupied, even compared to when she was poring over a complex physics theory.

“Hey,” I said, softly. “This place has a certain ‘wow’ factor, doesn’t it?” I sat down beside her. “Sort of like being in a little version of France. A couple million quid probably created it.” I smiled.

“I’ve never been to France,” said Paula. “Some girls at uni went on holiday there one year. I didn’t, I had stuff at home.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “But it’s not your last chance, so that’s a good thing.”

“True.” Paula bobbed her head in assent. “Maybe someday.” She looked down at the notebook, which I noticed was doodled with scientific notes in its margins, and also with tiny music notes, hearts, and little flowers.

“So how are things this term?” I asked. “You haven’t talked about it much.”

“Good.” She nodded. “It’s all right.” That little smile didn’t fool me, however.

I sighed. “You know, I can tell,” I said. I gazed out at the vineyards, the yellow leaves caught in the breeze. “When

you're not happy. It's been long enough now that it's hard for you to hide it convincingly around me."

I glanced her way, and saw that Paula looked uneasy. "It's ... nothing, really," she said.

"Something's different this year," I said. "I'm not asking you to tell me. This is just me opening the door so you can if you want to."

"I don't want to make a big fuss over something small." Paula picked at the notebook's spiral loop. "It's not worth it. I'm feeling a bit out of sorts, but things will sort themselves. Things change, and some of them are bound to disappoint."

Maybe she had missed the opportunity for an important scholarship. I knew Paula struggled monetarily — her pockets were almost as hungry for cash as her mind was for knowledge. When I first met her, she had been a gawky young girl in Year 12, studying for basic exams and reading books constantly. Aimee had told me that it had taken Paula a year to muster the courage to try for more — to earn impressive A-level status to pursue her dream of studying science at a university.

Slow-blooming flowers should not be forced, Matt once cautioned me. His advice had been more practical to me on a human level than a horticultural one, however. I listened to it now, as I sat beside Paula, who might be on the precipice now, trying to muster courage for another bold step — or a response to disappointment.

"If you need a sympathetic ear, I'm happy to listen," I said. "If it's about scientific theories, I probably can't help, but

I have full confidence I can share in whatever baffles you about it.”

Paula’s lips almost smiled. “I think the science part is the part I’m okay with,” she answered, adjusting her glasses again.

So this was about something more personal. I pondered mean girls, mean boys, mean-spirited professors, or dons who thought a girl like Paula didn’t have what it takes to make a name for herself in the world.

“Just don’t forget,” I said, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Chapter Three

Amanda made good on her promise next meeting of the Women's Institute. She arrived with an item wrapped in a scarf in her bag, which she unfurled to reveal a worn-looking clothbound book.

"I have it here," she announced, triumphantly. "It belonged to my great-grandmother Caroline. A fully authentic World War II-era cookbook, filled with recipes she penciled in by hand during the most 'needs must' era the nation ever faced."

We 'oohed' with appreciation. How many of us had an authentic period cookbook one of our family members wrote by hand?

"Was she an enthusiastic cook, I gather?" asked Cherish.

"Loved it," said Amanda. "It wasn't a period of good fortune for my family, but she mustered what was left of the finances to preserve them, and put herself to the art of economy. Saw her house through the worst of the storm whilst my grandfather was serving in France, and came through with a tidy nest egg for future investment."

"She sounds very impressive," I said, feeling a little in awe of great-grandmother Caroline. Could I see my house through a war and economic deprivation? Probably not, since I once burned a cheap box of pasta and had to begin again.

“Oodles of recipes in here,” said Amanda. “She modified all the printed ones to fit the rations and available ingredients of the time, and wrote her own in the addendum pages at the end. Look at it — oodles,” she repeated, turning the pages for us in a story time demonstration. “They sound absolutely fascinating. Banana cake made with mashed parsnips — molded fish loaf — aspic salad made with tinned veg. There’s a pudding simply called a ‘milk boil.’ Sounds very intriguing.”

It sounded very disgusting to me, who pictured a shapeless white lump that would taste of scorched milk, but it wasn’t as if I could see the ingredients from here. I could see the women around me exchanging glances, however.

“Do any of these things sound like they’d taste decent?” ventured Kitty. A question which many ladies of the W.I. were privately thinking.

“It was the era of economy, Kitty,” Amanda answered, affronted. “I’m sure they taste a teeny bit different than we’re accustomed to, but still very palatable.”

“Great-grandma Caroline was supposedly a renowned cook,” I pointed out. “Maybe it’s worth a try.” Having heard this list of dishes, I felt a little bit of doubt, but it would make me a less-supportive friend to say so in the face of Amanda’s excitement.

“It could be adventurous,” said Cherish, trying to muster some enthusiasm also.

“It will be,” said Amanda. “How exciting is it, recreating the dishes our ancestors probably sat down to every evening — or as a treat on Sundays? Their Christmas celebration is

probably somewhere in these pages ... there's a section devoted to Special Occasions."

She closed the book and passed it around the room. "Now, I thought it might be fun if we did something a little special for the cookery classes, to help us with the spirit of things," she said.

"Like what?" Kitty sounded suspicious.

"Like dressing in period clothes." Amanda beamed. "Think of it — us in the little gingham prints and hand-me-down aprons of our grandmothers, learning their techniques. It'll be like they're alongside us, teaching us the way they would have in those days."

"Where would we get these costumes?" asked Charlotte, looking confused.

"Dig, my bird. Dig in the attic, dig in the cellar trunks. The secondhand clothing store in Truro sells dresses and blouses that look just the thing," said Amanda. "I'm sure we all have something in our wardrobe that could pass for a farmwife's everyday dress — an old plaid or serge skirt with a jumper would do the trick, if nothing else."

"I don't think I have anything that will do," I whispered to Cherish. I had a bad feeling I would be going shopping at a secondhand boutique soon.

"Do you think I could get away with one of my ancestor's everyday dresses? I think I have some of my grandmother's old saris packed away," she whispered back, and we both stifled our laughter.

“When I was cleaning the cupboards, I found a darling little blouse and skirt combo that one of Will’s ancestors packed away with some old clothes, that will just do,” said Amanda. “I even found a hat. How is that for kismet, I ask?”

“Kismet,” repeated Kitty, whose flat voice conveyed as much doubt as her quirked eyebrow.

“I’ll develop a menu from this book and we’ll put the dishes to practice before we make it public for the dance,” said Amanda. “Imagine everyone’s surprise when they see it, it’ll be completely unexpected.”

“Not like having old-fashioned bangers and mash and ham and egg pie, is it?” said Charlotte, whose bright tone of voice didn’t conceal a little bit of amusement. “Bit of a change from the dances my mum used to go to.”

Maybe it would be fun, learning to make an authentic dinner. Or maybe it would just eat up part of my spending cash for this month, forcing me to find an authentic dress to wear to the W.I. cookery classes. Either one was likely at this point.

“Maybe there’s something old in my gran’s stuff I can fix and wear,” said Kitty, as the meeting adjourned. “I think Mum gave it all away when she cleared out the spare room, though.” Kitty’s grandmother Madge was once a local sewing legend. “She had old fabric and some patterns that were my great-grandmum’s.”

The local shop’s racks didn’t have anything that would do for me when I checked at lunchtime the next day. I was going to have to shop in Truro, I decided, after hanging up a knit blouse that had the look of a seventies’-era domestic

goddess, but not a village farm wife peeling potatoes as she listened to Winston Churchill.

“This might interest you,” I said to Paula, who was looking at another rack behind me. I held up a cute jumper with embroidered leaves, the kind of thing Paula generally preferred. “It’s cute and it’s half off.” I was thinking ‘Christmas present’ in the back of my mind, because I hadn’t decided on one for Paula yet.

“Thanks, but I’m saving my quid for something a bit different,” she answered. “I was just browsing.” She moved away from the rack of clothes behind her, which held dresses, I couldn’t help but notice, of the soft, filmy fabrics that probably never touched the inside of her closet at home.

I had taken Paula to lunch at the Fisherman’s Rest, my treat, in hopes that she might confide in me. Whatever she was brooding about still weighed heavily on her mind, and it manifested itself at work sometimes — extra clumsiness, like spilling a bottle of glitter on one of Kitty’s hand-decorated announcement plaques for the wine tasting, and, more recently, the stapling together of our private notes with the business invoices.

So far, no luck. We had talked about different teaching methods for maths, the origin theory for the speed of light, the new far-reaching Webb telescope and Madame Curie, but nothing too personal. Maybe Paula didn’t feel she could confide in me, even after all this time. She probably thought I wouldn’t understand.

Maybe it was something to do with fashion. Paula had always dressed practically, not necessarily fashionably, as the

daughter of a single mom, who worked extra jobs to help out at home. Paula's friends hadn't been the same as my teenage ones, who had come over to my house to gab over issues of *Tiger Beat*, glitter boy band posters, and teach each other hair and makeup tips. Paula probably didn't have a straightener for her frizzy hair, much less a curling iron to style it into flawless curls afterwards, but I had owned both when I was thirteen, along with a pink glitter hair dryer and full manicure set, part of my 'extra-girly' phase of maturing

She could be wanting a change. Maybe I should look at those dresses and see if there was a cute, affordable one that looked like something she could dress down for class or dress up a little for a casual party. Maybe Paula was hoping to be more social this year at uni, as opposed to a bookworm whose friends were solely her lab partners and the library assistant who checked on her at her study carrel now and then.

"Some of those dresses were nice," I remarked, as we exited the shop. "Which one caught your eye?"

"None of them. I don't know much about dresses, actually," she said. "I was looking, just to look. I mean, I don't even know what colors I'm supposed to wear. Everyone has colors, right?"

"True," I said. "I had mine done, but I never trusted those results. Sometimes it's better just to ask a friend you trust if it looks good, and go with it. I can always ask Kitty. She'd never lie, so I know I'm safe."

"I'll remember that," said Paula, glancing down. "I mean, if I ever need fashion advice."

“Everyone needs it now and then,” I said. “Are you thinking about freshening your wardrobe with some new items? You mentioned you were saving money, so I wondered if that’s why.”

“No. That is — I can’t afford money for things I don’t need, I know,” said Paula. “What I saved, I’ll probably use to buy a better microscope. Mine has a broken knob.”

Probably it was a hand-me-down also, I thought. “That would be nice,” I said. “Not that dresses aren’t nice. I’d be in the wrong business if that’s what I thought, because not many brides opt for jeans and an old jumper on their wedding day.”

A slight giggle escaped Paula. “I suppose not,” she agreed, nodding.

We were passing the shop on the corner, formerly Prue’s bakery, but its sole occupant these days was the chocolatier who stayed in the village after her decision to move. Its windows were decorated for autumn with chocolate leaves painted edible red and copper, and a bounteous cornucopia of chocolate wicker, filled with marzipan gourds, miniature stripey squash and pumpkins.

Dinah’s shop was closed for two weeks — she was one of the hosts of a special baking seminar featuring former champions of the *Grand Baking Extravaganza*, along with — of all people — her former archnemesis and frenemy Prue. That meant no more mini pumpkin spice cupcakes, so we had skipped our usual dessert.

“How about I buy you some chocolate?” I said to Paula. “Proper dessert after a sandwich.”

“I’m fine,” said Paula. “Lunch was plenty.”

“I insist,” I said. “Besides, you never know what’s inside this place. Sometimes there’s something too irresistible to turn down.” I opened the door, letting Paula enter first.

The scent of chocolate, cinnamon, and candy-sweet marzipan perfumed the atmosphere, coming from the display cases of curiosities that I always found hard to believe were truly edible and not ornaments for admiration alone. Currently, chocolate acorns with biscuit caps spilled down one of the trays; mushrooms that looked fresh-dug from the forest were actually white chocolate-filled meringues dusted with dark cocoa dirt. A wreath of fondant leaves decorated a chocolate cake with cherry jam filling, which was today’s ‘prize’, for which every customer who bought ten quid of merchandise was entered to win.

The genius behind all of this was Calvin, the young chocolate master and creative force who made realistic chocolate nutcracker soldiers at Christmas, and marzipan sugar plums that melted on the tongue. He greeted us from behind the counter, where his white apron and his dark skin, slightly mottled due to a pigmentation condition, were both dusted with equal parts caster sugar and cocoa.

“What can I treat you ladies with today?” he asked. “Turkish delight plums or candy apples?” He lifted the dome off the tray of free samples on the counter, which contained tiny, shiny pinkish-red plums and little glassy-green jade apples trimmed with chocolate stem and mint leaves.

“Mm, tough choice,” I said. “I’ll try an apple.” I selected one of the green ones, and Paula took one of the plums. I took

a bite from mine.

“Oh. Wow.” I hadn’t been expecting the sensation which followed as the candy coating crunched — inside was a soft, textured filling, a flavor between a caramel apple with nuts and the brown sugar goodness of apple butter. “That’s extremely good.”

“It’s a new kind of soft caramel I’ve been working on,” he said. “I’m thinking about putting it into some seasonal chocolate, and putting those chocolates into some German chocolate cupcakes, with traditional frosting.

“Can this really get better? Are you sure?” I asked. “Because it’s pretty amazing right now.”

Paula nibbled hers, testing it with curiosity. “Turkish delight,” she said, as the rosy-pink soft candy appeared like a jewel beneath the red-painted chocolate. “It’s lovely.”

“Thanks,” said Calvin. “Now, what can I get for you proper?” he asked. “I would recommend the large acorns — they’re filled with marshmallow creme. Delicious if you toast them on a biscuit for a minute or two. Like a campfire s’more in the States.”

“What kind of biscuits are those?” I asked, pointing in the cabinet.

“Raspberry ones, with a vanilla filling, chocolate-dipped,” he said. “They’re very soft, almost like a cake. If your sweet tooth runs to the rich and decadent, that’s your treat.”

“Maybe just a little square of chocolate,” said Paula, who looked shy of eating anything too big or, maybe, too

expensive. Suddenly, I worried that talking about her finances had made her afraid I was being charitable — and that she was looking for someone to buy her treats to save her extra quid.

“You can pick anything,” I said, as Calvin stepped aside to answer the shop’s phone. “It’s a treat for me, too. I intend to eat something disgustingly delicious if it tempts me, even if it’s one of those chocolate horns of plenty.” I pointed to one of the centerpieces in the case, way too large for one person to eat in a sitting, with its autumnal fondant leaves and marzipan plums flecked with edible gold.

Paula bit back her laugh. “Nothing that big, for certain,” she said. “I’m just not that hungry. Too much studying lately.”

I knew my concern was showing through. I tried to hide it by pretending to look at the display of salted caramel, coffee, and toffee mini snails. Maybe something in miniature was the better choice anyway, I thought, as I pointed out the cute little bunches of chocolate grapes infused with different wine flavors, in a display that reminded me a little of the ‘Mediterranean vineyards’ of our clients’ wedding site. A molded white candy face, looking like one of the Roman statues of the gods, lay in the midst of a chocolate tray, its mouth open, its false ceramic dusted in edible gold and a little cocoa powder to add age.

“How about something unique?” Calvin asked, opening up the case. “You have a discerning eye for the special, since these chocolates are some of the best.” He pulled out the small tray of prettily-molded square dark chocolates. Each one had different floral or leaf patterns imprinted on the middle.

“What makes them special?” I asked.

“The infusions. The grape clusters on that tray are wine, the one of autumn leaves are hints of savory and spice. These are infused with sweet herbs. There are medicinal and folkloric traditions behind most of them, but it’s the taste that’s important.”

“Let’s try them,” I said, looking at Paula. “How about these?” I selected a couple that had little flower sprigs in the middle, pointing to them.

“Good selection,” said Calvin. “It’s got a bit of a secret ingredient that one, very light in the chocolate, just a little bit floral. It’s an interesting choice — in folklore, it’s called the truth-telling herb. Some people used to say it made you confess your secrets if you ate it.”

“What herb is it?” I asked

“Ah, I can’t tell you that part,” he answered. “That’s the secret.”

Paula and I exchanged glances again. He grinned at us. “Do you dare try it?” he asked, mysteriously, but kidding at the same time.

“I’m game,” I said. “I have nothing to hide. Mostly nothing, anyway.” Paula tilted her head, then nodded, with a shy smile. “Two, please,” I said to Calvin.

He handed us each a chocolate, wrapped in fall print paper. We each took a bite. “Mmm,” I said. “It’s different. Really good, though. I think I can taste the secret ingredient.” Something a little bit floral or lightly green, like the aroma of tea leaves fresh brewed, was coming through at the back of it.

“Glad you like it,” he said. “Sometimes the simplest is just the thing.”

Outside the shop, we both found ourselves giggling. “Do you suppose in the old days they used it for interrogations?” I pondered. “If it tasted this good, probably nobody minded.”

“I think it probably just tastes like green when it’s not in chocolate,” said Paula. “It was fun to try, though.”

“Next time, we’ll get the caramel snails,” I said, wiping my fingers on the candy paper. “Maybe I’ll bring a box to the office one day and brighten things up.”

Paula was still pensive. I tried to pretend I didn’t notice, but I knew she could tell. It makes us uncomfortable to see our feelings reflected in another’s face, if we’re trying to disguise them. It’s like seeing our failures in a flashing neon sign.

“Anything you’re looking forward to this term?” I asked. “I know there’s sometimes a science scholarship or prize that you apply for. There must be something exciting.”

“Not this term,” she said. “There is ... a dance. A sort of formal dance.”

The way she said it, I knew it was the issue she was wrestling. “A Christmas ball, right?” I said. “I think a lot of universities have them.”

“Not exactly a ball, maybe,” she said. “And it’s just a winter one, held before the school holiday. I was thinking about going, but then I ... I thought maybe it wasn’t such a good idea, and I should just stay home and study.”

“Why?” I said. “It sounds like a great time. You should go.” I tried to see if this was just the normal hesitation that

Paula usually had. “Is it the music? The crowds? The not having a proper dress?”

“I don’t know. I just didn’t know if it was what I wanted,” she said. “Nearly everybody goes. It’s a big deal, guys ask girls, there are hired tuxes and the sort of dresses girls wear to be bridesmaids. It’s not a place where I would fit in, exactly, since I hardly ever go to the socials. I’m mostly in the library.”

“I think,” I said, “that you simply have to decide if that’s what you want and go for it. The smaller details will figure themselves out. You just have to decide if you’re taking the first step by making up your mind.”

From the side, I gave her a brief hug. “You would have a good time, I think, especially if you open up,” I said. “I think there’s no chance you’ll be the only library lover who decides they want to be there.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Paula. “But it’s not simple to me. I’m probably overcomplicating ideas, the way I always do, and that’s why I want to keep to my books.”

“Well, if you want my advice on a dress or a date, let me know,” I said. I detected a quick blush on Paula’s cheek, and wondered if maybe the real problem was no one asking her. No one had looked past the books and the binary numbers to see how unique she was.

“Thanks,” she said again.

“Any time.” A few red leaves scattered across our path, from an ornamental tree that the new print shop’s employee was sunning on the pavement outside its door. In a couple of weeks, my son would be clamoring to carve his pumpkins, now turning hues of orange in our front garden.

At least Paula finally gave me a clue about the problem on her mind. *Maybe there's something in that herb after all*, I thought — then wondered what prompted Cal to offer us those truth-telling treats among all the others in the case. Probably just because they were small, I reasoned, and Paula said she only wanted a piece of chocolate to nibble.

Like all the times before, the way his genius seemed to transcend mere tasty works of art was just a coincidence. But I never ceased to be surprised when it happened.

Chapter Four

The carpenters were off on another job the following Monday, so Mark invited us to come tour the upper floor of Bon Cuisine. I think he already knew it wasn't possible to host the wedding reception on site, but I knew he wanted to show off his future restaurant to anybody who would admire it. Besides which, we had a few points of discussion with the bride about her cake design.

The upper floor of the restaurant was being remodeled with an open floor plan, featuring four cosy nooks for privacy, and a small, semi-private long table for bigger parties or to operate a smaller sous chef kitchen for carving and buffet preparation at special events, connected to the floor below by a hidden dumbwaiter.

A large bay window faced towards the sea, offering a stunning view, even facing the wrong direction for sunset, which Mark confessed was his only regret about the building.

“The rest was perfect,” he said. “Obviously, I mean after renovation.” He bundled aside some drop cloths which were used to cover the crown moldings while the workers put in the new decorative support pillars to replace the old walls that held up the building's roof and attic floor. “It was a marvelous location, prime spot for tourists and locals. Foreign travelers can practically disembark in our back garden.”

“Will you have a second public entrance?” I asked. “For people walking up from the harbor?”

“My mind in a nutshell,” he answered. “We’re putting a terraced path in, with a sign, that takes them on a little winding tour through the garden, past the outdoor and terrace tables, and to a small reception area that doubles as a mini wine showroom, featuring the local vintages we serve.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” said Kitty. She climbed underneath the scaffolding to reach the window view, artfully avoiding twisting a high heel on any of the plaster debris lying around. I felt less confident, so I stayed put as Mark climbed underneath.

“We’re putting a central table here, then two others flanking it, with a few potted plants or statuary in between, to add just a little privacy,” he said. “I want everything moveable, so we can set up a bar here on special occasions, when the place is hired for events, or if we want to put in a long table.”

He gestured towards the corners of the main room where I was standing. “Each alcove will be a little unique space, whilst still fitting with the harmony of the decor as a whole,” he said. “I’m laying in statuary with the look and feel of a Mediterranean country estate garden that’s been standing since the time of Louis the XV — tastefully aged, not that cheap stuff like the Venus de Milos you see at the garden center, I promise.”

We both laughed. “I’m guessing the rest looks very much like the estate we visited, the one belonging to your friend,” I said. “Lots of earthen terracotta, soft shades, herbs, a feel of something historic, yet timeless.”

“Exactly,” he said. “The tables will be sturdy, well-finished wood, giving a feel between farm kitchen table and

modern high-price Scandinavia — simple linens, simple drapes, old fixtures pulled out of a French-style manor house I found through an estate auction website. We even landed the basin-style fountain, which I'll be installing downstairs in the main dining room.”

“I'll have to come here when you open this place to the public,” I said. “You can't wait, I'm sure.”

“If I could only work out the snags in the menu, I'd be overjoyed,” he said. “But the chef and I, we're working through the differences at a steady pace. I have the feeling he's being patient with me — I'm trying not to seem impatient when he doesn't quite hear my reasons.”

Chagrin entered Mark's voice, but it was gone when he spoke again, moving back into the main dining room after ducking beneath the scaffold again. “Overhead, we're replacing the old light fixture with a large chandelier I found at a scrapyard, believe it or not. It was French metalwork, with these stunning little candelabra holders that only needed an electrician's help to wire for bulbs.”

“I think there was a French chandelier in the drawing room where you're thinking about hosting the ceremony,” I said.

“It's actually quite like it,” he said. “Our friend lived in France in his youth, which is why he modeled the house and grounds after a southern French estate. Morgan and I both loved it from the moment we paid him a visit. In fact, I proposed to her at an estate in France, when we were on holiday a couple of years ago. We're both mad about the architecture and the cuisine.”

“Do you miss France?” I asked. I pulled aside an electrical cord for safety’s sake, so Kitty wouldn’t trip as she followed him out.

“I do sometimes. Yeah,” he said. “It’s a beautiful place, like nature and human design had this kind of harmony and rhythm all their own that’s been preserved there.”

“I know what you mean,” said Kitty. “It stands still in some places, like you’ve been left in a place with no time.”

“You’ve been there before, I gather,” he said, as he swept aside some of the debris using a push broom, clearing a path around one of the new pillars that had yet to be installed. It had an impressive molded facade that had a tiny bit of antiquing that added authenticity.

“I lived there for a bit,” she said.

“Really? Where?” he asked, as he leaned the broom against the wall.

“Paris. Just for a bit, though. I fancied coming home after a couple of years.”

“I suppose we all do.” Mark led the way downstairs again. “We all have great moments that we wish we could time travel back to. But the program asked me, and I felt I couldn’t say ‘no’ to the BBC,” he joked. “It put me on a new path in life, without which I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

We descended to the main dining room, where the serving staff was unboxing a crate that turned out to be filled with new wine glasses. Mark led us through to the kitchen.

“Morgan’s in here somewhere,” he said. “She’ll be glad to see you — we’ve had a small issue crop up that may throw

a spanner into part of the works.”

“What is it?” I said.

“She’ll explain. It’s nothing to cancel the event, don’t worry,” he reassured us. “It’s up to her to decide what change to make, and she’ll want your advice, I’m certain. I’m staying well out of it, truthfully. I have enough worries on my plate, culinary pun excused.”

“What is it about?” I asked, feeling slightly concerned. We passed a server carrying a box filled with tiny little vases of French porcelain.

“It’s about the cake, as luck would have it,” he said.

Kitty looked chagrined. I knew that the cake, especially with matters of color and style, was in her wheelhouse for this event. “What sort of issue?” she asked. “Like — making a change.”

“Probably,” he admitted. “I liked the design, personally, and would like to salvage it, but Morgan should have her way on this, as I said before. I’ll be busy enough hashing out the menu for the main course.”

We passed the little alcove table by the kitchen passageway, which I had observed before was for the restaurant’s two chef owners to use when working, entering the main body of the kitchen, where the kitchen staff were circled around one of the prep tables.

“She’s been testing new recipe concepts,” he explained. “This week they’re focusing on fairy cakes and comfort petit fours, I think, so she’s really been in the thick of batter and icing these past few days, to add more stress to the situation.”

Morgan was the focal point of the staff circle, having an animated discussion over the treats which were on the table — little golden cakes with a crumble top, that made my mouth water just looking at them.

” — and it needs more, more for the sake of comfort food really being part of the name,” she was saying. “This is what I’m building my reputation on, so don’t hold back. I want to taste the citrus and the sweetness in equal parts next time, Jillian, okay?”

“Of course, Morgan,” promised the blonde cook I remembered from before, who had served us the delicious raspberry white chocolate bites. “I’ll work on it today and fix it.”

“Good. Put half the new batch on my table as soon as they’ve cooled, then chill the others for the leftovers test,” said Morgan. “And — where are we in the blueberry biscuit shortbread ginger souffle tarts? Anyone?”

“I, uh, am finishing the blueberry shortbread today,” said one of the male cooks, hesitantly. “Jillian — you’re doing the modified souffle mix, right?”

“I’m on it, but it still has some issues with separation,” said Jillian. “And timing the biscuits so they don’t burn before the souffle filling is done.”

“Solve it ASAP, okay?” said Morgan. “The publisher wants to read the section on home comfort mini cakes as quick as I can finish it, so those recipes have to be perfect. Okay, that’ll do, everybody back to your stations, it’s been a productive discussion.”

She noticed us now and waved. “Sorry I couldn’t tear myself away,” she said, unbuttoning her chef’s coat. “It’s been

utter chaos these past few days. My editor moved up the date for reviewing the chapters on fairy cakes and mini tarts both. They want to push the deadline up to launch the book at spring's end."

"So what's the issue with the cake?" I asked. "We're concerned, Mark told us a moment ago that you may have to change your plan."

The cake design delivered to us involved three layers of vanilla bean bourbon sponge with a rich honeycomb cream filling, golden dates, and a corresponding buttercream — all decorated with sugar paste flowers shaped like wisteria panicles with open and budded peonies, all in various shades of lavender and wine-red purples. Whilst Kitty had questions about a few shades and whether the wisteria could be changed to lilacs, it was perfect for the wedding's theme, down to the chocolate bark vine climbing up one side of the tower. I hated to think it was being changed for some reason if we could help fix it.

"It's absolutely rotten luck," said Morgan, groaning. "It's me. I can't make the sponge for the wedding, by doctor's orders. I have severe carpal tunnel in my right hand, and I'm having surgery at the end of next April, as scheduled yesterday by my doctor's orders. Also by his orders — no mixing, no dicing, and no stirring for eight weeks' afterwards. I'm to minimize the amount I do in the months before, which is devastating, given I'm in the thick of recipe development."

"I'm so sorry," I said. "No wonder you're stressed. But — couldn't we use the design and another baker?"

Morgan's expression looked slightly stony. "Look, I don't mean to sound like an absolute prat, but I really don't like the thought of anybody else executing one of my designs before I've had a chance to create it myself. I'm not comfortable with it, so if I can't do it, then I would prefer to choose some other design."

Kitty looked disappointed. That's how I felt, knowing that the great design was going to waste. "Do you have anything in mind yet?" I asked. I knew I could recommend Dinah, of course, but not until after she was back from the seminar.

"No, but I know it has to be something really impressive," she said. "Something comparable to what I created, in a style that fits our wedding. Top-tier cooks, the best bakers in the country will be tasting it. I have to have something of that same caliber." She shook her head. "I was thinking maybe we could post an ad for professional bakers to audition, maybe ask them to pitch their creations via email? A chance to be featured in a wedding that will be photographed and publicized is something that less-famous professionals would love."

My mind explored this idea, trying to think quickly to get ahead of a possible contingency problem, which would be the cake remaining a mystery to us stylistically until it was nearly too late to commission a replacement, if necessary. Kitty's look was a message that confirmed it was a bad idea.

"Let us think about it," I said. "We'll discuss it and get back to you."

“I’m open minded on this one,” said Morgan. “I want to be excited about it, since I can’t have my own cake as the centerpiece.” She clapped her hands. “That’s one load off my mind, at least. Now I can focus on the recipes more closely.”

“You’re having to rely on your staff to finish developing them?” said Kitty.

“I am,” she said. “I can’t do the lion’s share of the mixing on my own, nor the chopping, nor the decorating, so I need them to fill the gaps. It’s inconvenient, but I want the book to be released on time.”

She stepped across to the table again. “These are the latest,” she said, gesturing to the lemon rounds. “Mini lemon sponges with a spice cheesecake batter incorporated, with lemon curd and crumble shortbread streusel. Try one,” she urged.

Kitty and I each sampled one. I was wordless. “I have eaten a lot of amazing things, but this — this is borderline magic,” I said. “My friend Dinah would be jealous, and I swear by her creations.”

“I’m glad to know I rival the best you’ve ever had,” answered Morgan, with a pleased smile. “Delicious food always speaks for itself, I say — that’s the only testament of talent we chefs need.”

She rubbed her wrist. “I have several recipes I have to finish in order to bring this book together in time, so when I’m not supervising in the kitchen, I’m absolutely stuck in chapters. There’s so much commentary and color to write. It’s amazing how much it takes to actually *make* a cookbook.” She

rolled her eyes. “I can’t keep up with all its many sides. Mark must think I’m going mad.”

“We’ll do our best to come up with a solution on the cake,” I promised. “We’re really disappointed to hear this news.”

“Not more disappointed than me,” said Morgan. “Thank you, both of you. I hate to chat and run, but I have to get back to work. There are chocolate silk mint tarts to gush about on paper, and the words won’t volunteer to appear on paper themselves.”

“We’ll see if Mark has finished talking with us, now that his tour is at an end, then we’ll go back to the office and work on securing the flowers,” I said. “We’ll set up a meeting with you in a couple of weeks, or sooner, if we think of a solution for the cake.”

“Marvelous,” she said. “I’m looking forward to it — help yourself —” she didn’t finish this last thought, to our disappointment, before her mobile phone rang. “Hello? Yes, Terry, I’m going to have the proofs ready on those by Saturday —” She hurried towards her writer’s corner again, leaving us in the midst of the kitchen.

I glanced around at the busy scene in the main kitchen, where staff were cleaning up after today’s recipe test, and others were consulting with the chef on the new menu. Diced parsley covered a bamboo cutting board, a confetti of bright salad with papery garlic skins nearby.

The little blonde cook Jillian, who had served us the lemon curd sponges, was putting them into an airtight container for the fridge, to my disappointment, as if maybe I

could sneak a second bite. She went back to the oven, checked the temperature, then drew out a small cupcake tin.

“I’m going to track down Mark, then we’ll go, I suppose,” said Kitty. “Do you want me to take a few snaps of the main restaurant? I doubt we’ll need them, but never say never.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “I may ask the staff a couple of questions about the bride and groom’s tastes, to have some contrast and perspective.” I preferred knowing clients as well as possible, even vicariously, so we could intuit what they wanted whenever we couldn’t ask directly. Plus, we generally gave our clients a personalized gift, and this time was going to be more challenging than most, I already surmised.

The cook had turned out the contents of the cupcake tin on a platter, a circle of perfect mini spiral covered in a melty, sticky glaze. I couldn’t help staring, and she noticed my hungry eye. “Try one?” she offered. “They’re really still hot, but they should taste good.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It must be spending time in a kitchen that makes me so famished for sugar.” I accepted one of the pinwheels, took a bite, and nearly swooned with awe.

“Is that cinnamon? Apples? Both?” I asked. It melted in my mouth like toffee, and had the wholesome goodness of apple cake and rich apple jam paired with an old-fashioned cinnamon pinwheel.

“Both,” Jillian said. “And there’s just a bit of caramel, too. The flavor is enriched by the browned butter and molasses sugar — that’s the secret of the recipe.”

“They’re delicious,” I said. “I’d like to take the entire plate with me, but that’s probably not allowed.” I thought these were the kind of treat that Matt would love, especially. Probably these were the first batch in a a dozen or so to be tested before the recipe entered the book.

“I might need a few to keep,” she joked back, smiling. “But I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I’ll be back in the future for more samples,” I promised, as I went in search of Kitty, and left the cooks to finish the question of which tartlets belonged in the latest book chapter.

Chapter Five

“How do I look?” I asked.

I was hoping my lipstick wasn't too smudged, and that the dress I was wearing, a tad too loose, had been cinched in effectively by an old belt with a wide clasp. It wasn't the most authentic forties' style dress I could find, an old pink floral print with a brown background, but it paired well with the old-fashioned high heels I found at the charity shop — I matched them with a cheap handbag and an old pair of earrings.

Matt closed the door to the fridge, and Joel looked up from his homework. They both studied my old-fashioned floral dress and accessories, then Matt spoke. “You look like the photos of my great-grandmother Tressie.”

“From your tone, I'm guessing she wasn't a fashion maven,” I said. “What do you think?”

“You look like something out of an old film,” said Joel. “Are you supposed to be in a play?” He looked confused.

“It's for the W.I. cookery class,” I said. “We're supposed to get into the spirit of things by dressing in period costume, and this is the best I could do. It was Amanda's idea, not mine.”

The boys exchanged glances. “Should you do something with your hair?” Matt pondered. “Should it be loose like that?”

“Thanks for your help,” I said, sarcastically. “I asked for input, and I get comedy.”

“No, I only thought it would be more authentic if you wore it in a little bun. Like great-grandmother Tressie.” He almost managed to bury his smile, but I caught him.

“Fine. Laugh if you want, I have to go, I’m meeting Kitty,” I said. “Makeup okay at least?” Joel gave me a nod, and I took this as a sign that despite my dress’s loose fit and chunky brown heels, that I passed inspection for public appearance.

I left them to ponder my new fashion and let myself out of the kitchen door. Through the garden gate, I turned right, and made my way up the steep back stairs, in the direction of the W.I.’s headquarters, which was located on the lane at the top, in a converted building that once belonged to a photography shop, so the kitchen still had the faint odor of chemicals when some of the least-used cupboards were opened.

Halfway up, I met Kitty, coming out of the back gate belonging to one of the community’s senior members. Unlike me, her outfit was perfect — she looked like a fashion plate out of a wartime sewing pattern, the button-down green dress fitted to her, with a trim belt, and matching black gloves and a hat.

“Did you have yours tailored?” I asked, slack jawed. “I thought you said you were going to do over one of your grandmother’s old dresses.”

“I had to ask Birdie for help,” said Kitty. “Mum gave her all of gran’s sewing things when she cleared out. Madge taught her to sew, so she fitted me up with this.” I had a feeling that

part of it was authentic, like the glittery little black netted hat and the wrinkled black velvet gloves she was wearing.

“You look amazing. I feel like a charity box fashion grab by comparison,” I answered. “Even your handbag’s authentic — everything matches your coat.”

“You look fine,” scoffed Kitty. “You’re just self-conscious because you don’t wear this sort of stuff.”

“That’s true,” I answered. “Matt compared me to his great-grandmother, but since I had similar thoughts about Teagen’s blouses a few weeks ago, I have no grounds for complaint. I should just pin this dress to fit me, and find a better pair of shoes.”

“Maybe let me pin it,” suggested Kitty, archly. “I’m a bit better at it than you. I’m no Birdie, but I still have some training.”

“Point taken,” I answered. “Do you have any more of those vintage handbags of your gran’s lying around?”

We climbed the steps, past garden fences and low-trimmed hedge, where a few people watering their winter greens’ seedlings gave us funny looks as we passed. It wasn’t every day you saw two women in forties’-era fashions going for an evening stroll.

All of the ladies had managed to find something to wear that looked semi-authentic, even those who relied on Amanda’s advice and chose tartan or plaid skirts and the ever-fashionable knit jumper. Cherish had gone the same route as Kitty and found someone to fashion a dress that looked old, judging from the attractive fit of her long-sleeved red one.

Amanda herself had clearly found a vintage-inspired dress — possibly online, a flattering one with a floral ‘flower sack’ print from the war days. Tights in an old-fashioned style, with ‘clocks’ up the back, as if she had rummaged through an old trunk just to locate a grandmother’s old wartime stockings as well.

“Isn’t this marvelous?” said Amanda, tying on a vintage apron sporting an applique pear. “I can’t wait to begin. I feel very Ruth Goodman right now.”

“So what are we cooking?” asked Charlotte, who was frowning as she looked at the ingredients piled on the counter. Powdered milk, tinned fish, salt, pepper, flour, and a pile of root veg with a grater beside them. “This is a rather strange family of ingredients, isn’t it?”

“These are to make a dinnertime meal from grandmother Caroline’s most tried-and-true recipes. She put notes by all the ones she served multiple times,” said Amanda. “I thought we’d start with something simple and everyday to get the gist of it. This is her fish loaf with white sauce, served with parsnip fritters.”

“Parsnip fritters?” repeated Marian, who looked as if she hadn’t heard this part correctly. “What are those?”

“Yes — isn’t that clever sounding?” said Amanda. “I thought at first it must be sort of like potatoes o’ Brien, but it isn’t, actually. It’s sort of a medley between an American hash brown and apple fritter, slightly sweet but not too much, according to the description I read online for parsnip patties.”

I put on my apron and surveyed the basic cooking supplies laid out. “Where do we start?” I asked.

“Well, someone will have to open the tins of fish and add them to the bowl, where we mix in just a touch of flour and old breadcrumbs, and a little powdered mustard for flavoring,” said Amanda.

“I’ll do it,” said Charlotte. “Spend my days with fish, don’t I?” she joked, and we all chuckled.

“Then we need to grate the parsnips in a bowl, add some gelatin and a little salt, and combine,” said Amanda.

“No flour?” said Kitty, who had reached for a bowl and a grater.

“No ... it says no,” said Amanda, studying the book. “To conserve, I suppose. After all, can’t be tossing about such a valuable ingredient at random.”

Kitty shrugged and reached for one of the roots, as Amanda thumbed to the next page marked in the book. “We’ll need to make the sauce when the loaf is about halfway through,” she said.

“I’ll do it,” volunteered Cherish. “I love to make sauces. I always make my own marinades at home.”

“Perfect,” said Amanda. “Lastly, we’ll make a little bit of something for pudding. It was called ‘carrot dream aspic’ in the book — a sort of tropical-inspired salad. Rather brave in its ingredients, so it should be interesting.”

I raised my hand. “I’ll give it a try,” I said. I made jelly in molds for the kids, so how hard could this be?

Charlotte opened the tins for the fish loaf, dumping in canned haddock and salmon. She glanced at the ingredient list, then added the cup of bread crumbs and the flour required,

along with spices, and began squishing it together. “It’s rather dry, isn’t it?” she remarked. “Doesn’t it need a bit of milk?”

“It doesn’t say so,” said Amanda, checking the recipe. “I think the milk was conserved for the sauce.”

“Tinned milk?” Cherish held up the can, her nose slightly puckered.

“Well, the recipe calls for it,” explained Amanda. “Fresh was for the children, I suppose. I suspect grandmamma was using a little bit of ‘needs must’ pantry stockpile in her recipes, as the bright sort when it came to cookery.”

“Mmrph,” said Cherish, who was holding the rest of her doubts back. She began reading the recipe, as Charlotte squished on.

“Should I add this water, do you think?” she asked Lady Amanda, glancing at the book. “It seems to me that won’t add much in the way of flavor.”

“Yes, but it will moisten it,” I pointed out, as I dissolved my gelatin. I wanted to shred my carrots, but Kitty was still trying to shred the parsnips, which appeared to be tough and resistant.

“I suppose.” Charlotte splashed in some water and began mixing. The fish made *splush splash* noises at first, and I exchanged glances of bemusement with Kitty, but the bread quickly absorbed the moisture.

“Here are the spices,” announced Amanda, opening her basket. “Some chives, some rosemary, and some dill. Not grown in a Victory Garden, sadly, but pinched from Mrs. Norris’s patch out back.”

“Maybe we should have made her an unofficial member and you could have brought her along,” remarked Charlotte. “She has the arms of a combat warrior in training.”

The loaf was beginning to put up as much resistance as the turnips. Charlotte squeezed it, trying to form it into something palatable-looking, but the water and the fish combined had made a rather thick, pink pasty-looking mass that didn't inspire one's stomach. “I think it's combined,” she announced. “What do we do next?”

“We put it in the tin,” said Lady Amanda, who produced one from the cupboard, a standard loaf pan. “It says to sprinkle more crumbs over the top, along with a dash of pepper, and bake until the crumbs are crisp and brown.”

“Sounds simple,” I remarked, as Charlotte covered the top with a very slight sprinkling — it was difficult to make a teaspoon's worth cover an entire loaf. She poked it into the oven and turned the temperature to the medium heat setting. She wiped the pink smears off her hands with an old towel, and glanced quizzically at the book, as if to be sure that this step was correct.

Kitty was still wrestling with the parsnips, which were finally reduced to nubs. The pile of starchy shreds were ready for the shaping, although they did not shape when Kitty mixed in the gelatin with seasoning. It remained loose and sloppy as she stirred.

“What do we do with this afterwards?” she asked, looking to Amanda for guidance. I could see by her expression that she was feeling doubtful. I felt a little of the same when I looked at the contents of her bowl.

“Let’s see ... we fry these in a pat of lard, according to the instructions,” said Amanda. “It’s supposed to crisp them slightly.”

“Do we have lard?” Kitty asked.

“No, but I think a pat of butter will do,” said Amanda.

“I’ll heat the skillet,” volunteered Marian, who put one on the stove’s eye. “Bring the bowl here, Kitty,” she said, as she melted the butter, waiting for it to turn brown.

The smell of the loaf cooking was better than the way it looked, I thought, as it began to bubble in the oven. I peered inside on my way back from rinsing the carrots, which I soon grated in the same fashion as Kitty’s parsnips, and added them to the bowl.

The next ingredients were a pinch of coconut and a heaping spoonful of honey, which I stirred into the gelatin with the carrot shreds. The instructions said to pour it all into a mold and chill thoroughly, so I obeyed, watching the liquid splash into the mold. The carrots were sinking to the bottom, which I thought might be problematic at some point in the future. Shouldn’t they be distributed all the way through?

Cherish had begun the sauce, but it showed signs of trouble partway through the process, as she stirred thickener into the tinned milk. Maybe it was the color of the tinned milk that was the problem, being a slightly yellowish-brown — or maybe it was the additional powdered milk, which had become somewhat lumpy. The seasoning added was merely flecks floating on the surface.

“It says season to taste,” she said, as it coated the spoon. “Do you want me to be the judge?”

Amanda had been busy trying to help scrape the parsnips off the bottom of the pan, which had begun to stick and disintegrate. “Here, I’ll help,” she said to Cherish, taking two spoons — one for each of them. “Bon appetite.”

They both tasted it. Strange looks crossed their faces, nearly identical in the sense that it was quizzical. “It’s a bit ... odd ... isn’t it?” ventured Lady Amanda. “It needs something, I think.”

“What about paprika?” said Charlotte.

“It’s not on the recipe’s list,” I said. “Did they have access to paprika in war time?”

“They did if they were in Budapest,” said Kitty, who was trying to scrape burnt bits off the parsnip patty which had gone wrong somehow.

“Let’s add more salt and pepper,” suggested Amanda, sprinkling more into the mix. I had a feeling the dry lumps were not breaking down.

At six, the timer for the fish loaf sounded. “There’s dinner,” announced Charlotte, taking it out with two potholders. She placed it on the cooling rack. “It says ‘cool before turning,’” she said.

“At least a half hour,” said Amanda. “Let’s cut it a bit early, to see.” She looked eager.

“What about the aspic?” I said.

“It’ll be a bit runny, but the taste will be the same, I suppose,” remarked Kitty.

We stood in a curious circle as Charlotte and Marian flipped the loaf. Too hot, it cracked in half, sagging a little. The top crumbs had largely disappeared, but the scent was undoubtedly that of a standard fish loaf.

Charlotte sliced it, laying it out on plates, while Kitty scooped the sides. Cherish gave the sauce a final stir, trying to break apart its thickness before it was ladled over, since it had thickened to the consistency of custard somehow.

On the plate, it was a dismal show — the parsnips were slick and somewhat pale, and the sauce was like old gravy — but maybe it tasted better than it looked. We all armed ourselves with forks and tried it.

Silent chewing. A long moment, then Charlotte spoke. “Bit dry, isn’t it?” she remarked.

I crunched something, not sure what it was, but I knew it wasn’t from the contents of the loaf, unless it was from an underground peppercorn. More likely a bad spot in the parsnips. “It’s different,” I said, simply to contribute some remark. *If you can’t say something good ...*

Glances were exchanged between the group, mostly looks of uncertainty. The look was unappealing, but the taste was not much better, if the truth was told. This particular recipe of great-grandmother Caroline was not a winner by today’s standards.

Amanda’s consideration was long as she smacked her lips. “Well ...” she hesitated. “I think ... it needs adjustment to

be palatable,” she said. “One has to keep in mind that it *was* wartime. This was a day-to-day dish, not something for special as well. But how fascinating is it that we just made a dish that hasn’t been made in decades? This —” she pointed to the fish loaf, ” — sustained our ancestors through the worst time of their life.”

“Let’s try the dessert,” said Cherish. Of course, the aspic hadn’t set, but oozed onto a plate. It was scented by the lemon, but it tasted of burnt honey to me.

“I thought the carrot was meant to taste like apricot,” remarked Cherish. “Do you taste apricot?”

“Not really,” said Marian.

“It’s a bit chewy, isn’t it?” said Charlotte. “Maybe it needs to be boiled.”

“With sugar,” suggested Kitty.

“That’s not very wartime-spirited, is it?” said Amanda, in an injured tone. “It’s the economy of dishes like this which saved a nation. Besides which, we haven’t tried the special recipes, which are the real gold in the book. We’re only getting into the first stage now.”

We voted to try something different the next week, and Kitty and I tried not to discuss our grumbling stomachs as we walked home afterwards. I buttoned my coat over the dress, which was made from a summery fabric that didn’t block the cool wind. “I think great-grandmother Caroline left out some ingredients,” I remarked. “Or didn’t write down whatever additional ones she made to earn her reputation as a cook. Then again, *I’m* not a great cook, so what do I know? Amanda

cooks some, and so does Charlotte, but the rest of us are pretty rank amateurs, unless we're talking about making a showstopper from a recipe."

"Maybe I'll ask my Mum," said Kitty. "Her recipes are the worst, they're probably from a wartime cookbook. She might know why the sauce turned to gravy, if nothing else."

"The more the merrier," I said. We needed some advice if we were going to turn these recipes into a menu for a seasonal fundraising dance. "Anybody who knows their way around a saucepan is welcome to weigh in."

We were almost to the downhill path by the Frobisher's back garden when a car horn beeped for us. Nathan rolled down his window. "Take pity on a lonely G.I., babe?" he said to Kitty.

She smirked. "Do I look like a tart to you?" she asked.

"Come on. Be my U.S.O. entertainer tonight," he grinned. "I'll buy you a glass of champagne and we can toast the war's end."

Kitty glanced at me. I nodded. "Go on, he took the trouble to save you a second walk," I said. She opened the car door and climbed in.

"Do you want a ride?" Nathan asked. "I'll drop you off at home."

"Thanks, but I'll walk," I said. "Good for working off tonight's tuna loaf." He made a face, but didn't ask why that was the dish of choice.

At home, I entered through the kitchen door again, where Matt was sitting at the table with a cup of tea, glancing

over his design for a garden at a private home in Penzance. I shed my coat and dropped my purse atop it, issuing a deep sigh. “Any tea?” I asked.

“You look as if you could use something a bit stronger,” he said. He rose and opened the cupboard, pouring me a sherry from the bottle behind the catsup and canned soup.

“Thanks,” I said. “I feel like I’ve been doing combat with food for the last two hours. It turns out that tinned fish is not a delicacy. I’m ready to put on my pajamas, eat a snack, and watch television until bed.”

“That’s a pity,” said Matt. “I rather fancy you in that dress.”

“I thought I looked like your great grandmother.” I sipped the sherry. “Who was, apparently, not a looker.”

“I never said that,” he pointed out. “I merely said you resembled her. In fairness, she was sixty in most of the photos my mother had.” He polished off his sherry in a large sip.

“I am wearing a garter belt under this thing,” I said.

“Really?” One eyebrow lifted. He set down his glass.

“And real stockings,” I answered. I put on my saucy smile.

He slid his arms around me, drawing me close. He kissed my lips, tenderly, and I leaned into his embrace. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to forget about pajamas and peanut butter ice cream for now.

Chapter Six

Bon Cuisine's construction crew had returned the following Tuesday, when I stopped by on my errands day in Penzance. I parked behind a truck with lots of construction scaffolding and support poles in the back, and approached a front door with the 'closed' sign flipped and a 'if on business, use tradesman's door' with an arrow pointing.

Two muscled construction workers were hoisting lots of poles and clamps — I surmised that more of the new support pillars must be in the process of installation today. Mark would probably be busy supervising the process, given how proud he was of the upstairs plans.

In the restaurant foyer, deconstruction of an old coat closet was taking place, with a team of plumbers working on the pipe installation for the fountain. The future faucet face, the open-mouthed god on a plaque, seemed to be expressing astonishment with how quickly the restaurant had gone from brisk and open for light dining and walk-ins picking up takeaway to a scene of full-scale construction chaos.

The glass view of the back garden was covered by drop sheets — the door to the sea path was receiving its promised makeover also, and I pictured the new wine buyer's paradise — meant for tourists who want a souvenir bottle — across from a hostess station. Today it wasn't a sunny spot with the perfume of lavender from the garden, but a scene of drop

cloths and plaster dust as a circular saw bit into old framework left by a built-in cupboard.

In the kitchen, the staff were working a quiet pace, with no dishes to prepare except for some takeaway orders pinned above the service window. I presumed since the restaurant was temporarily closed, they were working on projects for Morgan's new cookbook. Mark had mentioned the next few weeks were particularly important for her, and I could tell last time by her level of stress that the deadline for her book was making itself felt.

The restaurant's main chef wasn't around, and I learned from the sous chef that he was in a meeting with Mark, hashing out the changes to the new menu. Morgan was with them, and they would probably be busy for the next half hour or so in the chef's office.

"I guess I'll wait," I said, looking around for a good place to perch that wouldn't be in the way. Probably that should be somewhere other than the main kitchen, where the staff were finishing some little savory pinwheels not unlike the ones Jillian had made last time I was here — this time, instead of apples and molasses sugar, these contained marmalade mixed with herbs that I thought were probably sage and oregano from the debris on the cutting board, but I was no expert despite the culinary use of Matt's herb garden.

The little nook where Morgan was writing her book was in use, and I didn't want to invade her space, so I made myself at home temporarily in a little wine station in the kitchen, where nobody appeared to be working at present. It commanded a view of the passage to the chef's office, and of

the kitchen's general workspace, as the cooks simmered a glaze and decorated the crowns of little lemon chiffon tarts with a sprinkle of ground honeycomb and candied peel.

Jillian, the young cook from last time, was working on making a butter-studded dough, rolling it out at the work table directly across from me, rolling it until it was a paper-thin sheet of pastry. I never understood how it would stay together under the weight of the ingredients, despite watching similar dough prepared by both Dinah and Michael.

Little dishes on the nearby tray contained dried peaches soaking in a golden syrup, praline, and a dish of fresh raspberries. The yellow-dough rectangle was sprinkled with a dish she took from the fridge first, containing crumbles of a soft white cheese which had bits of herb in it also, and a hint of lemon zest — things I could identify more readily from having witnessed the staff conversation and activity for the lemon chiffon tarts.

As she added the drained peaches, the candied toasted nuts and raspberries, I couldn't help commenting. "Whatever that is, it looks delicious," I said.

She smiled up at me. "It's a peach and raspberry garden frambois strudel," she said.

"I have no idea what that is, but it's probably something delicious in the culinary world."

She laughed. "It's inspired by the traditional German strudel popular at Christmas, with lots of apples and spice and raisins. This is a summery version," she said. "You'd probably serve it with a light lunch, or maybe for cake with tea. It's

sweet, but the richness is tempered by the cheese and her herbs.”

“Is it going to hold together?” I asked, making a joke.

“It has each time before,” she said. “Say a little prayer for it, perhaps.” She smiled, then carefully rolled the pastry, forming a giant tube filled with fruit and cheese, a translucent gold on the outside as she gently positioned it on her baking sheet.

“Is this one of the new recipes?” I asked, as she set the oven timer. “I thought they were all miniature bakes.” So far everything I had seen was miniature, from the delicious raspberry bites to the tiny ladyfinger sandwich biscuits Morgan had been sketching at our last meeting.

“No, this is one of my own. I’ve been trying to finish it for weeks, but I haven’t found the time,” she said. “I work here until past midnight, I go home and sleep, then I generally come in a little early to help my boss, the pastry chef, set the breads and the other dough. I found if I try to cook before work, things go terribly wrong. Burnt breads, lots of smoke detectors beeping.” She chuckled.

“I didn’t realize the kitchen was such a democratic place,” I said. “My friend Michael used to be a chef at a popular restaurant, and his working environment was anything but, according to him.” Staying on task was the general attitude, especially at places with a reputation for hosting an exclusive menu.

“The chef bent the rules for me just a couple of times,” she said. “After I promised to bring my own ingredients and only experiment when Morgan hasn’t asked us to work on her

projects. Normally that means I wouldn't have any time, but the savory spirals were assigned to Jerome, and he didn't need a third hand on his team."

She opened the door to a holding cupboard. "Mostly the chef agreed because I asked if I could try for the assistant pastry chef's opening, which will be decided as soon as the renovations are finished. I know it's a distant chance because I'm inexperienced, but I really want to impress the chef and the owners that I can do it."

"Sort of a lifetime dream?" I said, as I tasted one of the peaches left behind in the bowl, which was deliciously sweet in the way dried fruits are, softened a little by the golden syrup, which tasted of honey, mango, and a hint of citrus.

"You could say that," she answered. "I've dreamt of being a professional baker since I was four. I had one of those toy ovens ... but I only wanted to play with the real one. My grandmother used to teach me recipes for making jam biscuits and filled Danish pastries. I found it amazing that people could do this for an actual career and not just for joy."

She uncovered a platter which had a second strudel on it — the baked version of the one she had popped into the oven a few minutes ago. "Would you like to try some?" she asked. "I put together this one at home — one of my rare morning attempts that actually worked. It's a little bit different from the new one, but still similar."

"I'd love to," I answered, eagerly, as she sliced a piece from the loaf, which had been decorated with a few more candied nuts, and a glaze of some kind which made it look glossy. I dug in my fork, peeling apart flaky pastry and soft

fruit. The cheese had solidified, and the peaches had a slight firmness from being dried. Multiple textures, but pure harmony in the mouth, I discovered a second later. The sweetness with just a hint of savory, the sugar balanced by natural deliciousness.

“That — is a showstopper, as they say on the television baking shows,” I said, taking another forkful. “It would be great at a summer garden tea party. We could use a dish like this when we’re hosting events where they want something light and original.”

“You really like it? I’m so glad. It’s a modified version of my grandmother’s secret strudel recipe,” said Jillian. “She taught me the secret of never tearing the strudel dough. Of course, her version was a special blueberry and cheese version with walnuts. It’s my favorite of all the kinds of strudel.”

“I like this one,” I said, finishing another bite or two, trying not to look like I was ready to wolf the entire slice down in one greedy gulp. “It’s perfect as it is, so I can’t figure out what you changed.”

“Taste the hint of ginger?” she asked. “I decided it was too much. I wanted to try a version that emphasized the purity of the flavors, with only one herb to season them. We’ll see if it makes a difference.”

“Again, it already seemed perfect to me, but I’m not a culinary professional, so what do I know?” I said. “I think you have a winner here. If that doesn’t convince them to promote you, what would?”

“You probably know already that it can be pretty difficult in the culinary world to make your mark,” answered

Jillian. “You said you have a friend who’s a chef, so he would have told you. We have to be patient. Opportunities come and go, so you have to be ready to try at any time. Sometimes finding the courage is harder than it should be.”

With this, she carefully wrapped up the pastry and put it away again, then began sweeping the flour and spilled fruit into one of the bowls, tidying the table. “I haven’t been able to impress them the way I hoped, so I’m trying to develop the perfect recipe to show my skills,” she explained. “I’m working on another one for some rustic garden dinner rolls that I hope the chef will really like, because he loves artisan breads and very garden-to-table style dishes. If he likes them, I’m hoping Mark will, too — and maybe that will convince Morgan, because she wants him to be happy with the new restaurant.”

“Is she hard to please?” I asked. I had a feeling that Morgan might easily become one of our pickiest clients, at least when it came to the thin edge between perfection and ‘almost there.’

Jillian nodded. “She can be,” she answered. “She has very exacting standards. We have to work pretty hard to meet them. That’s why we’re so focused on the new recipes. It’s pretty much cook — taste — fix — finish every time, and there’s not a lot of room for us to breathe in between. So if I want a chance to shine for the chef before spring, I have to come in early and try to make time on the side as well.”

“What about Mark?” I asked. “Does he have the same standards?” He seemed the more pragmatic of the two, which wasn’t all that surprising. I had an inkling Mark was accustomed to compromise in life in most aspects of it.

“He’s pretty strict about quality, but he’s not as worried about the details being perfect right away, when it comes to developing the signature and the look of a dish,” she said, as she piled her dishes in the sink. “He’s working today on putting in place the entrees, so we’ll be practicing new chicken and beef dishes and all the new pasta varieties as soon as we finish with the spiced praline biscuits and the spinach gruyere crostini.”

“Jillian — check the butter stores. We’ll have to remake the Sunday brunch biscuits, judging by these notes she left us,” said one of the cooks in a tone of slight disgust as they read through a large dossier being divided into stacks on the counter. “Too much filling, too little ‘Sunday’ about them, apparently.”

“She’s the boss,” Jillian answered. “I’ll check the supplies right away.” She was off to the fridge, leaving me to wonder what ‘Sunday brunch’ biscuits would be — something of the comfort food variety rendered with culinary delicacy?

The meeting in the chef’s office must have concluded, because the restaurant’s owners and the kitchen’s boss had just appeared in our midst. The chef and Mark were still talking, something to do with a stuffed chicken recipe, and Morgan was right behind them, disconnecting a mobile call.

“Julianne, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I have to go today. Emergency meeting with my editor, so I won’t have time to discuss the cake.”

“That’s okay, another time,” I said. Secretly I was glad, because I still had no suggestions, only a plan to argue against

placing an ad and hoping for the best. “Kitty and I are still working out the details of what we think the best plan is.”

“Thank you,” said Morgan. “Again, I’m so sorry. I was looking forward to hearing what you thought about my plan of substitution. Also, a couple of chefs I thought we might consider if it looked as if the experiment was a complete failure. Must fly, though.” She lifted a portfolio from her workspace and gave me an apologetic wave before turning back to the chef. “Jacques, I really need the emphasis to be on the special chocolate chess tarts this week, and I need those walnut ones to be perfection this time. It’s a ‘no compromise’ in my book.”

She kissed Mark on the cheek. “See you later,” she promised. “Don’t work the construction crew too hard on your vision.”

“Look who’s being the kettle,” he joked to her. “See you later.” He checked his phone as it made a buzzing noise, then looked at me. “All right, Julianne? Any questions? I have to see the project engineer about a plumbing issue, but it probably won’t take very long to sort it.”

“No, I’m fine,” I answered. “I think I have what I need for now.”

Back at Save the Date, I entered to find Kitty on the phone, consulting with someone as she scrolled through an online list of musical entertainers for hire. Paula was putting little marzipan roses atop some tiny cupcakes that Michael had provided for us to serve our clients at an afternoon meeting, since Dinah’s kitchen was temporarily closed — sadly, I had

not purchased enough requisite chocolates to be entered into the raffle for the delicious chocolate tart in Calvin's window.

"Looking good," I said to Paula, who was startled. Her glasses slipped down her nose, narrowly missing an opportunity to land in the midst of those fluffy frosting peaks. I realized that what I had mistaken for concentration was actually an intense internal focus.

"Sorry," she said, quickly adjusting the frames. "I'm almost done. I'll have to leave early today, I have some chores to help Mum with, and I'm working on my paper's presentation, the part on oxidized molecules, so I can explain it to my tutor next week."

"Better you than me," I said, joking. "I suppose there's some sort of big study crunch for you before the university holiday?"

She blushed. "Sort of," she said. "There's always a great deal going on, at least. Sometimes it's hard to get the attention of my lab partner — even my tutor — because of extracurricular events that are in the works, at least until it's down to end of term exams."

I sensed something in her tone that made me think of our last conversation, the 'chocolate-induced' confession about one event in particular. "Maybe that's a signal for you to join in," I said, smiling. "Why fight it for oxidized molecules — which I'm sure you know about backwards and forwards."

She blushed again. "I'm not that brilliant, you know, I'm just hardworking," she answered. "I study ages to know things for exams and to understand aspects for my dissertation. Not all of it comes easily."

“It doesn’t come easy to geniuses every time,” I said. “I’m married to one, so trust me, I know.” Maybe it was stretching things to claim Matt was a genius, but I felt it was close enough to the truth — he was certainly hailed as one by the botanists and horticulturists who had begged for his opinions over the years. “Even geniuses deserve a moment to let loose and forget about the facts,” I added.

Kitty disconnected her call. “So what’s the latest word from the two chefs?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I answered. “They’re too swamped by culinary concerns, so we bought ourselves more time to figure out a way around the ‘help wanted’ wedding cake.”

“Are you sure she wouldn’t like to hire Dinah?” asked Paula. “She’s really good.”

“She’s one of the best — but I think our pastry chef wants someone who’s been certified as ‘one of the best’ by culinary experts on a professional level, not just on a television program,” I said. “Even if one of the judges happened to be one of the globe’s pickiest professionals.” I was thinking of the French chef Pierre here more than Harriet Hardy.

“She’s wanting to put the ad in a paper, though. Couldn’t amateurs just sort of ... apply?” asked Paula. “I mean, how would you know?”

“I think we’re supposed to figure out the difference and do some subjective weeding of the candidates,” I answered, as I placed the tray of cupcakes behind the glass doors of a little display cupboard.

“True,” said Kitty. “But maybe we should work with that. You know, because we don’t know at the outset, right? So what if we convince her to agree amateurs are all right ... *if* they impress the way professionals do.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I wasn’t sure I was following her logic.

“Instead of an ad, make it a contest. We have them pitching concepts, giving taste tests — the chance to be the baker in a celebrity cook’s wedding,” said Kitty. “We get some sort of wedding mag behind it, some pastry journal or something, and we make ourselves and Morgan the judges.”

“Wouldn’t that just complicate things?” I asked.

She shrugged. “We have to screen the candidates, right?” she said. “What if we get someone else to do the dirty work for us. If there’s a wedding mag involved, their staff would do the vetting based on our criteria, and we’d only have to look through the recipes and designs of actual candidates, and choose the finalists to show off.”

It was beginning to make sense to me now, and, amazingly enough, I saw its brilliance without Kitty having to emphasize the part where it was actually less work for us. “Okay,” I said. “I’m following you. So ... we sell Morgan on the idea — or sell our third-party workhorse on it first?”

“Workhorse first,” said Kitty. “Let’s make sure someone’ll bite — but I reckon getting an exclusive angle on the wedding of London’s culinary darling is probably good enough. We can ask Michael’s thoughts on who to pitch it to, if you want.”

“Then we go to Morgan. Or maybe we let them make the approach, saying we were in touch with them about helping us find the best baker for the wedding.” Morgan was keen on good publicity for the book, and this would be a way to have her career, her culinary romance, and her beautiful food-inspired wedding featured without having the day itself invaded by food columnists on duty.

“I think we have a winner,” said Kitty.

Chapter Seven

At Kitty's behest, Michael had a list of candidates ready for us after a couple of days of research. He agreed to meet us for an early dinner in Penzance when we drove down to meet with the chief bridesmaid and see the bridal party's dresses firsthand, which she brought to show us and Morgan at the same time.

"I love this color palette," said Morgan. "I think having you and Samantha each wearing a different pastel from this sort of lilac shade will really bring out the hues in the bright flowers."

It would also erase the bridesmaids a little bit, but both they and I knew that probably wasn't a bad thing, compared to wearing one of those unforgettably-garish outfits. The dresses were tasteful, light sateen with a floral pattern running through the fabric of the sensible cocktail one, and a wrap style for the other one. Both would compliment the bride's dress well, which I had already seen.

Despite the wedding's grandeur, Morgan had chosen a low-key bridal gown, citing the fact that she was distanced from her twenties and thirties in maturity, and wanted to enjoy her big day without worrying about a long dress train or a princess-style skirt. Her dress was a simple champagne-white one, made of the same filmy fabric as her bridesmaid's wrap dress, with a flattering bodice line, half sleeves, and a mid-calf skirt.

“If you have time to lunch, stay,” urged Morgan. “Mark is trying out his stuffed chicken breast with pilaf and herb-crusted tomatoes, and he loves a large test audience.”

“I would, but I can’t distract you from your book, which I know you’re dying to finish,” said Rachel. “I have a stake in it, too, after all.” She was Morgan’s literary agent, the two having become good friends when bonding over marketing during book one’s major success, as the London baker herself had explained to me earlier.

“How is Mark, by the way?” asked Rachel, zipping up the garment bags again, which were draped over a chair in the parlor of the little cottage Morgan was renting at present before transitioning to the house she and Mark were jointly buying for the long stretches of time they would spend in Cornwall.

“He’s obsessed at present with getting a menu that will erase everyone’s doubts about the changes,” she said. “That’s the trouble with taking a successful establishment and flipping it, of course. He wants his mark on it, but you know how it is — celebrity versus public perception of a television presenter who only passed the cook the salt and tasted the dish afterwards.”

“That’s terrible,” protested Rachel. “Everyone knows Mark is talented. That’s why they invited him to the program.”

“Maybe it will boost his confidence if the menu feedback is positive,” said Morgan, seeing her to the door. “If you can’t stay this time, do stay the next and try one of his latest dishes. Today, he and Jacques are trying to sort the issue

with the pickled quail egg salad, so I'll be joining him later to give my two cents and take his side."

"Next time," promised Rachel, waving goodbye to Kitty and I. "Lovely to meet you," she called to us before she turned to go and Morgan closed the door.

"On that note, I'll be off to the restaurant shortly," she said to us. "What do you think of the wedding fashions?"

"I thought they were a perfect fit, both ways," I said, smiling. "You made a beautiful dress choice. But having a friend in fashion design is probably a big help, too."

"I thought it was the sort of dress that wouldn't look too dated or too juvenile when I look back on the occasion," she answered. "I wanted to feel like the princess in a fairytale we all dream about when we're three, not necessarily dress like the one we envision at that age."

"True enough," said Kitty, archly. "Some things are overrated."

"You can come with me and sample some lunch, if you want," said Morgan. "I'm sure Mark won't mind. As I said to Rachel, he's eager to please, and he wants taste testers for the new menu, the more the merrier. I can't guarantee at what time he'll be ready to serve, but he'd probably rather have it tasted by potential customers than by the kitchen staff who don't want to lose their jobs over a wrong word." This last part was a joke, I realized, and not a real threat.

Kitty and I glanced at each other, and I knew that despite the tempting offer, we had another appointment for our newest client's catering menu. "I know we'd love to, but we really

have to go,” I said. “Maybe we can take a rain check, like Rachel has.”

“Suit yourself,” she said. “You’ll miss a delicious chicken on pilaf, I’m sure.”

We visited a new caterer with reasonable rates, and still had intact appetites with which to sample their menu. I told myself that the chicken pilaf of Mark and Jacques’ creation couldn’t be better than the version Michael sometimes made for catering gigs, adapted from a popular restaurant menu our clientele typically loved.

We were meeting Michael at a new Spanish-style tapas bar that opened just off the high street, a spot where trendier visitors to the town liked to go for drinks and a light dinner. It was also the spot where a friend of his worked now, a cute young chef who had, obviously, been hoping for something romantic with Michael prior to his relationship with present-day girlfriend and comic presenter Kimmie.

He chose what we ordered, in the typical brusque bossiness I expected from him — steering us towards the better, newer selections and away from safe bets. The delicious battered fried fish treats of Lent were featured, now served to a wider class of diners than the penitents watching the floats of the Easter parade, and a deconstructed empanada made with grilled chicken, spicy lentils, and pickled peppers was served on crisp mini flatbreads with fluted edging, a sour cream sauce with fresh goat cheese to the side.

“I apologize for scolding you for steering me away from the cheese and rice balls,” I said to him, as I tried one of the

empanadas. “These are truly special. They look so perfect on the plate, like tiny little pieces of art.”

“Told you,” said Michael, who polished off one himself in a single bite, knowing how to fold it with precision so it became one morsel. “Sadie developed that one. She has a knack for the grill.”

The young chef had joined us, paying Michael a smile in exchange for the compliment — no hard feelings for unrequited amore, apparently. “Thanks. I’m trying to be the best, at any rate,” she answered.

She was blonde, her hair cut shorter than the last time I had seen her, nearly a year ago at the village’s winter fete, and something about her reminded me of Jillian from the new restaurant in town. “I thought you were a pastry chef,” I said.

“I used to be the sous chef at my old job at the Evergreens, but this is more exciting,” she said. “I made the change this summer. Definitely loving it.”

“I told you she changed jobs,” Michael said to Kitty. “We were having dinner at Julianne’s. Matt was cooking, obviously.” He cracked the faintest grin in my direction, knowing my feelings about my own kitchen prowess.

“Sorry, I think I was mixing you up with one of the staff at the new Bon Cuisine kitchen,” I said, apologizing to Sadie. “She reminds me of you a little, and I was there only today, so my brain went back in time.”

“Bon Cuisine?” she repeated, sounding curious. “What are you doing there? Aren’t they closed until the new owners finish the renovation?”

“They’re our clients, the owners,” answered Kitty, as she sipped her glass of Spanish wine, from a bottle Michael had chosen for us, of course. “We’re planning their wedding.”

“You’ve probably heard of them. It’s the pastry chef from London, the one who wrote the book on posh home bakes,” said Michael. “And the one who was the traveling cooking television presenter, too.”

“I know who they are,” said Sadie. “Morgan Corky is the name on the lips of everybody in town. At first, we thought she was running the place alone, and wondered what kind of menu she’d develop when she took Jacques on. It turned out to be the husband who’s making the major decisions, though. Rumor has it she’ll develop the new desserts off the ideas in one of her books. Which everybody who reads cookbooks is gagging for until its release.”

Definite snark in her tone. “I’m guessing there’s not a lot of love for a celebrity chef or two moving in,” I remarked, as I reached for one of the battered fish strips.

“Not so much him. I’ve even met Mark Stroper before, when he used to come down and eat at the seafood tavern near the bluff,” she said. “He’s all right. Morgan, on the other hand — I’m glad it’s not me who’s working in the kitchen whilst she’s in the thick of developing her new signature recipes.”

“She doesn’t seem that bad,” said Kitty.

Sadie laughed, sarcastically. “No, she has fantastic manners, and she’s winning enough to meet in person. Just don’t work on her staff is what I’m saying,” she answered.

There must be rumors. I had a bad feeling about what they might be, after hearing the tone of staff last time I was at the kitchen, except for Jillian. “What reasons do they have?” I asked.

“Typical ones,” she said. “She’s exacting, she’s picky, she blames everybody but herself when things go wrong. She changes her mind on a whim, which is a nightmare for the people who are trying to please her.”

“Sounds like my old boss,” remarked Michael, as he poured himself another glass of wine. He topped off everyone else’s afterwards.

Sadie sipped hers. “Worse than that is the part about stealing talents — which they can’t talk about obviously, but they say enough that everyone knows it’s true.”

I frowned. What did that mean?

“You mean she’s poaching good staff?” asked Kitty. “That won’t make you friends in a tourist town.”

Sadie shook her head. “Let’s just say she’s a bit stale in the creative idea department,” she said. “She doesn’t mind taking credit for what other people think up and tweak to make perfect, even if her part in it was basically issuing the instruction — ‘make a lemon tart today, put a twist on it.’” She smirked, then took another sip of wine.

It wasn’t pleasant to think that Morgan Corky — sweetheart of the posh London baking scene, comfort food cuisine diva — was using her restaurant staff as a brain trust assigned to think of great recipes for her to appropriate. “Does everybody really know it’s true?” I asked.

“Who knows?” answered Sadie. “Her staff signed contracts that prohibit them from talking about her books and her techniques. But I know someone who tried one of her new mint chocolate tarts who had one nearly identical — down to the ‘special’ ingredients — from Jerome the assistant chef. Coincidence, maybe?”

I knew the odds of that were slim. This depressing thought lingered in my mind as I sampled Sadie’s latest creation in the tapas kitchen, a pepper filled with spicy meat, then charred and served with a special seasoning that enhanced its smoky flavors. It kept popping up again on the drive home after we waved goodnight to Sadie, and Michael and Kitty were arguing in friendly spirit about which restaurant made the best finger foods.

Kitty dropped me off at home after Michael. I entered through the cottage’s back door, nearly tripping over Matt’s satchel and a garden hand rake, and my son Heath’s green frog wellies. Two empty cereal bowls were stacked by the sink, and a cold kettle sat on an equally-cold hob. The telly was switched off, so I knew Matt had dispatched everyone to their rooms to finish any school assignments before tomorrow — although I heard the sound of muffled video game music coming from Joel’s, after I emerged from giving baby Lottie a goodnight kiss.

Matt was lying on our bed, studying a partial blueprint of his latest client’s garden. He had a pencil tucked behind his ear and his very serious expression of concentration, as if envisioning all the plants in his mind’s landscape inventory planted in those gridlines.

Slipping off my boots, I lay down beside him. “How was the tapas bar?” he asked me.

“Delicious. I brought you a deconstructed empanada. It’s in the fridge.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Tomorrow’s lunch solved.” He reached for a list of plants next to him, a garden centre’s order receipt, studying its open page.

“Not unless you have a tiny appetite,” I answered. “The food was good, though. At least something was.” I rested my arm across my forehead. “Sadie disillusioned me, so I’ll need a day or two of mental readjustment.”

“What do you mean?” He stopped reading about hostas and ferns in quantity.

I shook my head. “Rumors about our client,” I answered. “She told us that London’s favorite posh home recipe baker is basically stealing her ideas.”

Matt tsked. “Morgan Corky?” he said. “I never would have thought so.”

“Nor would I. She seems so dedicated and detail-obsessed. But I guess you would be if you were paying other people to create recipes for your award-winning book.” I sighed. “Sadie said that Morgan has trouble thinking of enough creative ideas to write her newest book, so she’s turning to the staff. Expecting them to come up with genius recipe blueprints for her, based on a couple of ingredients or a suggestion that she provides.”

He sighed, too. “That’s a pity,” he said. “That’s a disillusioning discovery to make, and a professional

relationship doesn't improve the situation. It won't be the first time you've discovered a client is imperfect, however. Far from it. We've both known our share of difficult personalities in our work."

His arm slid across to touch mine, rubbing it lightly below the elbow sleeve of my shirt. "It's true, I know, but I didn't want to find out that the friendly celebrity chef who hired me thinks stealing intellectual property is okay. Now I have to compliment her recipes, knowing that they probably belong to the sous chef or the little pastry chef who was letting me sample some of her work today."

Jillian was talented, and I knew that her intellectual work might be among those recipes that would be sold as Morgan's own, complete with sentimental little bio paragraphs about how she came to develop them from her own inspiration and a beloved flavor profile. This, when the young cook barely had enough time to finish her recipe to pitch to the chef and increase her chances of future promotion.

"I'll never look at Morgan's artisan apple table bread quite the same," said Matt. "But I suppose it's no different than the time I found out that the legendary landscape architect behind the garden in Preston died before he could complete even the first blueprint draft, and was simply a name slapped onto the finished design by an unnamed outsider. I had always considered it his best, too."

I snuggled closer to him, glancing up at the blueprint held above. "How close are you to your masterpiece?" I asked.

He smiled. "Hardly that. But it will be a very decent garden when we finish. The new hydrangeas will make all the

difference to the fence along the kitchen gardens, and we'll develop the existing beds with softer edges and a narrower path. It will be more inviting, and less formal, once we renovate both arched gates and remove the overgrown privet border that was supposed to create a division over here." His pencil indicated an area where I thought a small pond was going to be featured, recognizing Matt's trademark scribbling.

"They're lucky to have your genius," I murmured, pillowing my head on his shoulder. "They don't have to worry that you're stealing anyone else's to give it to them." Even Matt's interns Grant and Mel had moved on to their next stage of study or employment, making him the only creative brain being consulted now.

A brief laugh from Matt's lips. "Genius is a bit strong," he suggested. "It's more accurate to say I'm knowledgeable. Perhaps they're getting a garden library in the form of my head, instead."

"It's semantics." I closed my eyes and breathed out, trying to fall into relaxation after a long day and disappointing evening.

Chapter Eight

Morgan liked the idea of the contest — as Kitty predicted, *Bridal Touch* was eager to sponsor the competition for all professional bakers across the ranks to enter for a chance to be a semifinalist for the celebrity wedding. As I predicted, it sounded better coming from them than from us.

“I think it’s a great way to find a chef of the right caliber,” said Morgan. “I love the idea, especially of having an emphasis on someone who takes into account the style and creativity associated with my name.”

I had to force myself not to think of Sadie’s revelation from the tapas dinner when Morgan spoke these words. “The magazine promises that they’ll narrow the numbers to serious contenders only,” I said. “Plus, this is a good way to promote chances for some up and coming talent. Maybe your wedding cake will introduce the world to a new creative genius.”

“Could be a good P-R angle,” suggested Kitty. “It’s a nice tribute to you coming up from the ranks of small bakers.”

I didn’t think Morgan looked as charmed by this idea as we were, but she pushed forth a smile. “I think it will work out for the best,” she said. “So long as the best possible vision becomes my cake on my wedding day, I’ll be happy. In the meantime, I assume you’re handling things, and you’ll tell me when it’s time to narrow the candidates further?”

“Right,” I said. “We’ll bring in the first round for your approval, then the three of us will choose the finalist from the

promising field that remains. After that, the winner will be revealed and the cake will be commissioned from them in time for the event.”

The magazine had set up a webpage for entries, and a cloud account where all the entries were stored, along with the names and information of the initial contestants, separate from the judge’s part, where Kitty and I signed in to look at the first designs contributed. Word had gone out quickly over the web about the contest — already, entries were pouring in from everywhere.

We didn’t have to watch the short bios, obviously, or read the CV information of each one. We were concerned with the design, submitted by photograph or sketch. They ranged from the weird to the wonderful, and to patches of beauty and uniqueness in between the ordinary wedding cake variety.

“Is that supposed to be a china cat?” asked Kitty, lifting one eyebrow.

We had logged on from our office, where we were having a working lunch over takeaway oggies from Charlotte’s shop, which, thankfully, tasted nothing like the fish loaf she had helped construct two weeks prior. I munched buttery crust as I peered closer.

“I think so,” I said. “It looks almost like the real thing. How did they get the sheen on the fondant?”

“Maybe glaze? That would be a bit yuck,” said Kitty, making a face. “It must be a trick we don’t know about.” She scrolled to the next one. “Bit of modern art here.” Blocks of cake covered in fondant, stacked and even spired, with an edible metallic sheen.

“This one would make a great birthday cake for my youngest daughter.” A mermaid unicorn shaped from sugar paste and marzipan over molded chocolate sponge, swimming on blue fondant waves.

“This one’s nice,” commented Kitty, pointing to the next one, which featured pristine pale green fondant and gold filigree for an Irish-themed wedding cake.

I made a note of it, then leaned back against our little sofa. “At least it’s working,” I said. “Entries are coming in, and there’s definite talent in the pack. It’ll be easier to see who’s a finalist after the taste test and wedding cake designs are in.”

Kitty closed her laptop. “I was a bit nervous at first, after I suggested it,” she said. “I reckoned we should keep the bakers that Morgan picked on reserve, in case she didn’t like anything they submitted.”

“She’ll be impressed when the finalists show off their actual wedding designs, I think,” I answered. “I don’t think we need a fallback plan, because I think one or both of us will probably agree with her on whatever baker she prefers from this group. Her taste is pretty close to both of ours.”

Kitty shrugged. “We’ll have to see after round one,” she answered. “In the meantime, we should probably set up some times and dates for the taste test. All three of us judging need to be in the same room for that part if we don’t want to misread each other.”

“We’ll get a copy of her schedule and hours and try to set something formally with the magazine,” I said. “All we

need are blueprints, a recipe, and a slice of sponge. That should be easy.”

“Yeah, just ask a hundred random people chosen from thousands to draw a wedding cake in a couple weeks’ time, bake it perfectly and send a slice — then design another one a few weeks later, totally different, using the same scheme all your competitors are using,” said Kitty. “Nothing mad about that.”

I ignored her sarcastic tone. “This was your idea,” I said. “Your brainchild, and I actually think it’s pretty good.”

“It’s not bad. I’m only saying it’s risky,” said Kitty. “But I like a little mad. I don’t know about you.” She cracked the barest of smiles after this, which I had learned to appreciate from Kitty’s dark humor. Although it had taken time to learn that appreciation, I might add.

She lifted her shoulder bag. “I’m off,” she announced. “Nathan’s meeting me at the barn to finish fixing the broken window shutter. I’ll probably tidy before I call time.” She reached for her helmet, which was hanging from one strap next to her bag. No child present today and Nathan with the car, meant she had brought her motorbike to work. “I’ll be in tomorrow, but I can’t go to Penzance with you. I’ve got that stupid assignment for the W.I. Mum’s coming by to help.”

Amanda had assigned some of us unique aspects of the latest cookery school menu, to be completed ahead of time. Volunteers only — although it was notable that only Amanda’s closest friends volunteered after sampling the unfortunate everyday dish of fish loaf with parsnip to the side.

Parsnips figured again in this week's, I noticed, although as a bit player only. I was glad about that, although I wasn't too thrilled with my own volunteer work.

"I can handle Penzance on my own," I answered. "See you tomorrow." I reached for the pre-release copy of the magazine feature on the contest. 'Be the Baker in a Celebrity Wedding — Few Qualify, But One Will Rise to Showcase Status on the Top Table of London's Favorite Posh Comforts Baker.'

Try not to think of the negatives, Julianne. I stopped reading at this point, tucking the article in my bag. It was particularly amusing to think of a potential meltdown, unlikely as it seemed now. Things were actually working out in our favor, which was rare on the cusp of a disaster like we'd just averted.

Morgan seemed pleased by the feature's copy, too. "I think this is great press," she said. "I'm sending a copy to Rachel if they didn't — this could really be a feature for the book as much as the restaurant." She tucked the copy she had printed out into a notebook which had 'recipes' written on its cover.

"I think when it comes out next week, we'll see a significant uptick in the number of contestants," I said. "It won't be easy, but we'll winnow them down to the top seventy-five, then have four tasting sessions for the semi-finalists before we bring it down to the final tier."

"I love it," said Morgan. "You and Ms. Menton are geniuses of the P-R variety, not only geniuses of wedding prep and planning. Rachel was astonished when she heard about

your plan. Truth be told, I think she was a bit jealous that she didn't think of it herself."

I pulled on my professional smile for compliments. "I'm glad that it's working out so well," I said. "Believe me, we're just pleased that it's working. Nothing could be worse for us than a baker's wedding without a good cake."

She laughed. "Don't worry, I won't let that happen," she said. "I just wish that things had turned out the way I originally planned. I was so looking forward to creating the cake myself. I had grown attached to the design, and it was crushing disappointment to put it away."

It was yours, right? The little imp in my mind asked that question, before I pushed it away. "Maybe there will be another opportunity — another wedding, even though it won't be yours," I said.

"I think it's too good to give away to anyone else," she answered — and I thought she was only half kidding, even with her tone of voice inclined towards a joke. "I kept it practically under lock and key except for showing it to you two for the wedding, which shows you how attached to it I had grown. I think I'd be too disappointed to let it be seen on someone else's top table."

"It's yours, so I suppose that's fair," I answered, trying to sound agreeable. "So now that we're working on the list of finalists, we'd like a criteria list from you. Just to make certain that the most important judge in our finalist round has what she wants."

"Very sensible," answered Morgan, smiling. "Mark and I were working on it last night. Well, I was working and he was

listening and contributing a bit now and then when he wasn't too distracted. I'll go fetch it, it's in his office." She cut through the kitchen in the direction of the passage to the chef's office, where I surmised he must be sharing quarters with Mark presently during the restaurant's overhaul.

She brushed past Jillian, who was carrying a tray of fresh-baked biscuits, with Morgan lifting one and snapping it. She eyed the younger chef. "Does that seem crisp enough?" she asked.

"If we don't use dessicated cheese, it retains moisture," said Jillian. "Jerome didn't want to make the switch without consulting you."

"Which is right, because dessicated cheese is rubbish," answered Morgan, sharply. "There's a way to make them crisp without compromising cheese quality or overcooking them. Find it, and turn out a proper batch." She brushed the crumbs from her hands and continued on, as Jillian began scooping the biscuits onto a cooling rack.

I moved closer. "These look and smell delicious," I ventured. The young cook raised her eyes, and the troubled, tired look in them receded.

"Thanks," she said. "Jerome developed — he, uh, did the main part, I only mixed them and shaped them. The bigger scallop would make a nice statement, I thought."

"It looks great," I said. "May I?" She nodded, so I took one of them and took a bite. "Mmm," I said. "Really good. Even without perfect crispness, the flavor is really sharp."

“We’re working on it,” said Jillian, brushing back some wisps of blond hair that escaped from under her kitchen cap. “Another few batches, and we’ll perfect it for the cookbook.”

I hesitated to comment, because I now knew what was involved in the perfecting process — something I wasn’t supposed to be aware of. It was probably better that Jillian didn’t realize it, however.

“Is your audition recipe coming along well?” I asked. “I’m still thinking about how good it was.”

“I haven’t had time,” she admitted, as she scooped the last biscuit onto the rack. “Maybe after we finish with savory biscuits I’ll have more time. I’ve been staying late, but it’s to help chef with the new menu. It’s hard to rehearse two different staged food events at the same time when you have no clue what they’ll actually be like.”

I nodded. “I understand that,” I answered. “I’ve had an event or two I thought might go completely wrong up to the day of. Fortunately, most of the time, it turns out the way it’s supposed to. Sometimes it’s even better, if things fall into place.”

“We hope the same happens this time,” said Jillian. “Better wish us joy.” She smiled, and set the tray next to the sink. “Jerome, I’m going to mix the angel food mini bunts now — this time, I’ll temper the chocolate at the last minute, and add the candied fruit one stage earlier, and we’ll see if it impacts the recipe.”

“Sounds fine,” said the other chef, who was just switching off a big mixture. “Do you want Connie’s help? She’s only finishing tidying my area.”

“No, you need the prep spaces cleaned,” answered Jillian. “I can handle this.” She reached for a bowl and a large tin labeled ‘baking chocolate, small medallions.’

“Jerome, we have to pick up the pace in here, we’re falling behind,” announced the chef, who entered the kitchen with a large crate of assorted produce, and the scent of fish coming from a package bundled atop it. “Have you checked the temperature logs on that cooling drawer like I asked you to do?”

“Uh ... well ... I thought I told Jillian ...” began Jerome, who looked like a man who wanted to duck behind the nearest cover. He glanced towards the little chef, as a look of disappointment flashed through her eyes. She lifted her chin, however, when the chef looked her way.

“I’ll get on it,” she said. “I forgot, but I’ll fix it.”

“Jill, this area needs tidied ASAP,” said the chef, indicating the table where she had been prepping the next recipe. “I need this station pronto, so move these things and prep it for me before you check those logs.”

The little chef had just finished filling her double boiler, now hastily removing all her baking materials and wiping down the stainless steel surface for the chef to begin his prep. She piled her things on a smaller, makeshift table, and hurried off to finish the kitchen’s checklist before starting on the aforementioned logs.

I had watched silently, but something in me chafed a little, the way the assistant chef let her take the blame to avoid a conflict — the way no one noticed she was getting twice as much done as the rest of staff in the midst of their crisis. *It’s a*

job, Julianne, just like everybody does. I retreated towards the exit, so I could avoid having any further troubled reaction to her doing the work of two other people who couldn't finish their own projects.

Morgan's sketchbook lay open on the table, where she had tucked the article inside. I noticed the page opposite contained a dessert sketch that looked a lot like the peach strudel that Jillian had made the last time I visited the kitchen. A few lines were scribbled around it — *swap raspberries for blackberries?* read one. *Change glaze to old-fashioned icing drizzle. Peaches a bit dry, inaccessible. Try tinned or frozen version.*

Something in me felt even more irritated. Even someone's family recipe, prized for generations? I made myself walk past it as if I had seen an ordinary scribble of a cake on that sheet of paper.

All the world is unfair, Julianne. Matt would point that out to me, as he had a few nights ago, but it didn't make me feel better as I slammed the driver's door of our car.

Of course, it was still perfectly true. People like Jillian were patient, played by the rules, and did what they were paid to do — which, in this case, was be the creative surrogate for one person and the scapegoat for an overworked staff that needed someone to take on all the extra burdens. It probably wouldn't change unless she found that magic opening that forced everyone to see her talent outshone everyone else's. Like the world that Paula was part of, in which she played the part of the serious, hardworking student who was afraid that if she stepped outside that box, she would look like a dowdy girl

trying to impress everybody by wearing a party dress. Laughed at, not welcomed; ignored at best, but certainly not admired.

The Jillians and Paulas of the world deserved their chances, too. They needed their friends to champion their progress, not stand by every time someone took advantage of their talents or their convenient presence, the way I was forced to in the case of the first one, out of professional courtesy. Fortunately, I didn't have to stand by in the latter case, since I had the power to speak up.

Paula was minding the office as I expected, after I parked the car outside Save the Date's headquarters. She was reading another dull-looking academic book that only people with a thirst for knowledge see the beauty within, chewing on the rubber end of her pencil.

I put away my jacket and my work bag before approaching the tea kettle and cups. I turned to her as I stirred in my sugar. "Paula, I really want to help you go to that dance," I said. "Really, really want to help. Whether it's giving you extra time off, or giving you an advance on this month's salary so you can buy a nicer dress than whatever you typically wear to parties, I want to do it."

She looked up, an expression of total surprise having taken over her face. "Me?" she said "Go to the dance? Oh — uh — I don't know if I should — if that's such a good —" she faltered. "Why?" That seemed to be the question she really wanted to ask.

"Why?" I repeated. "Because it's one of life's many chances that could turn out good or bad, boring or great, and

there's only one way to find out."

"But — it's just a dance, right?" she asked. The blush in her cheeks flashed a little, and gave her away.

"That's not the impression I've picked up lately," I answered. "We've become like friends over the last year, and I can tell it means more to you than that. Please, let me help, however I can."

The blush gave her away completely. "I don't know," she said, dropping her gaze.

"It doesn't have to be girly, or about meeting someone, or even making new friends," I said. "I just want to help you with whatever you want it to be. You have every right to enjoy it as one of the hardest-working students they've probably ever seen."

With a blush twice as deep as before, Paula dropped her gaze. "Thanks, but I'm not that good," she answered.

"What do you say? Will you let me help?" I asked. "I really want to, Paula. I'm telling the truth about it when I ask."

She looked up at me. A tiny smile tried to break through as she wrestled with her feelings, and I could tell she was still torn between playing it safe or saying 'yes'. The dance meant more to her than she wanted to admit, whether because of all the ones she missed before, or even the realization that moments like this, whatever they ended up being like, were part of a stage of life she would leave behind soon.

To my relief, however, it ended with a nod. "Okay," she said. "I really could use a little advice."

“Then whenever you’re ready, I’ll listen,” I said.
“Beginning now if you like.”

Every available utensil and pan belonging to the Women’s Institute’s kitchen was laid out and ready for use, as those of us who were participating — again in our wartime costumes — gathered for the latest culinary learning experience.

“Today’s menu came to me in a lightning flash whilst I was dozing off over Gemma’s latest book late last Tuesday on the sofa,” Amanda was saying. “Great-grandmother Caroline’s stars — of *course* that was the answer. Why else would she mark certain recipes in that manner unless they were the best ones?”

“As opposed to the everyday rub — um, variety,” I chimed in. Not to malign great-grandmother Caroline’s fish loaf as if it were burnt fish fingers and baked beans at my house on a bad night.

“All cooking from that time is the same,” sniffed Bets. “Mark my words, it was only decent if you put a shot of whiskey in everything and said a little prayer, my own granmama told me a hundred times.”

Bets had joined us as much by Amanda’s invitation as Kitty’s, the former wanting someone who was a household cook with closer ties to the past than the rest of us, the latter because she had needed to borrow some of the obscure kitchen tools that had been gathering dust in the Alderson cupboards.

Like us, she had consented to dress in old-fashioned clothes, although I could tell this outfit was thrown together hastily — an old cotton blouse and matching skirt made over with some trim and buttons. Bets’s slightly-longer bristly maroon hair tucked underneath a jaunty little hat trimmed with cherries that in no way matched was probably as authentic as Kitty’s little jet-black one.

“So I made some selections from the chapter marked ‘side dishes’ as you all know,” continued Amanda, as if Bets’s remark had been a positive one simply enfolded into the speech, “Recipes that were simple but a bit more familiar than last time, and should really sharpen out skills.”

“Think any of this will make the final menu?” Kitty asked. She studied the list, and one eyebrow quirked already at something on it. She passed the copy to me.

“I’m working on that separately, based on the recipe book’s celebration menu and grandmother Caroline’s own personal notes,” said Amanda. “I want it to be unusual and impressive. “

“I don’t see why we can’t simply have the old-fashioned things we already know would be decent,” whispered Charlotte to me. “Ham and egg pie, steak and kidney — pasties — sausages on rolls, and some jolly good puddings. Even during the war, there were still a few oggies being made, I’ll wager.”

“She wants it to be fully authentic,” I whispered back.

“Then let’s make this a *pre-war* dance,” whispered Cherish. We giggled, and Amanda looked our way, with a slightly-injured expression that hushed us immediately.

“So let’s get to the heart of the matter,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “Everyone who had homework assignments, turn them out please, so we can see the results.”

I was first, much to my chagrin. “Well, I had the aspic salad recipe that grandmamma Caroline marked as a tried and true, and I followed the directions to the letter. This time it actually turned out ... I think.”

From the fridge, I retrieved my aspic in its mold — one with Teletubbies on it, in which I usually made Jell-o for my kids, but maybe the inauthenticity would be forgiven — and carefully turned it on the floral serving plate. This time, the mass slid out intact, having chilled the proper time, and we beheld the original salad aspic of Caroline’s day.

A quivering mass of transparent, yellowish jelly, with tiny, precise squares of tinned vegetable trapped inside like bits of rubbish floating. This is the most accurate description I can make, and the reason why some of the W.I. members recoiled slightly.

“Is that what it’s supposed to *look* like?” Cherish asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I only did what the recipe told me to do.”

Amanda reached for a serving spoon. “Let’s have a taste,” she said, and a slice wobbled onto a plate after being cut from the whole, where it slumped over. “Dig in, ladies,” she said.

We waited for someone to take the initiative. Finally, Bets reached through and dug a spoon in, scooping up some.

She popped it in her mouth, and screwed up her nose a minute later.

“It is what it is,” she said.

“What does that mean?” asked Marian.

“You know, I’ve never liked the idea of aspic salads,” began Cherish — a preface to her own reaction, I suspected. I took a bite, and shared in whatever sentiment was about to come. It was watery, slippery, and tasted of nothing but the bland vegetables that added a strange chunky texture.

“Needs seasoning, maybe,” said someone who was being charitable.

Amanda tasted it, looking ready to defend it, and frowned. “Let’s try the next dish and see if it’s more to our fancy as a group,” she suggested. “Who had the vinegar turnips?”

“That would be me,” said Kitty.

I had read that recipe, and knew that it consisted of turnips, parsnips, and Jerusalem artichokes all boiled together with vinegar and milk. Kitty produced a little casserole from the warming oven and lifted the lid. There were a few chirps of approval from the room, and murmurs of interest — this, at least, looked like something one would eat, even if the name sounded far from it.

“We did the topping, but I’m not sure about its success,” said Kitty. “Mum and I strained it for ages, but it didn’t have a good setting agent besides a bit of gelatin. Texture’s a bit squiffy.”

“Let’s see,” coaxed Amanda.

Bets unwrapped the cheesecloth which was holding together a now stiff, gelatinous lump of cheese. It was plain white with streaks of yellow, and smelled sour. Bits of green sprinkled it.

“What is it made from?” asked Charlotte.

“Curdled milk,” said Kitty. “You’re supposed to add lemon juice for acid, it says online, but the recipe in the book just called for adding some more vinegar and a pinch of salt.”

“What’s the green stuff?” asked Cherish.

“Bit of parsley and chive. It needed something,” said Kitty, bluntly. “I reckon it’s supposed to be like a cheese topping for the turnip dish.”

We scooped a little onto the casserole dish’s contents. It lumped on like very dry cottage cheese, and began crumbling apart immediately. The heat from the turnips began melting it, so milk with bits of green was filling its cracks. I saw Cherish and Marian take a step away.

“Time to taste,” said Amanda, digging a spoon into the midst. “It looks very ...”

” ... interesting?” I suggested. No one else said anything, so this was the verdict of the group as she ladled some onto a plate and set it within reach of the group. After much hesitation, we reached for our forks and each chewed a bite.

In presentation, it had looked decent — in reality, however, the vegetables had a gritty, grainy quality, and had absorbed much of the boiling liquid, making them watery and

sour. A tiny bit of grit refused to be crunched, so I removed it from my mouth, discovering actual dirt.

“Those artichokes are murder to scrub,” said Kitty. “A thousand cracks that won’t clean. Sorry.”

“It’s a bit ... earthy,” remarked Cherish.

“That’s what comes of cooking things straight from the garden, with nothing but a bit of salt,” said Bets. “Boiling ‘em is what does it. Give me a proper fry any day. Nigel feels the same way.”

“The cheese turned out a bit unusual,” remarked Marian, pulling it apart with her fork. “I think it didn’t quite set without the lemon. The gelatin’s really just acting as a sort of glue.”

“It tastes like milk and onion,” said Charlotte. “A proper farmer’s cheese needs a bit more flavor and a setting agent.”

“The recipe didn’t call for it,” Kitty answered, shrugging.

“Now, now, no one is to blame,” said Amanda, interrupting here. “Scarce ingredients made for creativity among the past generations. I’m sure with a little tweaking, this would all be more delicious. We’re accustomed to more spice and flavoring, so we simply have to season to taste a bit more generously.”

She took another bite of the turnip mixture and chewed it. I could see the groove of deep thought trenching deeper in her forehead. “It *does* need a bit of something,” she admitted, disappointedly. “I wonder what it could be?”

“Maybe the stars marked the ones great-grandma Caroline avoided,” said Kitty.

Chapter Nine

“Some of these look nice,” I coaxed. “I like that one with the roses.”

I held it up for Paula to look at, trying something that seemed subtle and not too dressy to begin with, from the shop’s section of posh frocks and party dresses. Her eyes held uncertainty and confusion so far.

“Do you think I’d look good in it?” she asked. “My Mum always says pink washes out my skin tone.”

“Only one way to find out,” I said. I held out the dress. “Let’s start with this one.”

I waited outside the dressing room, with my arms crossed, and my fingers also. Paula had been reluctant to come along, but I had persuaded her that this was the best place to start. Buying a dress would feel like committing to the dance in some ways. On the hanger in the closet, it would become a reminder every time she opened its door.

Glancing over the nearby rack of half off dresses, I turned my head again when Paula drew back the curtain and stepped out. The little dress was snug, but not too tight, but I agreed that something about it looked ... well ... *off*.

“I think it’s promising,” I opened, tacking onto the hopeful winds. “It’s not your color, I agree, but the style is nice.”

“Think so?” Paula looked down. “It doesn’t make me look too, sort of, dowdy?”

“No,” I said, emphatically. “I think you look nice. You have great bone structure, for one thing, and that means you only need the right dress to emphasize your shape.”

Defining Paula’s shape was not going to be easy. She had the build of a tall girl, all length in its appearance, from trunk to limbs, but wasn’t particularly tall — her waist wasn’t long, and her hips and chest were not particularly easy to define. I could see why she had gravitated towards wearing things that tended to hang loosely or sag, like the old flannels and the t-shirt with quirky slogans.

This dress was a start in marking out Paula’s curves, but it was all wrong for her in terms of color and cut, and the length was far too short for her comfort level, I suspected. Maybe her mum was right about this color not being good for her, although I suspected the rose print itself simply looked garish to me from a psychological vantage point, having known Paula’s most outrageous fashion choice to date was pink flannel.

“How about the blue one?” I took another dress from the rack. “This one is really pretty, and it’s a little longer, too.” Dubiousness had entered Paula’s eyes when she turned to the mirror and saw herself.

The blue one went on next, as I sifted the rack’s contents, looking for something else that might suit, possibly either in color or style. The selection locally wasn’t that good, so I had a feeling the boutiques in other towns were going to be more helpful. Maybe something in a nice raspberry? Not

too bright, but with enough rich color to bring out Paula's cheeks and the highlights in her nut-brown hair? Or maybe green was a better choice.

She stepped out a moment later, and we surveyed the latest dress, which was Grecian style, so no worries about it fitting too closely. Somehow I had the feeling I was looking at a very tall garden statue with sensible glasses.

"It isn't quite right. Is it?" Paula was looking in the mirror. She pulled at the banners of fabric that hung loosely around her, as if trying to make them look less like old drapery and more like a goddess's robes.

I studied it, racking my brain for answers. "I think maybe we should choose something a little shorter," I said. "It would be more practical, anyway."

"How about that one in yellow?" Paula pointed. I noticed a trim, sensible little sailor dress with buttons, that was brighter in shade than a banana. *Bad idea*, I thought. I begin to see that a sense of fashion was not among Paula's many gifts.

"How about this one first?" I selected a dark orchid lavender color, a bandage dress that had multiple styling options. "This will let you decide how you like wearing the dress's bodice — maybe halter style, maybe off the shoulders." I handed it to her.

"Me?" she repeated.

"Yes, you," I said. "The dress doesn't have to decide if you look great in something — sometimes you decide how to make the dress look great on you." The power of positive

thinking would have to see us through until we found something that made the choice for us.

Tonya the shop assistant joined me. “We have some nice things in seasonal colors,” she suggested. “The cinnamon brown is nice, and so is the orangey-fire one in the window.”

“I like the bodice on the last one, but I think it might be the wrong cut and color,” I said. “She has a skin tone that’s hard to compliment, and she needs more definition in the bodice.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes these things are perfect even when they look like they’ll be a bit saggy.”

Paula drew back the curtain. “What do you think?”

The dress had been wrapped in amateur fashion, too loose for it to have any real definition. It hung like an old cowl sweater from Paula’s body, bagging over the skirt’s waistline. After a brief look at its disaster, Tonya retreated, leaving me alone in my task yet again.

“I think we’ll keep looking,” I said. “But first, let me help you fix this one to be just a little more flattering.”

It was Paula’s half day at work, so I returned to Save the Date alone afterwards. I slipped off my shoes, since today I made the mistake of wearing a nicer pair of high heels for my meeting with our client, and flopped down in one of our parlor chairs.

“Fun times?” Kitty’s sarcasm was only slight, but still detectable. I wondered at the tone as I turned my head, until I realized that Bets was here also, looking for a vase to borrow among our collection.

“Not really,” I admitted. I sighed. “I thought buying a dress would be the easy part. But it isn’t, actually. I’ve never had a client so hard to match with the right fashion.”

“If it’s the local shop, they’re a bit skim on choices,” said Kitty. “Try the boutique in Truro, they’re bound to have something nice for all the Christmas parties.”

“It’s not merely the selection,” I said. “It’s ... just hard.” I left it vague.

“She’s your Eliza Dolittle,” surmised Kitty. “So why are you helping her buy a dress? I didn’t think Paula was the type keen on dances anyway.”

I sighed again. “Because this one is important to her,” I said. “I have no idea why, maybe because it just seems more special. Christmas balls, the end of term, the beginning of the end for her time as a student. I could tell from the beginning that she had something on her mind this term, and this was it, apparently.”

Kitty looked as if she didn’t believe me. “Eliza Dolittle may need a gift card from you, and that’s where the help stops,” she said. “Picture Paula at a dance like that. What’s she going to do? She likes labs and libraries, and her friends probably don’t even go.”

“I can help her have a good time,” I insisted. “This is what she wants.”

“You know you can’t make her into the type who likes school formals,” she said. “Magic dresses don’t exist to fix that.”

“Maybe this is a new leaf,” I answered. “I’ve never seen Paula want anything that wasn’t practical. She wants part-time jobs, she wants university scholarships, she wants extra time to study. Those are the typical things she asks someone for when she asks for help, and this time being different seems like it deserves my notice. This is something special to her, for some reason.”

I thought Kitty was beginning to bend, but it was hard to tell. I knew she was partly right about it being a sudden change that might not suit Paula. What good would an expensive dress do in that case?

“I wouldn’t get caught up in that sort of thing,” Bets advised, coming through to the main office again, carrying a tatty old planting pot. “It only leads to heartache, mark my advice.”

“What would you know about encouraging someone to go to a formal dance?” scoffed Kitty. “And is that what you wanted from our stuff, a pot that’s seen better days in an old garden shed?”

“I’m potting some of those rubbishy liatris thingies in the front garden to give to Corrie Tibbs, what’s renovating her garden — I’m not giving her a good pot as well,” retorted Bets. “Anyway, you’re better off not offering your help to hopeless cases. It’ll leave you with nothing to show but a heap of nothing.”

“I can’t let her fumble around on her own,” I said. “I wouldn’t leave a friend in a situation where they feel lost. I’d rather give them whatever advice I can offer, at the very least.”

“I’m only saying what I’m saying,” replied Bets, stubbornly. “She wants to do it, she’d better learn what those sorts of evenings are about — young people drinking spiked punch, making eyes at each other, and dancing to loud noises. Sort of thing I reckon she’s never done in her life.”

“Those dances aren’t all like that, Mum,” said Kitty. “Anyway, you wouldn’t know naught about it, since you never had me go to a school that bothered with anything — Ceffylgwyn didn’t have enough students to warrant anything except the typical kitchen scuffs and barn drinking parties on the fly.”

“I sent you to a decent enough school — it kept you away from worse riffraff than that Lyle and his cronies, I reckon.” To which Kitty rolled her eyes. “Local was good enough for me, it’s good enough for my daughter,” retorted Bets, stoutly.

“Your modern dance party protocol comes from the birds at mahjong night, eh?” said Kitty.

“They’ve all got granddaughters dressing up like tarts and dancing in compromising ways with boys, that’s what *I* know,” said Bets.

“I don’t think I have to worry about that with Paula,” I said. “I just want her to have the confidence to have a good time and be herself — and not just the version that concentrates on reading maths and physics.”

“Is there another version?” Kitty lifted one eyebrow. “Know that for certain, do you?”

“Now you sound like Bets,” I said, knowing that would irk her. “Don’t we all have hidden sides? Why can’t Paula’s be a girl who goes to a party, has a nice time with people she usually only sees at the university lab, then goes home to her latest science dissertation for Monday?”

Neither of them answered me, but I could tell they were skeptical. I flopped back in the chair again, wishing my feet didn’t ache quite so much, and that I didn’t feel so hopeless. Maybe I needed to practice wearing less-sensible shoes again.

It was my night to cook, unfortunately, and I had nothing in the freezer that would thaw quickly, so I made do with the ingredients I bought for one of my quick casseroles that wasn’t far from some of great-grandma Caroline’s cooking, probably. To soften the blow, I bought six mini death by chocolate cupcakes from Calvin’s shop, in part so I had a chance at winning the beautiful hollow chocolate pumpkin of this week’s drawing.

I put the packages in my car, then noticed a familiar bicycle leaning against a tree near the harbor car park. I thought Paula had taken hers with her when she set off for home.

A short walk past the guard rails, I found her sitting on an old mast timber someone had hauled up from the beach last year, eating one of Cal’s chocolates wrapped in gold paper. I sat down next to her.

“I thought you were going home,” I said. “You said something about your Mum still working on the painting project.”

She nodded. “I was supposed to. Then I cycled past the chocolate shop, and thought maybe I’d have one. Or two.” She folded up the paper. “Just have some time to myself.”

Paula taking time to herself was rare. I didn’t know what to say to this, as I contemplated whether I should say anything. I had a feeling that she was feeling blue today, hence the reasons for the chocolate. Maybe the trip to look at dresses depressed her with the thought a perfect-fitting one couldn’t be found.

“I hope you don’t feel like this dance is something that can’t work out,” I said to her, softly. “I hope — that it’s not something you want because you think you have to prove a point. I wanted to find one today because I thought it would give you a little more confidence since you decided to go.”

“I know.” She nodded. “I guess I’m a bit hard to shop for.” Her smile dwindled.

I stared towards the harbor. “If you don’t want to go to a university formal, you don’t have to,” I said. “But if you do, then we’ll find a dress that you’ll like, I promise, and make certain it fits. It’s about what you want to do. No pressure, if that’s what you’re feeling, because I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No, I knew you were trying to be nice,” she said. “I appreciate it, I really do. It’s just ...” Here, she became quiet again, and smoothed closed the chocolate wrapper in her hand. A seagull buzzed overhead, scanning to see if we had anything it wanted to eat.

“There’s this boy,” said Paula. “I used to talk about him sometimes. He went to my comprehensive, too. His name was Tristan, and I sort of ... liked him ... but he wasn’t that fond of me back then.”

I thought I remembered Tristan. Good looking, a bit of a punk in attitude. I thought he had teased Paula mercilessly, at a time when that — and the contempt of the meaner popular girls — was all the attention she generally received in St. Petroc’s school for the gifted and bright.

“Anyhow, he’s at university, too, in graduate studies. At the end of last term, there was this sort of — of student mixer on the lawn — and I was studying in the park close by when Tristan kind of stumbled in, looking for a place to smoke. He saw me, and we chatted, sort of, I guess because there was no one else around. He was a bit drunk, too.” She paused. “But he was nicer to me than he’d been in ages. We actually had a good talk. And ... he told me that he felt a bit bad for the way he acted before, and that ... that he wanted to make it up to me. He said maybe if things had been different, different places and us not being like we were, maybe he could have fancied me.”

“That’s what he told you?” I said.

“He said he wanted to take me to the next dance to make up for being mean,” she said. “He said it was a date. You know, not a romantic date, but the kind you agree to pencil in at the same time, I mean. The next dance is the one in December. He hasn’t said anything since — but, sometimes, I think maybe he’s still thinking about it. Everything went back like it was before at last term, but sometimes I catch him

looking at me. So ... I thought I wouldn't go, then I thought maybe I would. He hasn't asked anybody else that I know of."

I didn't know what to say. I sat by, quietly pondering the chances of this, and processing it with all the information I already had from the past. This Tristan had been an absolute pain before, judging by the way Paula used to cringe miserably. Aimee told me stories of pranks he and his friends had played on her.

People change, though. Maybe he had grown up and realized her value? It might make him one of the rare people at uni who did, besides a few of her tutors.

I contemplated this for a moment. More than ever, I sensed the importance of this moment to Paula. She was on a fragile emotional precipice, in which she could hurt herself, or be hurt by another, no matter what was going to happen. The dance represented a turning point between the old Paula, the one who had been dowdy and studious and tormented since childhood, and the woman who was developing slowly as the studies became focused, and the inevitable maturity of life began to settle.

I put my arm around her, but still didn't say anything. I decided it might be better to let the silence have its moment. Heavy confessions need more time to settle before any rash promises or proposals.

Since it was getting late, I gave Paula a ride home, with her bicycle strapped in the boot of my car, then I drove back to my cottage after collecting Lottie from Gemma's mom. I wasn't too late, because Matt and Giles were putting in a long day at the teaching garden, cleaning up after a demonstration

on advanced tiered planting. Joel was at a friend's house tonight, and Heath and a friend had promised to study together. I could hear Sylvia's voice upstairs, where she and a friend were playing.

” — no, the glue gun isn't hot enough yet,” Sylvia was saying.

” — now I'm getting sequins on your duvet,” the friend giggled.

I thought it might be better if I didn't know what the damage was yet. “Let's save it for later,” I suggested to Lottie, who was snuggled against my shoulder, in a sleepy mood. “Come on, let's put on some chicken cream and peas for dinnertime.” Kicking off my shoes, I balanced her on one hip as I made my way to the kitchen.

The casserole was three ingredients under a cornmeal mix crust, soon shoved into the oven as Lottie played with some cracker crumbs leftover from the ones I sprinkled over the top. With my feet propped on an empty dining chair, I messaged Kitty.

Need some suggestions on the thing with Paula. I waited, knowing she was probably busy with Tige and might not answer.

It buzzed back. *What kind?*

The good friend advice kind. I paused. *I think maybe there's a boy at the back of this.*

Typical. Crush or serious?

Complicated. I paused again. *Maybe a wolf in sheep's clothing. Or a reformed wolf.*

What?

I'm saying maybe trouble. I don't know him, so I can't be sure. He's from her university, posh background, studying some kind of business. I think he's in choir.

This was why I turned to Kitty. As it happened, I knew that she was helping Lorrie and the vicar with a project involving the school's music class — a special chorale program the university extended to local primaries.

Let me guess. You want me to spy?

“Gwgg,” bubbled Lottie. I glanced in the direction of the baby chair, where she gave me a look that seemed to be a clear-eyed question that matched Kitty's bluntness.

Not after last time. I was thinking of our covert dinner with Teagen. Just get me in honestly?

Let me think about it. Maybe. Meddling isn't always good. Mum was right about that part.

This isn't Teagen, I pointed out. Plus, I don't know this boy. I just want to get a reading on him.

I expected that to be the end of things, but Kitty messaged me back. *Give me time. I'll tell you when.*

In its crypticness, I read a surrender to my persuasion. Instantly, I felt better. *Thanks.*

“I think maybe this is going to work out okay,” I said to Lottie, who responded by smiling and sprinkling savory crumbs all over the floor.

Chapter Ten

“So you’ll have the stack of finalists for me to sift in another week?” said Morgan.

The digital issue of the magazine had given the deadline for this week, and light entertainment news coverage of the contest meant the number of entries had increased, with Kitty and I scrambling to stay on top. I sensed by the time I was making my family celebrate an American Thanksgiving, I would be scheduling cake tastings and design critiques for our client, featuring a vast range of ideas.

“That’s correct,” I said. “The number of entries is beginning to decrease, so we think most of the serious contenders are already in the pile.

I sampled one of the little tea sandwiches she had provided for our working lunch, in a space which was occupied by lots of Morgan’s work in progress. Drawings of tiny little cakes decorated with edible candied peel confetti over fondant glaze, and miniature marshmallow cream puffs inside croque en bouche pastry, decorated on the outside with ganache. It all looked very delicious, but I felt less hungry than usual. Something about these sketches of sweets turned my appetite the opposite way.

“I’m looking forward to sifting the pile,” confided Morgan. “That cake has preyed on my mind since the disappointment. It’s the focal point of the entire wedding menu, so it has to be right.”

“You have a pretty impressive menu so far,” I pointed out. “I don’t think your guests could be disappointed, no matter what the cake actually ends up being like. Tomato and mozzarella salad with fresh oregano and pesto cream dressing — braised chicken breasts stuffed with farmer’s cheese and ranch-style herbs with bacon and parmesan — sauteed okra and carrots in sweet glaze —”

“It’ll be delicious, of course. There’s no slight intended on Mark, he’s a darling, and he’s so insistent that he has to deliver, for the wedding’s and the restaurant’s menus,” she said. “No, of course I didn’t mean that. Only to me, the cake is an absolute point of importance. Every bride probably feels that way, but being a baker by profession makes it more important, somehow.”

“We’ll make certain it’s a cake that fits your standards,” I promised. “Something that matches your initial vision in terms of caliber, don’t worry.”

“That’s why I’m glad to be the third judge,” she chuckled. “I’m so terribly particular about these things. I’m certain the kitchen staff are ready to murder me, I’m so very exacting. I want every detail of my vision perfect before the publishers have the manuscript in their hands.”

I began to wish this topic would go away on its own. “They seem like professionals,” I said. “Very talented and creative in their own right.” I glanced towards the kitchen, where the staff were apparently making the miniature biscuits today, which featured three different kinds of chocolate. Jillian was dipping some into melted ganache, half into white and half into black, then laying them on a drip rack.

“I tasted some of Jillian’s work, and it was delicious,” I said. “I think she would make a great assistant pastry chef when the job opens up in the kitchen.”

“Jillian?” Morgan glanced into the kitchen. “She’s decently talented, I suppose. I have no complaint about the work she’s done thus far in helping with the book’s recipes. Bright, but ... not very experienced. It really does show sometimes in the dishes she makes. A few more years, and perhaps she’ll be ready to take on a bigger role, but hardly now.”

This dismissal left me a little in shock. I thought she would at least give more credit than that to someone whose ideas she was using for her book. I had clearly seen the sketch of Jillian’s cake, being modified to include a few subtle changes to make it more Morgan’s style.

“I thought the raspberry bites she made for us that time were perfectly baked,” I said. “They tasted delicious.” For all I knew, they might have been Jillian’s idea, if Sadie’s story was true.

“They would, wouldn’t they?” Morgan answered, amused. She patted the pile of recipes. “Everything in here should be delicious, or there’s no point in staff continuing with the testing process beyond the first batch I ask them to bake, no?”

My tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth. *Count to ten and let it drop, Julianne*, I warned myself. The first rule of being a good event planner was to avoid conflicts with your clients whenever you disagree on a point, especially if they had nothing to do with the job.

“We already arranged for the flowers in advance, so the order will stand until next year,” I said. “Kitty has mostly worked out the arrangements, but she’s left some room for alternate designs, in case you want something different, especially for the table where the cake will be displayed.”

“Yes, I suppose that does depend on the design we choose,” said Morgan, studying the photos on my tablet. “I should show these to Mark when he comes down. His menu will be what this design would compliment on the long banquet tables.”

“We have spoken with him and Jacques both, to make certain the shades of the flowers would not be a contrast,” I assured her. “We’ve been trying to consult both of you on each stage, because we know the harmony of food and decor is particularly important.”

“You’ve done a marvelous job,” said Morgan. “I’m so pleased. It’s all been absolutely lovely so far, and I haven’t even one complaint. If you knew how particular I was, that would really seem a compliment.”

We both laughed, although mine didn’t have quite the same note of humor it would have had in the past, when I first met this particular bride.

“We do have an alternate design sketched, just in case some sort of miraculous finish means you want to use the restaurant as your reception venue,” I said. “But I’m going to say from a professional standpoint that I think the estate is a better choice. I think you’ll be happier with it in terms of having enough room for guests and having your wedding’s

decor shown off in the best possible light. The only downside is you won't have this marvelous kitchen at your disposal."

"Isn't that true?" said Morgan. "I suppose it's fortunate that the estate has a fantastic grill and a part-time chef who has agreed to help oversee the menu's final cooking stage and serving."

She gathered up a few of her recipes which were in the stages of notes at present — I saw snatches of it, like the phrase '*caramel?*' and '*cook 3-5 minutes.*' "Of course, when this place isn't at sixes and sevens will be the stage at which my book is in hard copy," she continued. "So a lot of good it will do me when we have all the space and no chaos. I would expect to be bored silly when I'm down, but developing the menu for the desserts here will give me something to do between cooking videos."

"I've seen the latest one on brownie bites," I said, having watched the 'teaser' video revealing one of the recipe books 'kid-friendly' projects. "Very scrummy."

"Your children would love them," said Morgan. "The videos are such a great way to connect with my readers, and the feedback's been tremendous. There's talk by Rachel — all nonsense, really — of the BBC asking whether we'd consider a cookery program."

"Like Mark did?" I said.

"Well, sort of. This one would feature me and my recipes only, not a general cuisine program with rotating guests," she said. "A bit more like Mary Berry or Martha Stewart."

“That’s an exciting prospect,” I contributed. Although a part of me wondered how Mark would feel about it. Then again, he had the restaurant to keep him busy, and a menu that would reflect his culinary gifts in a way that presenting the international cuisine hadn’t.

The chef in question now joined us. “Julianne, you’re here,” he said. “Nice to see you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I was just showing Morgan the flowers, which she made me promise you’d see before I left.”

“Don’t go before you see the progress upstairs,” said Mark. “You should pop up, the construction crew is taking a tea break. The work they’ve done really highlights what the windows will look like after all the molding is in place. It’s going to be spectacular.”

“I’ll be excited when the fountain is finished downstairs,” chimed in Morgan. “The plumbing’s halfway done, but they’ve made a mess of the place.”

“Eggs crack to make a scramble,” said Mark, smiling. “It’ll be worth it.” He laid a menu in front of Morgan.

“This is the latest from Jacques and I,” he said. “It’s not one hundred percent what I’d like it to be, but we’ll be testing it the next week. I asked Stan and Jake to come down, and Melinda from Forsythe will be driving down the same weekend to interview you for the feature in *Baking Today*.”

“Those are excellent taste test candidates,” said Morgan. She perused the printout. “I don’t like the bread choices, though. I really feel we should change those.”

“If you take on head baker for this place, you can change all the bread and pastry you want,” he said. “In the meantime, though, we have to go with Jacques’ choices. I told him I wanted to spearhead the main dishes, so I can’t very well take up my old baker’s mantle as well.”

“I thought Jacques was developing the sides and salads,” she said.

“Most of them, except for the grill menu,” said Mark. “But he needs more options for input, if he’s going to let me have creative control, doesn’t he?”

Morgan didn’t answer. She studied the rest of the menu, and I excused myself to let them hash out the details.

The upstairs floor of the restaurant had entered a greater stage of deconstruct, or so it seemed to me. More of the pillars were in place than construction supports, but the old trim that didn’t match the moldings was torn off and heaped in a pile.

Carefully, I stepped around obstacles, approaching the big windows that looked towards the sea. Below, a few construction workers were eating lunch in the garden; one of them was still working, carrying out debris from the renovations on the first floor to the pile on the lawn.

I turned to look at the room behind me, with its construction drapery over scaffolding, and the power tools stationed near the deconstruction of the last old side room, its walls already gutted. It was going to be beautiful when it was finished, but I hoped this wasn’t the site of the wedding. I felt we could do better with the other venue, and this space would not yet be at its best when newly-opened, even if Mark had the decor in storage already.

Then again, my enthusiasm for this wedding had been dampened a tiny bit by other matters. I knew that I shouldn't be thinking about Morgan's relationship with her staff, because it wasn't important to the wedding at all. I shouldn't be wondering how rampant the intellectual theft ran, and concentrate on the fact that my job was not to verify whose creations any of those biscuits and cakes actually were.

I should think of it like Jillian and the others were ghost writers, being paid to provide a service to a writer with a temporary case of creative block. Jillian especially rankled for me, however, after Morgan's comments on her talent, which I knew to be unfair.

There I went again on that track of people treating each other fairly. Matt would remind me that the only recourse would be to double down my own efforts. I couldn't change Morgan and I couldn't prove that none of these chefs were going to be credited, compensated, or at least thanked for their work.

Oh, well. I breathed out a long sigh. I retreated from the dust and construction debris, going downstairs again.

The spot for the fountain was mostly pipes and wall gaps at present, so I had to envision what the final stage would look like. I went back to the kitchen from there, where Morgan and Mark were busy looking at the photos on my tablet. I gave them space and went into the kitchen, to the safety mat space where I could safely stand and watch the staff as they finished putting the biscuits onto trays and into tins for the final stage of the test, involving the 'ageing' of the recipe.

Jillian was stirring a glaze for the tiny little shortbread biscuits with chocolate flecks in them. I watched her concentrate, tasting it in between handing other ingredients to her harried fellow staffers — pulled aside for a moment by the chef to help with a critical stage of making some mousse, only to return to a saucepan that had congealed. Without a dramatic sigh, she started over again.

My heart sank. There had to be some way to make her stand out in this crowd. If only people were judging these bakes purely by taste and not reputation, hers would probably be the winners. Then the public and her fellow cooks and employers at Bon Cuisine wouldn't see her as simply a fetch-and-carry restaurant employee.

Like if she was the winner of a major baking contest. One for a celebrity wedding cake.

The idea passed through me, leaving a shiver in its wake. I knew better than to think about it, yet I let it linger on the edge of my thoughts, teasing me with the simplicity of it. With the fact that it might be the best and only chance Jillian had, since Morgan clearly didn't realize — or didn't want to realize — the scope of her talent.

It was against the rules, of course, because employees of either the bride or the groom, family members and close friends also, were barred from becoming the winner. The magazine would be screening the names and information of every entry, so it wasn't possible for Jillian to submit a design.

That was the unfortunate obstacle that was blocking my one good idea to help.

Chapter Eleven

“Everyone settle down,” ordered Lorrie, as she gathered up a stray crisp wrapper and stuffed it into her bag. “No yelling, no pinching, no wrestling or anything else. We have ten minutes to get ourselves into shape for this class. Kitty, you take the girls, I’ll take the boys. Juli, do you mind passing out the sheet music?”

“No problem,” I said, lifting the stack of music sheets from the pew.

True to her word, Kitty had found a way to squeeze me in as a volunteer for the latest chorale event that Ceffylgwyn primary would be attending at the university’s on-ground cathedral. Stained glass windows and saints had no impact on Lorrie’s rowdier members of school choir, however, who were still jockeying for a prime position from which to fire spitballs at a rubbish bin one of the charpeople had left parked nearby.

“I want you to pay attention when the choir master explains the piece, and I want *sincere* efforts to sing your parts, is that clear?” Lorrie continued. “Now, the university choir is coming in, so let’s put on our appropriate behavior, shall we?”

The students who belonged here were coming into the stalls now, taking their seats in advance of the lecture and the dual piece to be sung. I scanned them, hoping to see someone who fit what little description I had of Paula’s old crush.

“Caleb — gum out now,” ordered Lorrie. “Connie, do you have your eyeglasses or are you wearing contacts?” She glanced at the time, then reached over and snatched away the wad of gum from the reluctant student’s fingers, using a tissue from her pocket.

“Which one is the bloke Paula fancies?” Kitty whispered.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “I’ve never met him. Like I said, his name’s Tristan, and he studies calculus and business, that’s all I know for certain.”

“Tristan,” she repeated. “That’s him over there.” She indicated the direction of a young man — posh, blond, very good looking, who was joking around with a couple of guys in the men’s section of the choir.

I could see what attracted her, yes. But there was something off-putting about him, too, at a glance — like you could tell he was brimming with so much confidence that it spilled over, like a bottle of cologne overwhelming the room.

“Him?” I repeated. “Do you know him?” I kept my voice quiet.

She nodded. “He’s a toff,” she said. “Always flirting, always making sly remarks about someone else. He’s a complete waster in my book. But what do I know? It’s not like I see anything of him but what happens in this room.” She shrugged.

My heart was sinking again. Why of all the boys in the county had this been the one Paula found intriguing? I knew it

was probably her quiet, mousy side being attracted by someone who was popular and flashy.

Love really should be blind. I sat down as the choirmaster entered, closing the door to the vestibule behind him. “Sorry I’m late, all,” he said. “Welcome —” he checked his folder, ” — Ceffylgwyn Comprehensive to our latest session on Bach.”

The lecture on the musical composition lasted for a quarter of an hour, during which time I listened to the occasional shuffle of boredom from Lorrie’s group, and watched the university students, Tristan in particular. I was looking for any sign, perhaps, that he wasn’t the same jerk who had mistreated Paula in her younger school years.

People change. But watching him watch the pretty young student seated ahead of him made me ache for Paula, and for him making that drunken attempt to assuage old guilt.

That’s what it was, really. He didn’t look like a boy who cared very much about what he said or whom he hurt, except in very rare moments. Kitty’s tone told me all I needed to know about his interest in the opposite sex.

When the lecture ended, Kitty led the school’s choir forward, into the opposite stalls. To my surprise, she was the assistant conductor, leading them through warm up as the university choir master did the same with the college’s students. Then the choir master took his station and conducted them both through a classical song that I knew was probably on one of Matt’s cds at home, and that simply served to make me feel a little bit sleepy with its lullaby tones.

At least Tristan had a good voice. I wondered if Paula had ever sneaked in here to watch the choir practice, or if she really had moved on from that little bit of fancy, prior to the incident with him in the park. No wonder she was feeling so confused and conflicted about whether to go.

She didn't deserve to miss the ball, if it turned out Tristan really was still a jerk, however. Just because a boy had let her down, why should she have to be a wallflower again? Why should she feel let down, or miss a beautiful evening out, just because he'd chosen to break a promise?

If only she could forget about him and have a good time as herself. That, it seemed to me, was the only thing that would make it right.

Kitty had seated herself next to me. "I didn't realize you knew how to conduct a choir," I whispered.

"I don't know much. I spent some time singing in it at school," she whispered back. "And Maureen gave me pointers when I was still with the Players." The local amdrums had a director with the drama of Dame Edna and an intense desire to see the players reach musical status — hence the music coaching, I supposed.

I waited a few minutes, pondering again, before I whispered to her. "Have you ever seen this Tristan guy do anything that made you think maybe he's not so bad?"

"In what way?"

"I don't know. Help a little old lady across the lane. Pick up the books of a student who dropped them ... someone who wasn't attractive, say."

“If you mean, do I think he’s the sort who hides a heart of gold underneath a prat’s body, I’ll say no.”

“Oh.” My reply was too quiet to be heard, probably, over the sudden crescendo in the song. This was the end, I realized, as Lorrie and a couple of other listeners present applauded.

On the drive home, I broached the topic again, trying to do it without breaching Paula’s confidence too deeply. “It’s just, apparently, he gave an impression at one time that maybe he was sorry about the past,” I said. “And that he ... *liked* Paula. He was just ashamed to admit it before.”

“Did he admit it to anybody else? Or to her?” Kitty asked.

I hesitated. “I think you know the answer,” I said.

“Then I reckon he’s still a prat,” she said. “The worst version of one, because he’s also a coward.”

“That’s harsh, but I see your point,” I said. “I just feel bad. I think she feels like she can’t ignore what happened, or the effect it had on her, but he intends to, unless he finds some sudden spark of courage.”

“If he was telling the truth,” Kitty retorted. “He may have simply been messing about when he said that to her. Some blokes will say anything — they like having a go at someone, just to flex their charm.”

That was even more disgusting than the cowardice, and I blenched at the idea of a spoiled boy manipulating Paula for a cruel joke. “She probably doesn’t know him well enough to be sure,” I answered. “Then again, I don’t know him at all, so who am I to say?”

“I’ve seen enough of him to know,” answered Kitty, darkly. That tough tone of hers — I knew it to be the same one from before, and I knew from years of friendship what it was saying. I decided not to press for details.

We fell quiet for a space, and I chewed my thumbnail, wondering what to do next. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to tell Paula that Kitty knew Tristan, or knew about his reputation. Nor did I think it would be a good idea to encourage her to hold on to any part of that promise he’d made. The middle ground would have to be helping Paula to see that his validation mattered as little as anybody else’s did, whom she didn’t respect or admire.

“I don’t know what to tell her,” I said. “I don’t know what I can do if she’s still harboring hopes that he’s going to notice her.” It felt like I was writing a dystopian version of Cinderella, an unhappily-ever-after with me endowed with the powers to make a disaster, not a romantic match.

“I reckon staying out of it is the better idea,” said Kitty. “Mum might be right this time.”

“Your mom is right about something?” I looked at her, both of my eyebrows lifting.

“Not many things, but she has a point about encouraging people who might have stupid hopes. And people who want things that don’t make them happy,” said Kitty. “If I were you, I’d leave it alone, truly. Let her figure it out on her own. Sometimes there’s no stopping a mistake.”

“You know I can’t do that, not to a friend,” I said. “That’s like ... smiling as someone accidentally commits

homicide.” Not quite, but I was out of good analogies at present.

“Yeah, right. Or it’s like letting her grow up,” said Kitty. “You can’t change people’s feelings on some things.”

That much was true. It was a gloomy prospect, Paula falling for Tristan’s charm, getting rejected, getting bitter about life and romance afterwards. At least this wasn’t an ongoing campaign, and the summer had given it time to fade ... unless Tristan decided to allude to it again when the dance drew nearer.

Or maybe that’s when he intended to drop the hammer by either telling Paula that it was a mistake or letting it be known that he had asked someone else. He wasn’t the type who went stag to dances, that much was very clear to me.

Maybe Kitty had a point. I felt the pressure of a headache building in my temples, inspired by too many issues and lack of anything to eat besides biscuits, which I had found less palatable as of late. I didn’t think I would want sweets again until Dinah returned home. Something about Morgan’s was making them stick in my throat.

Problems have such a disillusioning nature. I needed a bolt of hope to strike me precisely when none was available.

At the latest W.I. meeting, I ducked into the powder room to fix my lipstick and tug the decorative hair net to look less like restaurant necessity and more like the fashionable snood

couture it was supposed to be. At least no one at home laughed lately when I put on my dress and chunky high heels — maybe Matt really did find them as sexy as he claimed.

I snapped my compact shut. Tonight was the big holiday menu that Amanda had been planning, and which the rest of us viewed with apprehension after our two previous cooking sessions. Nothing good had come from great-grandmother Caroline's wartime cookbook so far.

The ladies were gathered in the main room, in their period attire. Bets had returned, and was giving an account of her latest attack of bursitis, brought on by housecleaning. "Never again, I tell you," she said. "There's heaps of stuff I know was dropped on me by family that should've been keeping it in their own sheds and garages."

"I hope you're not talking about my baby clothes still," snorted Kitty. "You'd better mean that rubbish Saul and Silas tucked away when the coppers were looking about for merchandise potentially lifted from delivery vans."

"I never," said Bets, acting scandalized. "Is that the way you talk about your cousins in public? It'd be better to be alone in the world than have that sort of reception from family."

"Better to be dead, too," answered Kitty, mercilessly.

Neither of them were in good moods tonight — Bets was enjoying having a moan and Kitty was tired, after having a long day's planning session with our other clients, the Woodworkers of the World, who were planning a special dinner for a newly-elected chapter president. No one else

seemed to be in a better mood, so this wasn't the week for good tempers all around.

Cherish checked her watch. "Where is Amanda?" she asked. "I hate to be impatient, but I promised that I would be home by eight. She told us this recipe was going to be complicated, so I'd rather not waste time, personally."

"Nor would any of us," answered Marian. "I think we're all rather dreading making bean soup without beans, or whatever the very latest in disparity recipes is bringing us."

The door opened and Amanda breezed in. "So sorry I'm late," she apologized. "Tire puncture. Fortunately, Mrs. Norris is very handy with a car jack." She pulled off the little fake fur stole and her latest hat, which resembled a fake fur hood with a decorative brooch to one side. "We had it switched in no time at all, but I had to put all the ingredients back in refrigeration until afterwards."

"At least you're here," said Charlotte. The mood lifted slightly on Amanda's bubbly attitude, or possibly just because she was here and the ball was now rolling. We all proceeded to the kitchen, where the various pots, pans, and utensils awaited us, and where Amanda deposited her food basket.

"Tonight is unorthodox, but I feel confident that this time we'll have much better success," said Amanda. "As you know, we said we'd turn our attention to the celebratory recipes with an eye towards the menu for the fundraiser —"

" — which is still a mystery to the rest of us," muttered Charlotte.

” — and I’ve done some very thorough research and consulted with the butcher in order to choose something that was the very *piece de resistance* of a wartime family’s table.”

She whipped off the basket’s checkered cloth and removed several butcher’s packages, which she opened. “We will be making that Christmastime specialty of the British wartime table — stuffed ox heart.”

The collective hush in the room was like an air valve had shut off, in the form of human breath. “Are you quite serious?” It was Charlotte who found her voice first. “The heart of an ox?”

“Yes, of course,” said Amanda. “Alternative large pieces of meat had to be substituted for the typical roasts and turkeys of the day, and ox heart was apparently not an unusual choice at the time.”

“But it’s a muscle,” said Charlotte. “It will be tough as old boots when we cook it, no doubt of that.”

“It might be a bit chewy, yes,” Amanda admitted. “But that’s to be expected. And it will have a long period of roasting time — overnight in a slow oven — so we’ll be sampling it tomorrow evening in a special tasting. Besides, we have a lovely filling that will really enhance its flavors.”

“What’s the rest of this lot?” Kitty was peering into the basket. There were more butcher’s packages in there, along with some labeled jars.

“We’ll be making a beet and honey salad — a blood sausage substitute using breadcrumbs and simple spices — parsnip goulash — and the stuffing for our ox heart, which

calls for one of the rare luxury ingredients of the time — tinned tropical fruit.”

“You must be joking,” said Marian.

“No, I’m quite serious,” said Amanda. “You mush it all together with some spices, and the juices have a lovely tenderizing effect, apparently, once they’re sort of squished inside. Well, no need to talk about it — let’s get stuck in, and we’ll see as we go.”

She donned her apron, then laid open the heart packet in front of Kitty and Charlotte, who both looked rather dubious of its appearance.

“Cherish, you can tackle our lovely beet salad, Marian can take on our parsnips, and Juli and I will do the sausages,” said Amanda, doling out the rest of the ingredients. “Come on now, let’s make hay whilst we have sun, my birds.”

We all put on our vintage aprons, and unwrapped our ingredients. Cherish put on the tea kettle, reasoning we would all need a cuppa at some point in this project, due to its intense nature.

I had my doubts about blood sausage made from bread crumbs, and had more of them when Amanda removed the package of intestines. “Are those real?” I tried not to seem squeamish as I pulled back the paper by its tip.

“Yes. Not very good ones, I’m afraid, but great-grandmother Caroline’s notes records using those of a rather old horse who passed on during the war.”

“A *horse*?”

“Needs must,” said Amanda. “Never fear, these are much more sanitary, straight from the butcher’s sausage supplies.” She consulted the recipe. “Now, we’ll need the breadcrumbs ... spices ... a little bit of blood...”

I tried not to look as I squished these things together using two forks. If I looked, I might retch directly into the bowl, which would ruin the ingredients, clearly. I was beginning to regret having a pasty for lunch earlier.

Across the way, Cherish seemed happy enough combining the ingredients for the beet salad — less so were Kitty and Charlotte, who were tasked with wresting the heart into a roast-like shape. Kitty wielded the knife, trying to cut through the tough fiber. I had visions of a horror movie’s maniacal killer as I watched, because the expression on her face reflected a similar rage at times.

“Hmm. Let’s see. This is rather difficult.” Amanda was fumbling with the intestines.

“What is?” I couldn’t turn my head her direction, not without seeing the oozy, mushy mass I was supposed to be combining. It was probably overworked, but I found it hard to believe that would matter.

“They’re a bit stuck. I suppose I should have envisioned them being difficult to pry open,” she said, trying to force her manicured nails between the delicate layers. “We don’t want to tear them, obviously.”

“Think of it like finding the top seam of a delicate silk stocking,” joked Marian.

“There! No, wait — it’s not quite there.” Amanda accidentally tore the top part of the intestine, creating a large rip. She reached for the kitchen scissors and snipped that part off, looking frustrated.

Charlotte had mixed the stuffing from chopped fruit and a sprinkle of cracker crumbs and flour, but the paste was not inclined to go inside the openings which Kitty had slit and remain there, instead oozing out of various cracks. Kitty was using her fingers to stop the escape, but it was not working.

“It’s too tough,” said Kitty, who was trying to knot twine around it, to close the slits they had made — crude ones, and not as deep as probably needed, since the kitchen’s knife was dull.

“Maybe we should paste it shut with some flour glue,” said Charlotte, who was trying to hold it steady.

“I’ll help,” said Amanda. “What we need is more twine.” She saw an opportunity to abandon the sausage casings and be helpful at a more successful project, tying up the main course. She grabbed another reel of cooking floss and measured it out, snipping it for Kitty.

“It looks lovely,” said Amanda. “It’s going to be delicious.”

“It’s going to be tough,” said Charlotte. “I don’t know how much of this mixture we actually squeezed inside the thing. It’s very difficult.”

Amanda stuck her finger into the bowl. “Mmm, delicious,” she said. “Well ... a little bit gluey from the flour, but very tropical.” She put on her encouraging smile.

“I can’t get it to hold together,” grunted Kitty, who was pulling the twine tight, squeezing the heart’s muscle near one of the incisions, which was bleeding an interesting orange-pink from the pulverized fruit and thickening agent.

I expected the band to snap from the strain. Instead, a burst of either fruit juice or blood squirted from one of the former arteries, directly into Charlotte’s face. Both she and Kitty froze, as did the rest of us. Charlotte blinked her eyes open through the splatter.

“That’s it.” Kitty let go of the twine, and fumbled with the ties of her apron, pulling it off. “This is completely mad.” She tossed it aside and marched from the room. A moment later, we heard the headquarters’ front door open, then close again.

“Well!” said Amanda, looking astonished. “Of all things.”

“She’s always been rude like that,” said Bets.

I arrived home at nine o’ clock, finding a newly-carved pumpkin sitting on our steps — a week early, and with one eye noticeably smaller than the other. The battery-operated candle was still flickering inside, so I stuck my hand through the top and switched it off. Touching raw pumpkin guts was not disgusting to me after touching the faux blood sausage.

Inside, the living room was messy and empty, with the telly’s volume turned low on a cartoon show that was surely one of Heath’s. I switched off the blue glow and went through to the bedroom where I flopped down on the bed without bothering to remove my clunky shoes, my disheveled snood,

or my dress which had a vaguely bloody smell from all the packets of organ meat.

Matt looked up from the book he was reading, his back propped up against our headboard. “How was tonight’s meeting?” he asked. “Your assembly ran rather late, so I put the food in the warming oven into the fridge instead.”

“It was enlightening. In a dark and bloody sort of way,” I answered.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Never mind it,” I answered. “Unless you want to know that fake blood sausage smells worse than the real thing and looks like bread soaked in grape juice.”

“What on earth have you been doing?” he asked, but with a little more sympathy. “It sounds as if you’ve been mangling groceries.”

“I feel as if I’ve been mangling the chances of this year’s fundraiser food tent being anything but disgusting,” I answered.

“Surely Amanda would never let it go that far,” he said. “She can clearly see that fake blood sausage will hardly draw in celebratory diners for the Christmas season. Even the real thing can be a difficult sell to some people, no?” He smiled at me. He shifted his position so his hand could stroke the top of my head. In return, his calluses snagging in the glittery black threads of the snood I was wearing.

“Want to bet?” I asked. He hadn’t seen her dogged determination with that wartime book in hand and visions of Ruth Goodman’s wartime Christmas table. “Don’t get me

wrong, I want you to be right.” I hoped comprehension was going to dawn on the chapter’s president that we could not go on making less-than-delectable dishes.

He sniffed the air. “Do you smell raw steak?” he asked.

That did it. I pulled myself up again and slid off the bed. “I’m going to take a shower,” I said.

Chapter Twelve

I made a shopping list note to buy candy for Halloween and replace Heath's mask, which had disappeared, leaving him with only the body of a penguin to wear, so he looked like a black bowling pin with arms.

"Did I leave my witch's cape in here?" Sylvia was hunting through the pile of coats, bags, and boots accumulated by our back door.

"I haven't seen it," I answered. "Did you leave it at Angela's house?" She and her friend had a costume fashion show the day before so they could see each other's outfits and assess their chances of winning the fancy dress prize at the hall's Halloween pantomime.

"I brought it back. Maybe I left it in the living room. Joel!" She shouted this last part at her brother, who was lying on the sofa, reading a book about the space station and watching a documentary on the history of music videos simultaneously. I debated switching off the telly, but decided to ignore it at present.

What was I forgetting? Oh, yes — materials for making dressing to go with the turkey. This year, I was planning to celebrate the Pilgrims' Thanksgiving in the traditional way, even if the English members of the family technically didn't have quite the same stake in the safe voyage of the nation's religious dissenters to the New World. But my kids were half-

American — excepting Joel, of course — and also loved a good turkey drumstick, so I didn't think it could fail.

Kitty had cut bittersweet to decorate our business's main window, which featured a fake autumn wedding cake made of cardboard and satin fondant, decorated with simple white pearls and leaves that looked identical to the edible red and copper ones Kitty had created from fondant a few weeks ago for a 'welcome autumn' reception for the ladies' charitable committee at the vicarage.

I stopped off only for a moment, letting myself inside ahead of time by key to gather my things before meeting with Morgan. Paula wasn't here in her early fashion, as I had hoped — instead, a note was pinned to the counter. *P called — switched meeting time with tutor. Won't be in until tomorrow — K.*

Kitty must be in the back, arranging flowers for the church. "I'm off to Penzance," I called out. "Be back later — I'm working on mailing out those save the date invitations tonight." I exited, leaving the 'closed' sign turned.

Morgan's kitchen was the typical scene of nonstop labor that I had come to expect when I arrived. I entered through the kitchen's service door, following the trail of safety rugs from there — the garden entrance was now entirely blocked as the wooden racks for the new wine display were being installed.

My client was piping citrus custard roses atop some ginger-pineapple mini bread puddings, the first time I had seen her in a chef's coat and cap. Her piping technique was quick and perfected, which is why she was instructing three members of kitchen staff, who were watching.

“Each one needs a little twist at the top. Just like that,” she said. “I want them all to be perfect, and to match the way mine do. And this custard needs to be lighter, and a little more tart, to balance the sweetness of the fruits inside the mini puds.”

“Can you show us how to hold the bag so the twist turns the same way?” Jerome asked.

I waited to one side, studying the pattern on the new ramekins that another kitchen staffer was unpacking, with a new Florentine-style fresco mural painted on each one. The new menu would include creme brule with an Italian twist of cream sauce with dusted cocoa. The inspiration for Morgan’s new creme brule-style tarts with caramelized sugar sauce, according to the latest video.

“There. Keep twisting just like that. Yes, that’s what I want,” said Morgan, as Jerome practiced on one of the little tarts. “Make these photograph ready. I want to try them before I serve them to the party Mark has coming at two.”

“Sorry.” The chef squeezed past me. “Are you waiting for Morgan? She’ll be a few. Today’s the prep day for the mini pudding recipes, she’s in a state already.”

“I can wait,” I said. “I told her I was stopping by just to confirm the dates for the contest’s taste test and design review. We have a lot of people to cover in a short amount of time, because the magazine wants to feature the winner in the Christmas issue with a little biography.”

“Want a snack whilst you wait?” He offered me a filled cherry tomato from a platter he took from the fridge.

“Thanks, but I’ll wait,” I answered, giving it a pass. I couldn’t risk tomato seeds and cream sauce spraying over my blouse and jacket, since I had a meeting after this with a nearby posh event site that wanted us to add them to our vendor’s list. That was one thing which having clients like Morgan and Mark always helped us with — a growing reputation for this part of the county as a special place for weddings, and our reputation growing in return.

The rest of staff was helping the chef prep his latest meal-style salad, or breaking apart leftover brioche and croissants which would probably turn into more miniature bread puddings. I didn’t see Jillian here, and thought it must be her day off, when I spotted her between the shelf stacks of industrial-size soup pots and catering pans, along with Morgan.

“You only finished chopping the chocolate and the dried fruits for the dough, when you knew I needed the raspberries soaked,” Morgan was saying.

“I’m so sorry,” said Jillian. “But the initial puff pastry dough had failed, and Jerome didn’t have time to finish a new batch on his own. You needed it for the brown sugar danishes.”

“Then why didn’t you find someone to finish prepping ingredients?” demanded Morgan.

“There was no one else left — I thought I would be able to finish all of it,” said Jillian.

“I’m disappointed, frankly. I want my things to be ready for the moment, so I reach for them and that’s where they are waiting,” said Morgan, scolding. “That’s my policy, and I

don't want this kitchen letting me down by leaving back any part of the prep for the day I'm baking."

"It won't happen again," said Jillian. "Next time, we'll be certain that nothing falls through the cracks. We'll make it right."

"You need to step up your game," said Morgan, pointing to her. "You're wasting time by helping other staff when you should be focused on what you were assigned to do. I assigned you to chop fruit, that's what you do. You don't save it for later. This is my reputation and my book that's on the line, so I had better see everyone on this staff taking it very seriously."

Morgan stalked off after this. For a moment, Jillian remained, and her expression looked upset and conflicted. She buried it from sight, and selected a large stock pot from the shelf.

"Julianne, there you are!" Morgan reappeared from the other side of the shelves, unbuttoning her chef's jacket. "I'm ready to talk schedules — so excited for the big cake tasting week."

"Good to hear," I said, forcing my smile into place.

I had to keep my feelings in check as we discussed her schedule. Morgan's cheeriness seemed out of place to me after witnessing her 'chewing out' someone from her staff for such a minor mistake as forgetting to put some dried raspberries on to soak.

Jillian seemed to bring out the worst in Morgan, and I wondered if it was a sense of competition, of having someone who was a rival in talent, and might even become better. She

needed people like Jillian to miss their opportunities to advance — she needed her to believe her ideas were only good enough to provide a basic template for Morgan to tweak and modify.

“Honestly, I think she’s one of the worst divas we’ve ever worked for,” I said to Kitty. “She’s particular, she’s two-faced, she’s making herself out to be a culinary genius she probably hasn’t been in a couple of years now — maybe not ever. Who knows? Maybe the recipes in the first book belong to some friend or relative.”

We were digging into boxes of Chinese food from the new takeaway that opened between here and Truro. It was our reward for working on the schedule for the taste testings and design judging sessions with Morgan, which is why our little coffee table was covered in work calendars and the page of dates Morgan contributed.

“We’ve had some who were pretty rude,” commented Kitty. “She struck me as a diva from the first couple of meetings. The sort who has to have everything her way or turns a snit.” She dug her chopsticks into the box of cooked cabbage and rice.

“Maybe it’s the fame,” I said. I thought back on some of my most difficult brides — including the infamous Petal Price-Parker — who had wanted things their way or no way at all. “It’s not a factor every time, but some of the time. Although

that *really* difficult bride with the fussy family was an out-of-work research analyst.”

I held out my hand and she passed me the egg roll carton. “It’s pretty common in the culinary world,” said Kitty. “People can be vicious when they’re climbing to the top. Michael talked about it some, saying he knew chefs willing to climb over others.”

“I don’t know how Jacques is going to feel about being pulled between her and Mark in the future,” I said. “Mark doesn’t seem confident enough to take on the menu himself, and Morgan isn’t going to let just anybody run the bakery side of things.”

The cashew chicken carton was emptied as I snagged the last piece with my chopsticks. With a little chagrin, I reached for the beef broccoli instead. “Maybe Morgan’s obsession with her baking reputation has driven her to new lows. Or maybe it’s the pressure of all the plans and the new cookbook’s success.”

Kitty shrugged. “All I know is, I wouldn’t want someone lecturing me on the price of greatness when they can only keep it if they can keep me.” She popped the last bite of her mini egg roll in her mouth.

“That’s true, isn’t it?” I poked at the broccoli. “Morgan leans on her staff right now. She can’t be without them and achieve what she wants, not with her creativity drying up.” It made my thoughts about Jillian earlier seem all the more true, that the young chef was key to the new recipe book’s vision. Or it could be a coincidence that Morgan had a sketch and a set of notes on the dessert Jillian had been making.

Jillian could be the manipulator, for instance. Sadie's stories could be false ones circulating in the restaurant community, inspired by jealousy and competition. Why did I feel so strongly that Jillian was the one whose creativity was being drained and maligned by the same source, because of a few circumstantial pieces of evidence only?

"Michael would probably tell us it's a complicated game of politics, and that it's all pretty ordinary for their world," I said. "He probably understands Morgan's side better than we do."

Kitty snorted. "Michael wouldn't poach someone else's work," she said. "Not even to save his career. He'd rather turn stagnant, hitchhike a bit, wait for his head to clear itself."

That was true, I knew, so I didn't have any reply. I poked my chopsticks through the veg, seeking a smaller piece to eat. "Still, he would probably point out that creativity in recipes is relative anyway. Everything has probably been done at one time or another, so what looks like theft is sometimes coincidence."

"I don't think that's what Morgan's doing," said Kitty. "I reckon she's burned out her own fuses on the last book, and doesn't want to admit it. She's hoping that she can tweak the kitchen staff's original ideas enough that she doesn't have to feel guilty."

"She has to write the background on most of those recipes for the book," I pointed out.

"Most of that stuff's fiction anyway. Does every chef have a brilliant baking immigrant gran?" Kitty's tone held scorn. "That part probably doesn't bother her much."

She reached for the last mushroom in sauce. “We’re used to divas, so we can survive,” she said. “World’s filled with difficult clients, so we have to take our share.” She shrugged. “She’s not much worse than a lot of people we have to deal with in this business.”

“I only wish she’d dial back the obsession with her career enough to see that she’s hurting her staff,” I said. “Especially Jillian. At this rate, she’ll never land a promotion at the restaurant. Morgan’s set against her because she sees her as the kitchen scapegoat.”

Nearly every time a recipe mistake was made, or an error in prep or timing, it was Jillian to whom everyone pointed. Since she helped in the jobs of nearly every kitchen staff, she was the perfect target. “She’ll never have time to perfect her recipe to prove herself to the chef if she spends all her time picking up after all the kitchen mistakes.” I probed my near-empty box a little harder than necessary.

“That’s life,” said Kitty, grimly. “It’s hard for us to escape it, no matter who we are. The planet’s filled with users and losers — we’re all trying to fall somewhere in between, most of the time.”

I reached for the carton of sweet and sour chicken, but it was empty, too. I sighed. Probably for the best, since I had eaten the lion’s share of the noodles. “Did we check to make sure the date for the second testing doesn’t cross the day of the Woodworker’s banquet?” I asked.

“Already checked. It’s three days after,” said Kitty. “I have to call the German restaurant again and find out if they

can still prepare the original menu, because the butcher claims there's a shortage of imported sausages right now."

"Yikes. We'd better call soon," I said. It wouldn't do to host a German-themed banquet with a gap between schnitzel and strudel.

"Tomorrow," said Kitty, as she made a note on the calendar for the second tasting date. "Probably it's just one of those rumors that goes around. Not like the toilet paper shortages or the winter without proper heat."

"Don't even," I said. I tossed the empty cartons into the dustbin and reached for Morgan's list of potential third dates for judging, so we could finish choosing the right times.

I was still feeling sad about it as I took the kids for trick or treating the next night. Maybe it was seeing the Cinderella dresses on all the little princesses scurrying ahead of us on the lane, which made me feel like a depressing candidate for fairy godmother.

"Mum, they have taffy apples at the next house," said Sylvia, who was running up ahead with impatience.

"Slow down," I called after her. "Heath, stick by me." My young son was trying to read all the flavors in his chewy candy pack, and almost walked into two young ghosts heading the opposite direction.

"I'll guide him." Joel went ahead, taking Heath by the shoulder and steering him along in Sylvia's wake.

Joel had thought he was too cool for Halloween until the moment came for choosing costumes, when I couldn't help but notice he wasn't above wearing a superhero mask and cape

and coming along for the fun. Which was a good thing, because steering a penguin was hard when one was also carrying a baby dressed like a banana. Lottie was beginning to outgrow the baby pack in which I carried her on my back.

This neighborhood had lit pumpkins on its front steps at nearly every house — one had even strung orange and purple lights around its doorway, where three little ghouls were knocking in quest of candy. On Kitty's lane this year, the number of glow-in-the-dark lawn ornaments of spooky variety, ghosts and black cats, had increased twofold. Even fake spider's webbing was finding its way into the shrubbery.

Sylvia skipped on ahead, passing a fairy with wings and a wand who was going home with a plastic pumpkin full of candy. My twinge of guilt was back for that sparkly-tipped star meant for wish-granting, and which only made me think of the recent dress mistake with Paula, who was caught between herself and the boy who might or might not be fooling her for fun.

Human emotions were so complicated to fathom. I was never going to figure out these issues and save the day — I knew Matt would make a point of telling me it wasn't my place to, if I shared them with him. He was right, that, technically, I didn't have to help Paula make the university dance a positive milestone in her life, even if she was my friend, and I could make things worse if I wasn't careful.

As for Jillian, she was practically a stranger. It was up to her to fix her career if it was falling into a rut, not me. She had to be the one to speak up for herself and her work.

“Mummy, look! Chocolate coins!” Heath opened his hand — or fin — revealing several gold coins of modern-day Cornish treasure, the kind with chocolate inside and a pirate seal on the outside of its foil.

“Congratulations,” I said. “Don’t drop them — don’t run after your sister like that!” But he was already out of earshot, scurrying along in the dusk after the two near-adolescents loping ahead of him, Sylvia’s witch cape billowing out in the breeze.

“Bwm,” said Lottie, absorbed with trying to bury her face in my shoulder. The tip of her banana stem cap was nuzzling against my cheek.

“My thoughts exactly,” I said to her. We followed the trail of dropped hard candy and a lost pirate coin, as the lights in the pumpkins flickered in the cool gusts of nighttime.

Chapter Thirteen

Morgan cancelled our next appointment together, as I learned the day I arrived. She had changed one of her own in order to be available for the cake judging in two weeks' time, and had forgotten to call me at the last minute to reschedule our plan to visit the furniture hire vendor about fitting the right banquet tables for the reception.

“She’s really sorry,” Mark apologized. “She thought she called. I think in this morning’s hurry, she left in a panic and didn’t realize she never contacted you. If I had only known, I would have taken care of it and saved you the trouble.”

“It’s all right,” I said, reassuring him. “I can always stop by, take some photos, and see if she wants to schedule another visit in which she can be present. Maybe some photos will answer any questions she might have, if you both trust my judgment.”

He laughed. “I think you both have handled this wedding’s plans as perfectly as anybody can,” he said. “I’m impressed by what you’ve done thus far, so I have no concerns about it whatsoever.”

He climbed down from the ladder in the foyer — until now, he had been peering into a hole surrounding the pipes of the future fountain, shining a torch for a plumbing assistant doing something with the plumbing connections. “Sorry about the mistake, truly,” he said.

“It’s okay, I understand,” I said. “I’ll drop her an email later tonight.”

He brushed some plaster from his clothes. “If you’d like to do me a favor, stop by the kitchen on your way out and try one of my stuffed mushroom and bruschetta savory tea cakes,” he said. “They’re getting rave reviews as hearty teatime buns to go with the chef’s salads, but I’m thinking now it’s a bit much.”

“Savory tea cakes? Very intriguing-sounding,” I answered. “I’d love to try one.” It would be hard to top Dinah’s saffron tea cakes in their beautiful fondant glaze, but I was open to new things, especially the continental cuisine that Mark was expanding.

The bruschetta cakes were every bit the culinary delight I expected, as I tried one. Not too large, slightly smaller than a typical teatime bun of this kind, and made from a delicious brioche dough with mixture stirred through and baked in beneath a light crust of herbs.

I was licking my fingers when I heard Jillian’s voice. “Like them?” she asked, smiling. “They’re getting great feedback from everyone who tries them.”

“They taste excellent,” I answered. “You can tell, because I’m not being a mature adult who looks for a handkerchief to clean their fingers at this moment.”

She laughed. “Everyone’s doing the same,” she said. “They’re really popular so far, from the construction crew to some of the friends that Mark has asked to come in. Jacques’ pretty enamored with them, and he’s very tough to please.”

She removed her chef's jacket and cap, hanging both of them up on a peg in the little open uniform closet near the doorway, unzipping a backpack hanging just below. "Are you leaving?" I asked.

"It's my day off," she explained. "I came in only because Jacques was shorthanded and needed someone to set the proofing drawers and mix Morgan's yogurt sauce for the spicy Indian finger breads, since she won't be in today."

I almost hesitated, but then I asked. "Do you have time to come with me?" I asked. "I have to see about the banquet tables, but that puts us right next to the shop where we usually order wedding cakes for big weddings like this one. I wondered if you'd like to see their inner workings, professional to professional."

Chez Cakes was the top regional bakery for couture cakes, and no local baker could resist an opportunity to slip behind its lines incognito, without having to worry about the professional wariness that Michael made us aware of. Jillian was interested immediately, and I knew she was picturing the rhythm of the kitchen, probably imagining cakes being built, with a talented eye that knew exactly how each step was meant to go ... and wanted to be surprised by the ones she didn't see coming.

"There will be samples," I said, coaxingly. "The head baker at Chez wants me to try the latest recipe, because she's hoping I'll recommend it to my next posh client ... who, she hopes, *won't* be a professional baker themselves."

"I'd love to come," said Jillian. "Are you sure I wouldn't be a hindrance? You're working, after all."

“Did you have big plans otherwise?”

“I was just going home to shower and watch some baking programs,” she said. “I was going to try some new porcini and chive rolls that I was reading about, because I’ve been wanting to learn more about creating filled rolls with alternative ingredients, but the shop didn’t have any mushrooms.” She slipped on a pink jacket, then closed up her backpack. “Mark working with dried mushrooms in his breads has really inspired me.”

“Maybe we’ll come across one that has some in stock,” I suggested. “If not, I’ll buy you a cup of tea and you can tell me about the recipe.” I led the way through the kitchen’s service door, and around the little gravel walk to the lane where I was parked.

The furniture hire shop was the first stop, and not a particularly exciting one for Jillian, but I utilized her knowledge as an insider in the food service world to help judge the height and width of tables. Mark and Morgan wanted something with a rustic wood finish if at all possible, which meant my choice of vendor had real furniture for rent — expensive, chic, and antique pieces that only very particular clients wanted or could afford.

We needed four long, rustic dining tables to form the long serving table they planned in the garden — any attractive tables which matched would do for the buffet stations, even standard mass-produced folding ones, because we planned to skirt them and hide the legs. Matching chairs of wood for the guests to sit in — I had to choose between a more formal one

with carving and a serviceable vintage dining chair in dark cherry, so I took photographs of both for Morgan.

At Chez Cakes, I took Jillian on the promised tour of the kitchen, introducing her as my temporary assistant — not that Bernice the chief baker would care if I brought another cook into her kitchen.

Two bakery assistants were icing the sides of a large, tiered cake on pedestal stands, spinning them gradually with each smooth motion of the frosting knife over buttercream. Little flecks of peel and cinnamon showed in its creamy mixture, giving a rustic effect to a cake that would soon be assembled, into a tower.

One of Bernice's staff was dusting the marzipan acorns and leaves with edible gold dust as they lay on a baking sheet nearby. The design was pinned to the board above the table, and I could see they would travel lightly down one side of the cake, as if blown aside by a gust of autumn wind.

Jillian looked with wide-eyed wonder at her surroundings. Chez Cakes had a unique atmosphere in its kitchen, feeling less stark and more inviting — cake designs covered its walls nearly everywhere, decorative tins were lined edge to edge in display shelves running the entire width of two walls, with pantry jars of tantalizing ingredients on display above and below in a more practical version of kitchen decor.

“They're making checkerboard today,” I said. “That's my favorite. My last client wanted one in pink and red for a Valentine's theme.” Bernice was cutting the center from a large cake with a circular cutter, then cutting a smaller one from the new piece to add back a piece of the original flavor.

Two different flavors in two different colors — vanilla white and blackberry-lavender violet.

“It’s a fantastic color,” said Jillian, admiringly. “The frosting — is that vanilla streaked with blackberry?” she asked Bernice.

“That’s correct,” answered the chef. “I’m going to pipe it in large floral rosette swirls on the bottom and top layers. The middle one will be decorated with handmade sugar blossoms with centers of flavored chocolate. I have to choose the flavor first.”

“What about licorice with a berry infusion, as a handmade candy chew?” suggested Jillian, who was tasting two different candies from the tray of decorative ones, where I was trying one of the chocolate espresso beans.

Bernice tilted her head. “I hadn’t considered that, but it might be a good compliment to the cake’s flavors,” she said. “I’ll keep that in mind.” She gave Jillian a curious look momentarily, before glancing at me. “You choose your assistants really well, Julianne.”

“I’ve had a lot of chances to practice,” I said. “We keep busy, so we need more hands than our own sometimes.” I glanced at Jillian with a smile.

“No worries about that big event planning firm that’s always threatening to open up in the future?” teased Bernice. “You are the best locally, after all.”

“Let ‘em come,” I joked. “But, speaking as the best, I still need to taste your new cake if I’m going to recommend it.”

She laid down the cake cutter. “Let’s go through to the dining room,” she said.

Within view of the cake display cabinets, filled with delectable slices, Bernice served us one large wedge of her latest, with two forks beside it. “Bon appetite, ladies,” she said, with a smile.

“It’s beautiful just to admire,” said Jillian. “What is the flavor profile?”

“Italian coffee with sweetened Belgian chocolate,” said Bernice, pointing to the topmost, ginger-colored layer. “Vanilla bean with golden raspberry.” She pointed to the bottom layer, an ivory color with dark flecks sprinkled through its crumb. “Frosted in dark chocolate ganache with a hint of golden syrup sweetness, and vanilla coffee-flavored chocolate curls for garnish.”

We dug our forks in, each sampling the same half. I could tell right away that this was a new level of perfection for Chez Cakes — subtle, sweet, but not too complex as the chocolate unfolded with that rich coffee infusion.

“Mmh. Oh. That’s *so* lovely,” said Jillian. “I can taste notes of both flavors. It has the simplicity of German chocolate, but it’s so rich.”

“I could recommend it wholeheartedly,” I said. “This one, I need to try first, though.” I dug my fork into the lower half, at the same time as Jillian’s. This one stood a good chance of being my favorite, because I loved golden raspberries.

Jillian tasted it, a look of concentration on her face. “I can definitely taste the berry,” she said. “The vanilla bean is really nice as a base flavor. They compliment each other so well.”

As for me, it was melting in my mouth. “It’s so good,” I said. “Although — the frosting —”

“I think it would work better with vanilla buttercream, maybe infused with raspberry and white chocolate,” said Jillian, thoughtfully. “Maybe if it was split into two different cakes, each one having its own tier in the layers.”

“I think that would be perfect,” I said. “What about citrus? Would that work?” I had an email awaiting answer at work from a prospective client who claimed to love all things orange.

“In the frosting, I think so,” said Jillian. “I think the citrus and the coffee would clash, so I don’t think I would pair it with that delicious coffee and chocolate cake. Maybe with milk or semi-sweet French chocolate.”

“Let me make some notes.” I pulled out my phone and typed in some of these tips. “Having you come has been really helpful,” I said to Jillian. “Any time it’s just me, without Kitty’s help, or Paula’s, it seems to take me twice as long to figure out what I actually think. I have no sounding board.”

“I’m glad coming along helped you,” she said. “I was glad for a chance to see that amazing bakery kitchen. I saw one of their cakes at the reception for Bon Cuisine on Mark’s first day of ownership. There was a little celebration, and he ordered one featuring clusters of Italian grapes — they were made out of marzipan, and looked real enough you would

believe them, with Turkish delight centers flavored by different table wine infusions. I couldn't believe it when I tried it — it was so absolutely brilliant.”

Listening to her, caught up in the description, I saw the quiet side of Jillian disappear as her passion took over. It was enlightening, like seeing a lamp switch on in a room where I recognized the furniture, but had never seen just how patterned its fabrics were, how ornate the trim on the picture frames. It was completing the image I had been trying to build of her since first seeing how dedicated and talented her kitchen self could be.

“So, what did we think?” Bernice had come back, after helping a customer decide which sample they wanted to take home from the vast choices.

“One hundred percent delicious,” I said. “Can I have the recipe, please?”

Bernice laughed, and we joined in. “Thanks,” she said. “I'll accept that as a compliment.” She glanced at Jillian now, who was taking one last bite from the nearly-finished piece.

“I agree with Julianne completely,” she said to her. “The quality is unbelievable. You and your staff are amazing culinary artists.”

“Again, thanks,” said Bernice, collecting our plate — which was empty as I snagged the last bite of chocolate sponge with a bit of coffee-cocoa curl attached.

She stopped at the kitchen door. “I heard those remarks about my sponge flavors, by the way,” she said to Jillian. “Nice call.” She smiled and went on through. The young

baker's face flashed pink momentarily with embarrassment. "I had no idea she was listening. I wouldn't have dared say anything," she said to me.

"Why?" I asked. "You were being honest, and you weren't trashing her food, you were praising it. I was the one who asked for your creative thoughts."

"I suppose. But she's such a master baker, I would never want her to think I didn't respect that. Everyone's creativity deserves respect."

Including yours? I wanted to ask. I considered those words before they left my mouth in the form of a different question. "I've noticed that Morgan has a tendency to rely on her staff pretty heavily for this new recipe book," I said. "Maybe a little more than one expects from a baker supposedly as creative and perfection-driven as she seems."

The uncomfortable silence from Jillian told me she understood what I was saying. "Do you mind that she does it?" I asked. "She's taking your ideas, she's taking credit for them, too."

Jillian shook her head. "That's how it is in the culinary world," she said. "Chefs and their apprentices sometimes have an understanding that what the employees develop in the kitchen belongs to the kitchen. It's the apprentice's way of paying back for what they've learned."

"That's great, except for the part where Morgan doesn't respect you for helping her," I said. "There's no return of the favor on the part of the kitchen for what you and the others are doing, not that I've seen. It's like she's pretending you haven't done anything."

Jillian didn't say anything. "It's none of my business," I said. "I've only wondered lately if it's costing you the promotion you planned to work for."

"If it does, I'll try again later," said Jillian. "There will be another opening on staff. If I want one, besides, I have to be on Morgan's good side, not her bad one. She wouldn't let Jacques or Mark promote someone she thought crossed her, who was supposed to be helping."

"I'm not saying that," I assured her. "Just that you deserve an opportunity to make up for it." I laughed. "If only you could make the wedding cake that Morgan wants to be so perfect, for example."

Jillian's face flushed deep pink and she averted her gaze, shaking her head again. "That's completely against the rules," she reminded me. "If she had opened it to staff, I would have been eager to try, but I can see why she didn't. It would look like favoritism if she chose one of us."

"That's why the rule is in place," I said. "I think you probably would have been a great choice if not, for what it's worth. I'm saying that as a professional who has tasted lots of wedding cake in my time."

Her blush was an ordinary one in response to praise, this time. "That's really nice of you to say," she said. "It's really kind, the way you appreciate our work. I mean, not just for Morgan's next book, but for how really good we are at making those recipes as perfect as they can be."

"Once I tasted your strudel, I couldn't have any doubts," I answered, making her laugh. "It was too good to resist."

We admired the other slices in the display case, the ones we hadn't tried. The previous exotic flavors, the red velvet and peppermint, the pumpkin spice lightened with golden raisins and raspberries blended with soft buttercream. A similar cake to the checkerboard one lay on a serving plate, only this one was strawberry with rose and chocolate, its mirror ganache decorated by roses made of dried strawberry and chocolate.

"I'll take one of everything," I said.

Jillian laughed. "That makes two of us," she said. "I wish I could create something this beautiful every day. Imagine coming into the shop, wanting something extraordinary, and finding it here. And you're only seeing one slice, so you know the rest must be spectacular."

I looked at her, seeing the admiration glowing in her eyes as she looked at the beautiful selections. She probably hoped someday to have a shop like this one, dreaming about it the way all culinary professionals do. It was far away at present, from the ranking she held in the kitchen where she worked. If only the chef had had the chance to taste her special dish perfected, he might change his mind. As it was, however, he was too busy for that, just like Jillian was too busy to finish it.

After this, I gave her a ride back to her flat, stopping first at a little specialty shop where she located a package of dried porcini mushrooms for her bread. She gave me directions to her home, and I navigated my way through less-familiar lanes in Penzance, the residential ones where our business as event planners didn't take us.

I parked, and came up for a moment so she could give me some brown sugar tea biscuits she had made, so I could try one of her original recipes — one that Morgan hadn't modified, that is. Her flat was only a little one that had turned mostly into kitchen by pushing the sofa against the window wall and putting two work tables and an old dresser and shelf converted into storage for pots and pans in between.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked, as she set her shopping bag on the table and laid her bag on the floor beside it. “I'll put on the kettle anyway.”

“Thanks, but I won't be staying long,” I said. “I have to be home at a decent hour tonight, so Matt isn't stuck minding the kids all on his own. We practically have a pack now.”

I noticed the books on her sofa — large binders filled with pages of handwritten recipes and sketches of various decorated sponges and biscuits. One was open to a blank plastic sleeve, and a sketch featuring a wedding-style sponge was lying above it.

“Is this your latest work?” I asked. “The drawing on the table?”

“It's the cake I designed before I knew that Morgan was creating the contest,” said Jillian. “I thought maybe it would interest her and Mark, because someone told me those are their wedding colors.”

The cake's flavors were unusual — a light bourbon vanilla-infused sponge with apricot and candied lemon, a nod to Italian cream cakes and tiramisu, with a light lemon mascarpone-style custard sandwiching its halves. The second tier was a decadent chocolate infused with espresso and

chocolate liqueur, with an espresso-caramel cream holding its layers together.

It was decorated with a rustic cream frosting with vanilla bean, and covered in sugar paste wisteria blossoms, cascading down all its layers, with realistic green fondant leaves, and a chocolate espresso vine crafted down one side, as Kitty had proposed suggesting for Morgan's, before we became aware that suggestions wouldn't be welcome.

"This is stunning," I said. "I like it. I think it's as beautiful as the one we had originally." I glanced towards the kitchen. "Have you ever made it?"

"Once," she answered, as she opened the cupboard by the fridge. "Only the two-tiered, like in the drawing. I ended up serving it in sections to friends over two weeks — it's not exactly a budget-friendly dessert, making a big wedding sponge for only yourself to eat."

I glanced over the open book as I waited. "Is this more of your work?" I asked. "I really like a lot of it." I noticed a pretty sponge with notes for decorating it with delicate orange-flavored glass candy that would look like real slices.

"Thanks," she said. "I've been keeping them for years. Every time I think of something, I put it in one of the books — sketches, notes, whatever." She assembled a little bakery-style box. "I took them to work once to show Jacques, and he liked some of the ideas. But without seeing the real thing, and tasting it, all he can do is say that they have potential."

"I see his point," I admitted, turning the pages.

“I take it some of these are for kids?” A lot of notes were about creating simple, professional-looking decorating techniques that children could do — making easy piping bags, emulating the styles of certain fancy icing tips, even making tie-dyed icing using food coloring stripes inside a plastic bag filled with plain frosting.

“That’s something I want to do in the future,” she said, as she scooped biscuits from a tin into the box. “I’d like to write a children’s book about how to make fancy decorations and frosting techniques easy for them to do at home. So they can decorate sponges, biscuits, to look amazing. Like — making marshmallow fondant, or a cheat recipe for marzipan that’s basically edible modeling clay made of sugar — making ornaments with glass candy by melting ones from the shops, and so on.”

It was a great idea, I thought, and one I would have appreciated for my kids in the years where Sylvia pondered why our cakes at home never looked as amazing as Harriet Hardy’s did on her Christmas program. “Do you think about writing cookbooks yourself in the future, or is this the one special project?” I asked.

“Maybe others,” she admitted. “I’d like to do a cross-generational one. You know, recipes that kids and adults can share in, using my stories of baking with my grandmother, and her stories of baking with hers. It would be great to leave blank pages in between the printed recipes, where they can write their own family’s traditions and stories, and the recipes their family teaches them to make. I thought, maybe feature stories and recipes from cross-generational families across

different cultures, because cooking is a global bonding experience.”

“Sounds like you need a literary agent, not just a promotion at work,” I said, feeling impressed as I looked at some notes she had made about her grandmother’s special cooking secrets. Scrap copies of her grandmother’s recipes in her own hand, carefully preserved with a note that said *‘presented to my granddaughter Jillian on this date, October 27th, 2018.*

“Some of these tiered sponges would be perfect for a wedding, especially the two-tier ones,” I commented, turning the page back again. “We have a lot of small weddings among our clientele. I should put you on our vendor list, if you’d like to do some side work — it would bring in extra cash.”

“I’d really like that,” she said, glancing back. “It would be wonderful to make someone’s actual wedding cake.”

“It’s the crowning achievement for a baker, so my culinary friends always say,” I remarked, turning the pages in her book. “This one goes back for years,” I remarked, noting there were little tags with years dividing the book into sections.

“About ten, actually,” she called back. “There are more on the shelf. I like to keep them chronological so I can see how my technique has developed over time.”

I folded back another year, and paused when I saw the sketch belonging to the second tiered sponge recipe. A two-tiered cake with rustic sides, rich cream frosting, and beautiful drapery of sugar paste lilac panicles, lavender, and peony

blossoms and buds, in shades of rich maroon purple to blueish lavender.

My finger located the corresponding recipe, recognizing the ingredient list, almost in its entirety, from the flavor profile we received from Morgan several weeks ago. I felt a cold spot inside, as if I had swallowed a sharp sliver of ice.

The date was 2017. I remembered Jillian saying she took her book in to show to Jacques her latest creations, and I knew it had to be this book. Morgan could have seen it — and Jillian hadn't seen the wedding cake's design, because no one else besides Kitty and me had done so.

“You know, I might have a client interested in one of your cakes,” I said. “They have an event coming up, and they need a small wedding cake. Could I take some photos?”

“Of course,” she answered. I heard the cupboard door shut. I pulled out my camera phone and snapped a photo of the sketch and the recipe of the original wedding cake, then of the new wedding cake that Jillian had been designing, along with its recipe.

“Thanks, I said. I flipped a few pages back, choosing one of the other two-tier cakes that I had admired, one featuring roses, and snapped a photo of it also. “I'll let you know in a couple of weeks.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kitty and I selected the last finalists the day after the contest deadline, looking through more designs from professional and semi-professional bakers who wanted to be featured in Morgan and Mark's wedding. With so many choices, it was hard to decide, but we had experience from enough weddings to know which designs would meet Morgan's expectations and which ones would fall too short to bother including.

"Not this one," said Kitty, looking at a modern cake styled after a London sculpture. "Good sugar work, but the construct's a bit too minimal. Nothing classical in it, either."

"I agree. I think some entries are from people who didn't read the brief." I propped my chin on my hands as she clicked ahead, to a photo of a cake styled like a large owl, with textured chocolate feathers.

"That's a proper sculpture."

We made notes as we went, nearing the end of the entries. I felt a slight twinge of apprehension as Kitty clicked through them, knowing what was coming.

It had been a mistake to do it, perhaps, but I had entered Jillian in the competition under a fake name, using one of the two-tier cakes I had admired from her book. My heart pounded, knowing by now the magazine had decided whether to enter her pretend identity without being able to check her credentials as Dinah's bakery assistant.

“I like that one.” Kitty pointed. A wedding cake with nearly-naked sides, a rustic chocolate one which looked posh with its vanilla icing and its faded-looking marzipan roses in slate-blue and lavender, a few sugar petals showering down, as if fallen from the ‘drying’ blossom heads. “That one’s decent enough to put into a bakery window,” she said.

“I’d have that at one of our client’s weddings in a heartbeat.” To keep track of which contestants we preferred, I put down the number assigned to the contestant, feeling my heart skip a beat from knowing who had created the cake we were just admiring.

“They’re on the list of contenders, no hesitation there,” said Kitty, as she clicked ahead to the next entry.

Our bride-to-be agreed with our assessment when she looked through the portfolio of contestants we had winnowed down to seventy-five from the huge list of applicants the magazine had processed. We brought her the complete portfolio for approval before the next stage would take place.

“Some of these are quite nice,” she commented, as she looked through the entries. “A few have fantastic talent — I wouldn’t be surprised if they work for one of the major bakeries in London. I feel as if I recognize the style of a few of these designs.”

“We picked the best,” said Kitty. “Some are a bit different, but that might be an edge in the finalist round.” She said this as Morgan flipped to a page featuring a fancy cake that looked like a pile of miniature pumpkins, all made of chocolate beneath their airbrush-painted fondant.

“I think I agree,” said Morgan. She paused in her review, on a cake that I recognized instantly as Jillian’s. “This one’s very striking,” she commented, lingering a moment before she flipped to the next one.

She laid aside the portfolio. “I’ll look them over more tonight, but I think these are just what we’re looking for,” she said. “I can’t wait until the taste tests. One or two already looked promising enough that I expect the actual wedding cake design to be a decent show, even if it’s not quite what I initially hoped.”

“I hope so,” I answered. “We’ll know in a couple of weeks.”

The last leaves clinging on to the shrubbery near Save the Date had all been shed as I tacked the wreath to our entrance’s exterior door hook, one with frosted branches and a few red berries decorated by glitter also. I planned to add the hooks for greenery above our windows, but it wasn’t quite time to hang boughs, which Kitty generally wove for us out of variegated holly from the wood, and which were still only branches in soaking pails in our shop’s back room.

I dusted off my hands, and inspected my work to be sure it wasn’t crooked. I checked the time — today was the third

round of the tasting contest, and I had to scurry if I wanted to change clothes before leaving for the restaurant.

Each semifinalist had been informed of the next step after their acceptance, involving baking and sending a slice of the sponge flavor they planned to propose for the wedding, sealed in an airtight storage container, by overnight delivery if located beyond the two-day arrival radius by post. All the addresses were verified, and a photo of their original design and the digits of their entry keycode were enclosed to ensure it was a real submission.

So far, we had tasted sour cream cakes with mascarpone, baker's cocoa with lavender, and even an unusual one of vanilla with sage and truffles. Some were far from the mark, and others were extremely delicious, so the range was wide. This was where Morgan's opinion mattered significantly, so she held a veto over the two of us in the tasting process.

Kitty and I had laid out the slices on plates with forks for sampling. Morgan was the first to taste each one, and made her own criteria checklist, from 'too chewy' to 'more flavor needed,' ticking the corresponding boxes each time she tasted one. We ranked the entries from one to five on the scale — each taste test winnowed the pool of contenders by two thirds, meaning only twenty-five would be left for the final round, submitting their cake design.

"The ginger one isn't bad," I said, pulling it apart slightly to inspect the crumb — pretending I was Michael at this moment, who looked at texture with an eagle eye whenever inspecting a new sponge recipe's bake.

“Too much cinnamon,” said Kitty. “Other than that, it’s good. Not the right flavor profile, though.”

Morgan nodded. “I agree,” she said. “It has strong potential, but ginger at a summer wedding feels like a complete faux pas. I want something more traditional, more evocative of summer — but with a twist, like the choice of fig in this cake, for example.” Her fork patted the delicious — but disqualified — gingerbread.

We all three liked aspects of the next one, a white chocolate with a vanilla marshmallow cream that was intriguing yet almost too different at the same time.

“We should ask Mark to come over and break the stalemate,” I suggested, after we debated it for a few minutes.

“He would hardly help us,” said Morgan, shaking her head. “He knows I’m an absolute diva when it comes to the cake, so he’ll always defer to my opinion. ‘My bake, my rules’ is the word in our house.”

“What about for Mark’s baking?” Kitty was asking as a joke — I thought.

“He’s scarcely in the kitchen baking any more, now that we’re together,” she said. “I suppose he thinks I’ll fulfill all the need for that we might have. I think turning to savory cuisine and entrees is good for him, frankly. He needed a change.”

“I thought he would miss baking,” I said. “I had the impression he enjoyed it when he still ran his original eatery.”

“We all change,” said Morgan, as she dug her fork into a coconut slice. “The program changed his mind about his life’s

direction more than I did. I gave him a gentle nudge after we were together, because I could see he was stuck. It certainly wasn't helping him to remain in a small shop when he had a big reputation that needed development."

"Do you think a change is always good when someone is stuck?" I asked.

"Absolutely." She paused in mid-chew. "This sponge is too dry," she said. "The coconut flakes needed to be smaller, in my opinion."

Kitty made a note. "This chocolate one looks better," she remarked, reaching for the next sample, which Morgan tested cautiously.

"You're right, it's quite good," she said. "Excellent bake crumb as well," she said, pulling it apart. "I can taste the coffee in it. It's very rich, but not heavy."

"I like this other bit, too, with the citrus."

"The custard really makes this one," commented Morgan.

I said nothing during this portion of the judging, and let my vote be neutral as they added this entry to the pool of finalists. Jillian had made it through.

I knew it wasn't a good secret that I was keeping. Sooner or later, the truth was going to come out, if Jillian beat the odds and won the contest with her beautiful cake. I hadn't thought the plan through beyond the impulse of putting her design into the mix — and seeing Morgan admire her artistry and her flavor profiles without realizing whom she was praising.

That brought me satisfaction. Guilt, however, was pushing me to face what might be coming my way if the next round of judging brought her into the spotlight. Morgan had the deciding vote in choosing the winner, no matter what Kitty and I decided. But the magazine's announcement would make it final. What was I going to do then?

You never lie to Kitty. Our partnership was based on trust and honesty, years of being friends. If I kept her in the dark, she'd be blinded by it if the truth came out. If I told her, however, then she'd be culpable in the plot — blameworthy in Morgan and Mark's eyes.

If I told her, I knew she would have to put a stop to it and withdraw Jillian's name. *You've accomplished enough by taking it this far,* I told myself. *Just let it go. The odds Morgan will choose her entry are small anyway.* But the praise for the cake sample whispered otherwise, trying to change my resolve.

My decision whether to tell Kitty the truth made itself known as we worked in her kitchen on the showstopper dessert Kitty had designed for the Woodworker's banquet table. Almost good enough to be an entry in Morgan's wedding cake contest in my opinion, it was a dark chocolate sponge stack in the shape of a Bavarian cuckoo clock, to accompany the German menu. Kitty used the techniques Michael had taught her over the years to do chocolate work, making the edible painted bird on its perch, the little shutters, and the multiple carved leaves decorating the outside.

I watched her carefully carve slats in the little shutter doors as I helped attach the chocolate fondant leaves. The guilt

prodding me inside was nudging its way out, like it was going to burn a hole for escape.

“I need to tell you something,” I said. “It’s important. Actually ... it’s a mistake that I have to own up to, and you’re probably going to be angry when I tell you.”

Something in my voice made her pause in the midst of attaching the shutter. “What is it?” she asked. Her tone was slightly concerned.

“Look — you know how I felt about Morgan mistreating Jillian,” I said. “How I felt when I realized she was culling all her good ideas from staff. Afterwards, I was at Jillian’s flat and I found out that she stole one of her biggest ideas from her.”

“According to Michael, it’s not theft when you’re a kitchen apprentice, it’s just standard practice,” said Kitty.

I shook my head. “This was theft,” I said. “It wasn’t an idea she developed in Morgan’s kitchen under her watch, but something private that Morgan saw. It’s not the same as hiring someone to make up a special biscuit recipe for you.”

Kitty had grown still. I had a feeling she sensed the direction this was going.

“That’s why I entered Jillian in the contest,” I said. “Under another name. I copied her designs and did it because I wanted to prove to Morgan that Jillian was a better baker than she gave her credit for, and put her in a position where she can’t take back the praise.”

“You did that?” Kitty’s tone held scorn. “That’s completely against the rules. We said from the start it couldn’t

be anybody on staff, so what's going to happen if she wins?"

"I know, and I know it could get us into trouble," I said. "But it's me who did it, and it's entirely my fault, so I will be the one who fixes it, not you."

She scowled, and dropped the little brush she was using to spread hot caramel onto a chocolate shortbread shingle for the roof, leaving a splatter on the tablecloth. "You know this is us breaking the rules," she said. "We're a team. They're not going to believe only one of us did it."

"They will if I confess," I said. "I'm going to have to do it. I'll say I thought the idea was too good to pass up, and I wanted it to be in the running for the wedding. I won't tell Morgan it's because I can't stand her attitude."

Kitty's fingers fiddled with the shortbread shingle between them. "What kind of ideas are we talking about?" she asked. "You've confessed, tell me the rest."

I reached into my pocket and took out my phone. I showed the pictures to her, in succession. I saw her smirk for the faded roses entry that she had admired from the first, and that Morgan had also liked instantly. When I reached the recognizable image of Morgan's wedding cake, I saw her expression change.

I didn't say anything as I closed the photo album. I put the phone away as Kitty picked up the brush, and stirred the sugar caramel on the hot plate.

"How'd you find out?" she asked.

"I was at her flat. The book was open," I said. "She doesn't know I saw it. She didn't know about it happening,

because Morgan's sketch was a secret, and we never showed it to anybody else."

"So you figured you'd get even like this," said Kitty. "Make it possible for Morgan to pick the featured cake from the artist she stole hers from. Which is a plan that could get us into bigger trouble with her, or get Jillian sacked, basically."

"Basically," I said. "Truth be told, I didn't think of the next step when it reached this point. I wasn't thinking of what would happen if Morgan found out by picking Jillian."

Kitty was silent. I could tell she was thinking — I could tell it had made her angry when she saw the photo, although she didn't say anything. She agreed with Michael that what happened in the kitchen at the restaurant was between the chefs and staff, even if it seemed like intellectual gleaning to me. It was another thing for Morgan to go through Jillian's private portfolio and take what she wanted, like it was a bin of bargain items in the shop.

"So what do you think happens if we don't tell?" Kitty asked.

I caught her eye, and felt a tiny flicker of amazement. "I have no idea," I said. "I thought I would wait for Jillian to apply for the promotion at work, and then show Morgan the designs and tell her they were mixed up with the others, just to prove she'd already admired her work." It seemed like a good way to make the point without embarrassing Morgan too much. It would make it hard for her to criticize Jillian's application.

"If she wins is the bigger problem," Kitty pointed out. I nodded, reluctantly.

“Then I have no idea. It’ll have to come out that the person who won is fictitious, and I’ll have to admit it was me,” I said. “Maybe Morgan will agree to save face in that situation?”

Kitty grunted. She applied caramel to one of the shingles. “Still. It would be pretty satisfying,” she said. I knew that tone from Kitty, and it wasn’t the begrudging one.

“I can withdraw Jillian from the competition,” I said. “I can put a stop to it before there’s a chance Morgan finds out, unless she asks too many questions. She’s not so attached to Jillian’s flavor profile that she would notice one less baker in the running.”

Kitty nodded. “Or we could wait a bit,” she said. “See what happens next.”

“That puts us at risk if something happens,” I said. “Like her choosing Jillian?”

“We’d be careful,” said Kitty. “Maybe we can make a point without a crisis, who knows?”

I hesitated. “So ... leave it alone?” I said. “Like I was saying, she may not make the final list.” Morgan planned to pare the finalists to three, then choose her favorite. We both knew that a strong possibility existed the Jillian would be one of them, judging how well her initial entry and her taste sample had performed.

“What’s her final design?” Kitty asked. I took out my phone and showed her the photo I had taken of the new cake she’d designed for Morgan, which had been abandoned when the contest was announced.

Kitty studied it, and I could see from her face that she knew as well as I did that this was a design that could win. If we left her entry in place, Morgan would see it at the next judging. What happened after that — that was the part where we had to explain things.

I waited for Kitty's answer. She could say we should do what was best for our reputation, and I would contact the magazine as 'fake' Jillian and withdraw my entry immediately. End of charade. What I had proven on Jillian's behalf might be enough to secure her consideration for a promotion at work.

Kitty stuck another shingle to the roof. "Leave it," she said. I heard her exhale, deeply. "It's a good design, and that's what we're supposed to provide for our client — the best we can get."

I nodded. "That's what I thought when I saw it," I said. "But —"

" — we better hope the consequences don't crush us," said Kitty. "Ever think about what happens if we have competition someday?"

I thought of the old rumor of a posh event planner opening a new branch here, and shuddered a little bit, because this misstep was exactly the kind of choice they'd never make. "I do," I said. "And — I think about what I'd feel like if I turn the other way when someone's being mistreated. I have to decide which one will keep me awake at night."

I reached for a brush and spread caramel on another roof shingle. We went on with the cuckoo clock's construction, both thinking about what the stakes were in deciding to leave the situation to chance. I knew Kitty was worried, and I was,

too. The secret thrill of hearing Morgan praise Jillian as one of the best was wearing off, leaving the certainty of a mess to clean up.

In another mess — an equally-precarious one — I had an appointment with Paula at a local hair salon, having finally coaxed her into getting a proper trim during their ‘half off rates’ special.

Those nut-brown braids had split ends, and the uneven trim of her fringe was all the proof I needed that Paula trimmed it at home in front of the bathroom mirror with a dull pair of scissors. It would be worth spending a tiny bit of her Christmas bonus to trim things neatly, and encourage healthy new growth.

“Will they want to do something dramatic?” she asked.

“They’ll cut it however you like,” I answered. “No one will give you a new hairstyle unless you want one. But they have books with different styles, and you might want to flip through one and look at the latest trends — maybe you’ll see something you like.”

“Maybe.” Paula sounded reluctant. “I think I’d like to keep things a bit more like me for now.”

Mabel was today’s stylist — she tended to gossip loudly and chew hard candies as she worked, making crackling noises I found startling on the occasion she trimmed mine for me — I preferred Donna, who was a little less interested in Ceffylgwyn’s rumors and a little more precise with the scissors.

She was not in today, apparently. I told myself not to see this as a negative sign of things to come as I chose a couple of styling magazines to read and settled into one of the nearby chairs. After swaddling another customer's head in non-drip foil and positioning them by the rinse sink, Mabel turned to Paula. She chatted on with my assistant, smacking a large grape candy jewel between her back molars all the time.

"You've got lovely hair," she said, as she undid Paula's braids and brushed them out. "Just a trim up? I think you'd look very fetching in a short pixie cut. Highlight those cheekbones."

"No, thanks," said Paula. "I think a regular trim, nothing too much." She took off her eyeglasses, rethought it, and put them back on so she could see this process clearly.

"Ever think of contact lenses?" asked Mabel. "Brings out the eyes more than old granny spectacles do." She scrutinized Paula's face, squinting. "Good cheekbones, those'd look great without the frames."

Paula looked taken aback. "Uh, I don't really like them," she said. "They sort of ... squish."

"Erm. Well, maybe another kind," suggested Mabel. "Now, why are we in for a trim, my bird? Breakup blues? Fancy a new face?"

"Just a little change and refresher, right?" I said to Paula, jumping in here in case it was about to become a little too much for her.

"There's a dance at uni," said Paula, trying not to blush.

“Say no more, pet. I know all about those events.” Mabel was ratted Paula’s hair in the opposite direction, with rapid strokes of the brush. “Bet a free rinse that there’s a bloke you fancy going.”

Paula blushed deep red. “Not especially,” she said. “One sort of asked, but ...” she paused. “... it’s probably nothing.”

I hurt for these words, if only because I was still harboring doubts. Paula was cautious about whether Tristan would renew his invitation, at least, because she had a sensible mind. Maybe it wasn’t going to be too disappointing if her words were the truth in the end.

“You show him you’re not a lass to mess about with,” said Mabel, stroking the hair the opposite direction with equally-fast bristles. “Put on a bit of cosmetic and strut your stuff. You make him see that he’s missing out on a good thing.”

“Maybe a little makeup would be a good thing,” I suggested, in order to change the subject. “Just a little, to bring out the highlights in your features, and compliment your eyes.” I could see a rack with some nice dusty browns and rosy shades in eye shadow, and some tubes of lipstick less garish than what Mabel was wearing.

“He probably wouldn’t be impressed by cosmetics,” said Paula. “He’s seen me without them, so he knows what I really look like. Why would he care if I wore them?” This was before Mabel tilted her back at the nearby rinse sink and turned on the tap.

“Blokes always like to see the difference,” Mabel explained, loudly. “It’s part of the allure, you know, the game

— we're the peacocks with the feathers, they're the ones strutting about being masculine instead of showing off those fan tails. It's like the nature programs on telly."

"I don't think all guys play along," I said, wishing to keep things away from the field of romantic pursuit.

"Every bloke I've ever known likes a girl to show off," said Mabel, slathering Paula's head in suds. "He'll be easier to wrap around your finger once he's nice and impressed — that's the sort of bloke every woman wants, isn't it?" She rinsed the shampoo off, then wrapped Paula's head in a towel.

"Blokes aren't as easy to manage as you lot think," said the second customer. "That's youth talking, whereas experience is what counts."

I knew that voice even before the chair swiveled around, revealing it was Bets beneath that foil cap, no doubt touching up her usual shade of maroon red. "They do as they please and we're the ones who get the nasty end of the stick every time — that's why women's rights came along," she continued. "The men are all in it for themselves, and we paint ourselves like dolls to keep them from straying as long as we can, don't we?"

"She might be after one of the nice ones, Bets," said Mabel, scolding her customer. She ran a comb through the catches in Paula's hair as an air dryer fanned it like a cloud of damp brown. "Some of them tame quite nice if you know what you're doing."

She switched it off, running the comb through one more time as she reached for her scissors. "See now, my Karim was the sort who ran about until I showed *him*. I was the only living doll who was ever going to stay around, and that was

what changed his mind and kept him ‘round when all the other lasses I knew were crying and moaning about their man leaving.”

A snort from Bets, one which Kitty had inherited from her mum. “Sounds like fairytale rubbish,” she said.

Not how I would describe it myself. “Sometimes a dance is just a dance — at least, I think that’s probably what it is in Paula’s case,” I chimed in again. “It’s better to go for fun and see what happens.”

“And not give the blokes something to think about in the wee small hours?” Mabel snipped away at the dead ends in Paula’s hair, cheerily. “That’s no attitude to have, is it? No, show ‘em what you’ve got, lass. That’s my advice.”

“Mine is to keep him on a tight lead if you catch him,” said Bets. “That’s the only way.” She lit a cigarette, despite the obvious presence of chemical from whatever was underneath her foil cap, and blew a long plume of smoke into the air afterwards. Despite the ‘no smoking’ ordinance, I had a feeling that Bets was an exception in many places simply because she was so difficult to argue and remove.

I tried to reason with the doubtful side of my nature after we left the salon — I carried a little bag which contained some samples of brown and rosy blush, eye shadow, and soft powder matching Paula’s skin tones, which Mabel let us have on half price also.

“You know, I think the gossip is getting out of hand at the salon these days,” I said, as I unlocked the shop doors, since Kitty was still at lunch. “The girls definitely need a new

hobby that isn't romantic matchmaking. It was pretty much nonsense they were talking anyway."

Maybe if I talked about it lightheartedly enough, Paula would see it as a joke — not thinking even a tiny bit in the back of her mind that 'showing off' for Tristan might sway his attraction, for example.

"I suppose it is," said Paula. "Not that I would know. I've never fancied anybody — not the way they meant," she added. "Nobody ever fancied me, so this was the first time I ever gave it any real thought. You know, that wasn't fantasy."

"Reality sometimes seems harsh when compared to fantasy," I said, as I switched on the lamps. "But it can be better in the long run, when you make the right choices. It seems like today all relationships collapse like sand castles, but there is still such a thing as real love ... compatibility ... opposites that still have the right things in common." I was trying to find a way to reconcile fictitious romance with the versions I had seen that were real. Like mine, like a handful of other too-good-to-believe stories that had actually been true.

"They were just being nice," said Paula. "Nobody thinks Tristan is going to notice me, even if they don't know him. They're like you, they just want me to go and have a good time."

Relief flooded me, even though a little disappointment was in the mix — mostly for how pragmatic she sounded. "I just want you to embrace your own moment," I said. "Forget about what everybody else says or thinks about what should happen, and be yourself."

“I couldn’t really do anything else, could I?” said Paula. “I mean — I’m a wallflower. We all know that much. And Tristan isn’t going to ask me if I’d like to go with him, or if I’d like to dance, even, because he didn’t mean it. He felt sorry for me in the park, for making fun of me all those years.”

This crushing assessment was like a model rocket smacking to earth minutes into its flight. I tried to smile in denial. “You’re psyching yourself out, because you are the kind of girl he should like, and have more than enough to offer, only he’s too blind to see it,” I said. “That’s nothing to do with you.”

“I know. But it is to me,” she answered. “I guess that’s that in life. But I’ll make an effort to go, because I do want to have a good time. Everybody else does, and they’re not afraid of what people say or think. They pick a dress they think is pretty, they curl their hair, they dance with some mates.”

“We could go dress shopping at lunchtime next week, if you like,” I said. I was still giving thought to buying Paula a cute one she might fancy at one of the shops — call it an early Christmas present, as I planned before.

“Oh, I bought a dress,” said Paula. “I forgot to show you.” She reached into her bookbag, which was lying behind the counter, and brought out a rumpled shopping bag. “Here it is. It’s a bit plain, but it was eighty percent mark off, and the girl said it was a good color for me.”

She held it up by two wide shoulder straps, a dress of plain-looking green fabric with a little feathery floral pattern around the neckline. A fringe of lace the same shade as the pinky-coppery flowers trimmed the bottom.

“It’s nice,” I said, making an effort to look like I believed it. For anything but a university Christmas dance, it might be true.

“I know it isn’t much — not a proper dress, I suppose — but I can wear it to work sometimes, when I’m part of the events you plan,” she said. “It’ll be good for that, too.”

“It’ll be great for that,” I said. “But —” I hesitated. “But if it makes you happy, that’s what makes it a good choice.”

“I guess so.” She smiled and shrugged. “Anyway, I’m glad you like it.” She folded it into the sack again and put it into her bag.

Her smile didn’t entirely convince me. I felt there was something sad in it, and something sad in the way that Paula’s magical Christmas experience was already looking threadbare.

Chapter Fifteen

“This one is good, but a tiny bit too moist,” Morgan was saying, as she showed Mark the design for a classic white wedding cake with an Italian-style molding in fondant around its sides. “And the main flavor is cherry, which isn’t one of your favorites.”

“If you like it, then I like it,” replied Mark. “At least the icing’s quite pretty.”

My two clients were having a second taste test before Morgan made her decision, eating the leftover samples as Mark had his chance to review the designs. I had held back my decision, as had Kitty, until Morgan decided which one she preferred. She had narrowed the candidates to her top ten, but I thought it was already down to three — a white chocolate raspberry sponge duo, a passion fruit vanilla sponge with sweet cream and caramel, and Jillian’s creation.

Mark forked a bite from the white chocolate raspberry and tried it, with a noncommittal expression as he tasted its flavors. “The rustic icing on this one is good, too,” he said, pointing to the sketch, which featured a thin, artfully-applied layer decorated with fresh raspberries in the center of each rosette.

“I did like that one,” admitted Morgan, as she made a mark on her checklist. “I thought it was fairly delicate, although I would have liked the flavors to be a little stronger. I

can imagine what Todd and Tammy would say about infusions lacking in the flavors.”

“True, probably,” said Mark. “It’s your cake, so I want you to pick the one you think fits the wedding best, not just with the palates of our friends in mind. We can always correct the flavors — we’re chefs, after all.”

“I want it to be right from the beginning,” insisted Morgan. “I’m a top-tier professional asking another professional to meet the same high mark. Basically, to earn this position, which I think is the very least I can ask for featuring their cake in our wedding.”

She placed another plate in front of him. “This one is a clear contender,” she said. “It’s almost perfect for us as it is. It’s the closest one of all the entries, in my opinion.”

It was Jillian’s slice on the plate that Mark was now sampling, taking a bite first from the coffee layer. He showed no expression, giving nothing away as he let the flavors sink in, then tried the second layer, giving it the same time for reaction.

He tapped the plate with the tines of his fork. “Yeah, I agree,” he said, after swallowing the second bite. “That one is definitely good. Professional looking, too. That’s the design, right?” He pointed to the sketch that Morgan had located in her stack, and which I recognized right away as the one I copied from Jillian’s portfolio.

“This one, yes,” she said. “It has just the right combination of ingredients ... perfect flavors for our wedding ... a fantastic finish by standards of most professional bakeries, maybe even a couple of Parisian ones.”

“That’s high praise coming from you,” chuckled Mark.

I held my tongue, watching them try a couple more bites of cake. The verdict was coming, but I didn’t want anything I said to influence it, especially since I knew that what was about to happen meant the truth about the cake’s real source would have to come out.

“The coffee is well balanced,” said Mark. “I think I’d like the chocolate to be a little bit sharper.”

“Only if the vanilla retains its sweetness,” said Morgan. “I love the subtle fruit notes. It only needs a little more to be the right balance.”

“Decoration’s definitely one of the best in the pile.”

I waited, hands folded, with a smile that I hoped kept me from seeming too anxious. Morgan selected another slice from the tray of cake, this one with chocolate piping in a lacy pattern.

“This one isn’t bad. The chocolate leans towards the bitter, though, I warn you,” she said, as he took a bite from it.

“I think it would be better in a semi-sweet blend,” he commented.

Jillian’s was going to win, I knew. It was a done deal.

A part of me was worried about what would happen next. Kitty had aptly pointed to the probability our client was not going to be happy if she found out that one of us was behind it. We didn’t know yet what she would say, of course — I wondered if there was a way to mitigate her anger in advance, because Morgan wasn’t a monster, and she was someone who genuinely wanted her way. Would she reject a

cake after the fact because she learned its baker wasn't the person she assumed? Or would she bend her opinion to begrudgingly accept it — if the groundwork was laid so this was the most graceful way out of the situation?

My only obstacle being that I had no idea how to lay said groundwork, of course. Neither Kitty nor I knew this client as well as we did most of ours, so I couldn't begin to guess where her weak spot might be.

Morgan would make her decision in a few days. That bought me enough time to think of a plan for what happened if Jillian's cake was the winner and all must be revealed. Jillian wasn't to blame, of course, because the only person responsible for this covert operation was me. That was the part I had to make clear no matter what else.

As much as Morgan loved the design, I knew there must be a way to sell her on the cake, even if it was Jillian's. She wanted that cake to be the centerpiece on her wedding table, it was clear — that was the least she owed the young baker for taking her original design in the first place, the one that was supposed to be on that table until the doctor's medical decree on Morgan's wrist.

I wanted to keep Kitty out of this as much as possible, because she wasn't to blame. She only supported the scheme for Jillian's sake, and because she recognized Morgan's poaching of the wedding cake design to be beyond the ordinary rules of chef-employee intellectual property exchange.

It was up to me to convince Morgan to do the right thing. I thought the answer probably lay in making certain she

and Mark were so enamored with Jillian's new design that giving it up would be too hard.

I had time to think of a plan before then. Cooking might help, I thought, which is why I accepted Michael's invitation to stop by on a day he was conducting an impromptu lesson in making Chinese food with Kimmie, who was stopping off for the weekend on her way to film a Cornish Christmas cookery show as its presenter.

As usual, Kimmie was her eclectic self, wearing a frilly 'Kiss Me, I'm Not Kardashian' apron over her pink leopard-print top, with her long black hair pulled back in a pink flower clasp. She was concentrating on rolling tiny little spring rolls, a specialty of snack buffets everywhere, which is why Michael had invited me over, knowing I always liked to field appealing recipes.

"Put more paste on," the chef advised, watching over my shoulder, as I brushed a flour and water glue around the edge of a thin sheet of egg dough. "Don't be shy. You'll brush the outside and roll it in the coating before frying, but you can always mix more."

"My problem is the filling bursting out," I said. "I've tried to make pizza snacks for the kids at home, and they always ooze."

"That's because you overfill. Also, you don't need more than two turns when you roll," said Michael. My spoon had added some cooked shredded cabbage and carrot in seasoned broth to one side of my dough, along with some finely-diced chicken.

“You mean, roll it so the dough isn’t as thick?” I tried to follow his instructions.

“Tighter. That’s it. Now, coat it and roll it in the starch mixture,” he said, placing another thin square of dough on the prep board. “Measure the same amount of filling if you want them uniform.”

“Isn’t he brilliant?” said Kimmie. “I think of him as the brigadier general of the bakes. The Winston Churchill of the whisk, guiding the kitchen through all culinary difficulties.”

Michael shook his head. “You speak nonsense,” he told her, but with a tiny bit of a smile trying hard to suppress itself.

“Then you don’t know how to fix my crab rangoon recipe? Tell me that’s true and I’ll promise never to make another joke about Hell’s Kitchen ever again.”

“Crab rangoon is an American invention — cultural cuisine gone awry,” said Michael, scornfully. “But I can fix it. For one thing, your mixture has too much moisture from the crab — add some Greek yogurt to the cream cheese to thicken it, if you want to keep the taste clean.” He showed her using his finger to spread the texture, then daubed it on her nose in a playful gesture that was totally unexpected.

“You’re a rascal, and I’ll pay you back for that,” Kimmie retorted, wiping it off with a towel as Michael chuckled from his prep area by the sink, where he was washing the vegetables for a stir fry recipe.

She turned to me. “I don’t care what he says, this stuff is delicious,” she said, sampling the mixture on a cracker from

the cheese plate we had been snacking from. “But he’s cute when he’s being snobby about food, so I’ll let it stand.”

I smiled back. “I think he’s pretending to be a snob. As far as I know, the only thing he can’t stand to put into recipes are artificial flavorings and imitation versions of anything.”

“See, there’s my mistake. I put in Japanese artificial crab,” said Kimmie, pretending to be enlightened. “Poor me. I thought ‘red fish, red crab, probably all the same, right?’”

“If you wanted to relax for a weekend, I didn’t think cooking with Michael would be your idea of it, knowing him like you do,” I said, as I spooned another strip of vegetable onto my dough square.

“Oh, but it is,” said Kimmie, switching off the comedy that defined her half of the ‘Pet and Kimmie’ duo. “Not that I don’t have fantasies of being in a pacific island beach bungalow for my holidays, with Michael’s head lying on my lap and my fingers working those spiky bits of it into relaxation as we daydream, but I have accepted the odds of it happening in our mad lives is ‘never.’ “

She added a dash of soy sauce and a pinch of sugar to her mixture, then stirred it again. “Cooking has become our *coup de theatre*,” she continued. “He shows me the joys of good ingredients and the ultimate satisfaction of that ‘just right’ texture — I remind him of the unpredictable side, with swapped spices and creative little twists to the process.”

“Does he like those creative twists?” I asked, making a joke.

“Loves them,” she answered. “Otherwise, would I still be mad about him after all this time?”

“I thought you loved me for my temper,” said Michael, who rejoined us with a cutting board and some radishes and green onions.

“That’s totally untrue. I love you for your dry wit and complete conviction that a dash of vanilla makes all things better,” she teased.

“That’s not true.” Michael elbowed her gently as he moved in beside her to work. “A pinch of nutmeg is the real secret.”

Kimie covered her bowl of crab and cheese for its chilling period, then reached for the green onions on Michael’s board and began chopping them in simpatico rhythm with his knife dicing the radishes. I added a pinch of salt to the rest of my cabbage and put it into the latest egg roll, tucking the ends.

“You’re virtually a master chef in terms of this place,” I said to Michael, who let out a laugh of scorn in return. “No, really — for Ceffylgwyn and for the mainstream restaurant industry in general, you’ve made it, in terms of talent and reputation,” I added. “You could work almost anywhere you wanted at this point, I think.”

“Maybe not anywhere,” said Michael, as he deftly moved aside the radish with the blade of his knife. “But I could probably be on staff at a place with a couple of Michelin stars. Not head chef, but maybe sous, or pastry.”

“Would you owe it to your reputation? Or your skills?” I asked. “Maybe a combination of both?” I rolled my latest

spring roll too tightly, and it cracked, forcing me to fill the gap with paste that would never hold. “Restaurant owners probably have one particular aspect they consider key when they’re deciding whether to hire or promote someone.”

“Why the question?” Michael asked. He’d figured out this wasn’t about his own reputation, or the notion he was going to leave Cliffs House for a bigger opportunity.

“It’s about you opening a twenty-four-hour Dine n’ Dash hub in Soho,” teased Kimmie. “After I leave comedy, I can be your short order cook.”

“Like on the Dani’s Diner skits?” I returned, trying not to laugh as I thought about Kimmie’s role as one of two dim-witted cafe employees bungling customers’ orders on episodes of *Pet and Kimmie*. “I loved the episode about the spaghetti sandwiches.”

“Back to your question,” said Michael, reaching for a kitchen towel. “Why ask?”

“I was wondering what makes a future for someone in the industry these days,” I said. “I have a friend — who works at one of the restaurants in Penzance — who’s trying to qualify for a promotion with the restaurant’s chef, but the owner has an issue with her. It may just be a case of a little culinary jealousy, but it’s not helping the employee in her quest to build a real career in the restaurant industry.”

“That’s harder to deal with,” said Michael. “Crossing an owner when you’re a hired chef typically happens when you’re too good to lose. That’s not worth risking for an employee who’s probably expendable.”

“Is she expendable?” Kimmie asked. “She might be the culinary genius of the age — you don’t know, do you?” she challenged Michael.

“She’s pretty good,” I said. “She’s a great baker. I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I think she’s one of the best I’ve ever met. Even with you and Dinah in the equation,” I added to Michael. “Even with Chez Cakes in the mix.”

Michael looked slightly intrigued, judging by the lift of his eyebrow. “That’s pretty high praise from you,” he said.

“I’m being professional when I say it,” I answered, honestly. “I feel bad for her chances, because I think she’s going to be disappointed unless she manages to impress the owner. There’s a chance she might be able to do it ... but it’s risky.” I avoided saying just how much so, since it was going to land me in a difficult spot in a few days, probably.

“Are they willing to listen? Open to giving her a dish and letting her prove her chances?”

“Like the omelette on *The Hundred-Foot Journey*?” said Kimmie.

“There’s sort of a ... blind taste test ... in progress,” I answered, vaguely. “She’s passing with flying colors, but I’m not sure the owner will relent her opinions without persuasion. Morgan is a little stubborn.”

“I heard that rumor,” said Michael. “Even her staff at the London bakery had that opinion.”

“Do you mean Morgan Corky, the famed darling baker of all London posh comfort foods?” asked Kimmie, as she added the green onion back to Michael’s cutting board.

“Yeah, she and her future husband are co-owners of a restaurant that’s opening in Penzance,” I said.

“Ugh, I would hate to be one of her employees,” said Kimmie, as she reached for one of Michael’s radishes. “I give your friend my sympathy.”

“You’ve met her, I take it?” I said. “Was she part of *Grand Baking Extravaganza*?” Kimmie’s comedy duo sometimes presented the baking competition’s televised version, as well as its seasonal contests and reunion programs.

“No — it was when I was cheating on *Grand Baking* one time by hosting *Bake/On Bake/Off* on Channel Four,” she said. “They had a rotating panel of culinary experts, and Morgan Corky was invited on as the golden girl with her book at the very top of the charts. Absolute fake, in my opinion.”

“Really?” I finished patching my spring roll, pausing to give Kimmie my full attention.

“Yes, darling — she was all smiles and politeness to those of us in front of the camera, but a diva to those behind it. Nothing was ever right, from the water on the craft services table to the lipstick the makeup artist applied, she was an absolute fusspot. She treated her assistant rather terribly, I felt sorry for her.”

“She isn’t the most respectful to her underlings, I’ve noticed,” I answered, with chagrin.

“They gossiped about her dreadfully, the others on the program, the way they always do,” said Kimmie. “I overheard the horror stories from her bakery. No one stayed on its staff willingly for more than a year, apparently. Anyone who did

usually got the boot from her royal highness over some minor offense.”

“That’s common in tough kitchens,” remarked Michael. “Why do you think I didn’t stay on at the Michelin one in Nice? They changed chefs and the new one wasn’t the forgiving kind. The type to sack people at random because he could.”

“She prefers the pretty faces and big names, I suppose,” said Kimmie, batting her eyelashes at us. “She was darling towards me, being one of them, and even to the contestants, since they were basically future book customers. She would like you, Michael, as my cooking guru.”

“Unless I was her sous chef, you mean,” smiled Michael.

I didn’t like the thought of Morgan being so difficult to work for. It didn’t put the odds in Jillian’s favor, even as much as Morgan loved that cake design. In short, the chances that Jillian was going to be promoted based on its merit were slim.

The chances that I might be fired, however, were probably pretty good.

Chapter Sixteen

Morgan made her choice of winning cake design the next week, and Kitty and I were booked in Save the Date's diary to come back to the restaurant for the decision. I felt nervous on the drive to Penzance, finding my hands clutching the wheel as I steered. In the passenger seat, Kitty was quiet.

"You think she went with the chocolate and raspberry or the coffee and vanilla?" Kitty asked.

"Jillian's, you mean," I said. "I don't know."

"Yeah, you do. It was her favorite," said Kitty. "If she picks it, it won't be long before we have to 'fess up."

"Me, you mean," I corrected. "I'm going to be the one to explain. I'll tell her that I did it for the good of the wedding, and so long as she begrudgingly admits that Jillian is talented, I'll consider it worth the scolding."

Jillian deserved the promotion, and all I wanted to come from this was a fair chance for her to impress the chef. Each step in the restaurant chain was important, as Michael's advice had shown me, and she deserved to advance to the next one. To live out her dream so her beautiful cakes could finally be enjoyed by others in the future.

We parked just behind Mark's car outside the restaurant. The construction trucks weren't here today, but a sign pointed for us to enter through the back garden, the door where tourists would arrive for a light lunch in the future when they trekked

up from the beach. The restaurant's front staff were turning over all the chairs atop the tables, and moving all the furniture out of the way in preparation for the floors to be cleaned. Several others were cleaning up the area around the newly-installed fountain in the foyer, where the stone face like the Roman god of truth, now spilled water into a rustic trough surrounded by potted Mediterranean plants.

“Want to stick your hand in it?” Kitty was thinking the same thing as myself, with her smile cracked grimly.

“No thanks. Mine would get bitten right now.” Morgan didn't know the truth yet, but I had a feeling the revelation was coming.

Morgan and Mark were in his office, where Morgan had set up her book proofs during this latest state of her recipe manuscript, since the front staff had moved her table also. “Come in,” said Morgan, waving us into the room. “I've been boring Mark with a description of my new praline and pear tartlets with honey cream butter. The editor's latest favorite to be featured on the website.”

My stomach would typically growl for the mention of something that delicious, but there were too many knots to afford it room to react today. I smiled. “Sounds like a great choice to me,” I said.

“It would be if I like pears,” chuckled Mark. “But that's a personal preference, the kind of thing I try not to let myself have as a chef, generally speaking.” He reached for a teapot. “Cuppa?” he asked. “There's extra cups, it's a nice ginger spice blend.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” I answered. Kitty shook her head also. We sat down on opposite sides of the room, in the only chairs that were available.

“We’ve been chatting the last few days about which cake to choose. It’s been challenging, to say the least — I feel like I’m choosing something as important as a child’s name,” said Morgan, making a little joke. “Seriously, it had to be the best, and we wanted to take our time deciding. We narrowed it to three after consideration. The chocolate and raspberry layers, the rustic apple with candied citron, and the espresso chocolate with bourbon vanilla and citrus.”

“All three of those had highlights we could appreciate, and good decoration, too,” said Mark. “I think the contest really brought some absolute winners. Like the apple and citrus baker — their first entry was the cake that looked like the ceramic cat, right? It was creative.”

“The best initial entry was the faded roses cake,” corrected Morgan. “I’m not surprised that baker made our top three, I could already sense it was a creative talent that would come closer to filling the void of my own than most of the entries.”

“The faded roses,” I repeated. “That was the baker with the final entry of —”

” — the wisteria cake,” said Morgan. “There are a few things I would change, of course, but I thought the overall design captured the wedding’s atmosphere. That’s why we chose it, as I’m sure you’re not surprised to hear.”

Kitty and I exchanged glances. “Not at all,” I said. “I could tell from the beginning that’s where your opinion

leaned. And if that's how you feel, we would support that choice, obviously, since we both agree it's the best."

"No sense in saying otherwise, since I could veto you, right?" said Morgan, laughing. "Yes, I suspected that was the case."

I took a deep breath. "There's one thing we do need to talk about before you make that final choice known," I said.

"Too late. I already rang the magazine this morning to tell them that's my choice," she said. "I'm waiting for someone in feature to ring back with the details about the winning contestant."

The air had temporarily been sucked out of the room, at least for me and my lungs. I felt the clutch — a slight panic — tightening on them as my mind raced to form my reaction.

"I thought you were going to talk to us first," said Kitty, without giving anything away.

"We agreed to that, I know, but I couldn't wait," said Morgan. "Like I said, I knew you wouldn't choose someone else if I was satisfied, the veto and all, so it was safer to go ahead with the plan and tell you here, when I congratulated you for coming up with such a successful alternative to the original plan."

"We're both pretty grateful," said Mark, smiling. "It was a good idea, and it worked like a charm."

My stomach was sinking, and the room felt very hot. On Mark's desk, a phone began ringing, and I recognized Morgan's mobile as she pulled it from underneath a culinary magazine.

“Hi, Colin? It’s Morgan. I’m absolutely thrilled to hear from you so quickly. Yes, their cake was outstanding, in my opinion ... you have their details ready so I can ring them personally, I presume? I want to be the one to give them the good news as soon as possible.”

She paused. “What do you mean?” Her expression became concerned. “But that’s impossible, isn’t it? You screened them all. What do you mean there’s been a mistake?” She scowled. “I think it would be best if you looked into it as quickly as possible and find out why, because I’m extremely disappointed by that possibility. Yes, I want to hear what you find out as soon as possible.”

She disconnected, looking extremely annoyed. “Of all the incompetence,” she said. “Do you know what they just told me? That the number on the contact sheet for the cake baker has no answer. The business that supposedly gave them a recommendation for the contest has been closed for holiday for the past month.”

“What? Are you serious?” said Mark.

“They can’t find any information about them, apparently,” said Morgan, vexed.

If I didn’t say something soon, I knew Kitty would. I cleared my throat. “I think I can explain,” I said. “In fact ... I know I can. I know for a fact that the baker they’re looking for doesn’t exist.”

“What?” Morgan stared.

“The person is real,” I said. “Just not the name, or the job. Truthfully — the cake is one I saw, and thought was so

perfect for your wedding, but the contest was already in place, so I couldn't stop it. But I couldn't resist adding it to the mix, because I knew you would love it the moment you saw it. I thought if — somehow — it did end up being your favorite that I would tell you the truth and explain.”

“Why didn't they just enter like all the rest?” asked Mark.

“They couldn't,” I said. “Conflict of interest. That's why I didn't even tell them I did it, I just sent the sketch in under another name. The business belongs to a friend of mine, she's a baker who's participating in a special seminar right now.”

Morgan was quiet at first, as if digesting my explanation. “Who was it?” she asked. “Was it one of you?” She glanced from me to Kitty, looking at her in particular, since it was believable in some ways that my partner could create something that artistic if they knew Kitty at all.

“Not us,” I said. “It was one of the restaurant staff, which is why they were disqualified.”

“What?” said Morgan.

“It was Jillian. One of the chef's general assistants — the one who helped you develop your cherry strudel recipe and the white chocolate raspberry bites, along with other recipes you've been working on,” I said. “She was working on it initially because she wanted to present it to you, but she put it aside after you announced the contest. And I thought, as your wedding planner, it was such a perfect design that I would have recommended it to you. So I — not Kitty — created the fake profile and added it. I didn't tell either of them what I was doing.”

“I found out, though,” said Kitty, speaking up. “I agreed with her that it was just what you needed. If we’d seen it before the contest, we’d have both said so.”

Morgan crossed her arms. “So you’re saying the winner of the contest is one of my staff?” she clarified. “Out of the seventy-five candidates you pared down using my guidelines?”

I nodded. “Exactly,” I said. “The magazine doesn’t even know. We thought we should protect everybody, until we had time to talk to you in case you felt this strongly about her design.”

“I see,” said Morgan. “How to fix this is now a problem.” She rubbed her forehead, as Mark sat by, looking uncomfortable. “I told the magazine — we set the rules —”

“The rules can be bent a little,” I suggested. “We could explain it was a surprise, and feature the two runners-up in the magazine as well.”

“We could have their cake designs scaled down and served at the upcoming engagement party,” said Kitty, speaking up now. “We’re supposed to have a showstopper for it, and you wanted it to be a copy of the wedding cake’s design for the big unveiling originally. Just make it these two instead.”

“I think that would be a perfect solution,” I said. “You’ve honored the top three bakers, and rewarded one of your staff who made a major contribution to your cookbook — and clearly learned a lot from your style, in order to make a cake that completes your wedding so perfectly.”

Morgan sighed. She stared out the window, and I could see she was thinking. Our words were probably turning in her mind, tumbling around as she tried to decide the best way to save face in this issue. I knew she was angry at us, but I knew she really wanted that breathtaking showstopper cake of Jillian's, the only one that would do justice to her wedding's atmosphere in the same manner as the first one she now refused to consider. Probably because they were from the same artist's creative mind, in reality, but Morgan didn't know we knew that.

A knock sounded on the door to Mark's office. "Come in," he called. It opened, and Jillian came in, carrying a plate with a grilled chicken salad on it, with artistic florettes made of pickled eggs to one side. "Chef sent the latest version of your new lunch plate for you to try," she said to him. "He wants you to give him feedback on whether the dressing is right, since you had two different measurements for the garlic powder, and we went with the smaller one to begin."

"Thanks," he said. As Jillian stepped back, she noticed the sketch of her cake lying on the desk, and I saw the look on her face become that of confusion. Morgan noticed, too.

"Did you design that?" she asked the young chef.

Jillian nodded. "I did, but — I didn't put it there," she said. "How did you get it?"

"I know you didn't," said Morgan. "I only want to be certain that it's yours, like they said."

Jillian glanced at us, then nodded again. "I drew it for your —" she began.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Morgan, before she could finish explaining. “I’m not really interested in what you designed it for. I think I’ve seen and heard everything I need to.” She paused. “Get your things from the staff closet at the end of today’s shift and don’t come back tomorrow.”

The young chef’s face turned pale. Mark interjected. “Now, Morgan, that’s unnecessary,” he began.

“It’s half my restaurant, isn’t it?” she shot back. “I told her I want her to leave. I don’t like her style, I don’t like her attitude, and I *don’t* like being made a fool of.” This last part was directed at me and Kitty, along with a stern glare that was meant to keep us both silent.

“I don’t understand,” said Jillian, helplessly.

“You heard the part where I told you to get out, so you understood just fine,” answered Morgan. “I think you’re a poor fit for the restaurant staff, so this day has been coming for some weeks, and it might as well come now.”

Without another word, Jillian withdrew and closed the door. I could see from Mark’s face that he was angry, and trying not to say anything about this decision with the two us present, but Morgan was taking over, anyway.

“I want you to call the magazine and fix this,” she said to me. “Tell them it was a mix up and get the identity of the baker who made the chocolate and raspberry sponges instead.”

“You want them declared the winner instead?” I said.

“You heard me. That’s the cake I want, it’s decided now,” said Morgan. “You made this mistake, I want it fixed, with a cake that fits the rules I chose.”

“Technically Jillian’s qualifies, since you fired her,” Kitty pointed out. That was a bold statement to make that I would have avoided at this moment, but she pulled no punches.

Morgan’s swift look was not a happy one. “I told you what I want you to do, and I don’t want to talk about it any more,” she said. “I’m finished with this situation, it makes me sick to think of it, and I want to forget it as quickly as possible. And if you *don’t* want to be sacked as well, you’ll take care of it now.”

Mark cleared his throat. “If you and Julianne wouldn’t mind, I’d like to speak with Morgan privately,” he said. “If you’re finished for now.”

The atmosphere was so awkward, this request felt like a relief. “Of course.” I rose from my chair. Kitty did the same, and we walked out, closing the door behind us. I heard raised voices on the other side, having a heated argument as we walked away.

“Whacking great loon,” muttered Kitty.

I glanced at her, but didn’t have the heart to smile. “She’s right,” I said. “Even though she’s wrong, I overstepped. At least she realized I was to blame — but firing Jillian was too far.”

“What did you expect?” Kitty lifted one eyebrow. “She knows where you got that drawing — same place she got hers for the wedding cake that she didn’t get to use. How long until you figured that out, she probably wondered. More to the point, how long until Jillian did?”

I hadn't thought about that. Morgan would be quick to see that my 'borrowing' Jillian's design mirrored her own act of appropriating another from that same notebook and passing it off as her own for the wedding. She probably didn't want Jillian to realize she had outright stolen some of her private work until after the cookbook was ready for release. She could find a way to discredit any rumors or allegations from her now-former employee after her hold on those recipes was securely in print.

"I thought she'd take our compromise," I said. "I didn't think she would be this ruthless."

"Thought she'd be like Michael, did you?" Kitty's sarcasm was mirthless.

I didn't comment on that. I lagged behind to look back at the restaurant staff trying to layer perfect mini trifles, when I spotted Jillian sitting in the lobby with her bag and her pink jacket on instead of her chef's coat.

All my fault. The shock of it was fading fast, replaced by guilt. I walked closer.

"Jillian, I am so sorry," I said. "I never meant for that to happen. Truly, truly, I thought she would see what a fantastic baker you are if I showed her that sketch without your name on it, and showed her just how perfect your ideas are. I know they're perfect for this wedding. That's an indisputable fact." I didn't tell her exactly how I knew.

She shook her head. "It's all right, really," she said. "I knew this might happen. I'm not the first person to be dismissed since the restaurant changed hands. I was hoping,

but ... sometimes hope is just the last door closing before a new one opens.”

“That’s not how I wanted this to be,” I said. “I wanted you to get the promotion you wanted so much, and work your way up the restaurant’s ladder.”

“I’ll find another job,” said Jillian. “There are restaurants up and down the coast. Not all of them need a recommendation from a former employer to hire a cook. I’m good enough that I can find a place for myself, even if it’s not the best. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Since it’s my fault this happened, I have to,” I answered.

She smiled. “Maybe it’s for the best,” she said. “Like I said, it might have happened anyway. I have to face it and move on.” She glanced down at her phone. “My ride’s here, so I should —”

“Of course. So sorry,” I said. “Please, call me if you need something.” Maybe we could take on another assistant? She could join Paula in the ranks of people-based projects at work that I was fumbling also.

She waved goodbye and walked out the doors of Bon Cuisine — for the last time, I imagined. My heart felt heavy, not buying the logic that Morgan would have sacked her so soon without my revelation. For one thing, she probably wanted to glean more from Jillian’s talent before crushing her aspirations.

I located the number for the magazine on my phone. Inside, my resentment was growing to the hot and angry stage

at the thought of doing this when I knew Jillian had deserved this place all along. But I was going quietly along with orders, changing the decision exactly the way my client wanted, as promised.

Chapter Seventeen

Arrangements for Morgan's wedding had mostly shifted to the engagement party to be held in a couple of weeks' time. I had to arrange for a baker to create the winning baker's design on a smaller scale for the big event, and confirm the champagne delivery for the wet bar in time for the formal evening event.

I was still feeling depressed about things a few days later, knowing Jillian was job hunting and Morgan was getting her way on everything, the way spoiled people in life typically do. I had hoped to hear from the young chef about whether someone else had hired her, but there was no word yet. I suspected being fired by chefs like Morgan Corky and Mark Stroper didn't heap positive reviews on one's CV.

"Look what I found in the closet," said Matt. "A box of Christmas ornaments. How do you suppose it ended up beneath my boxes of graph paper?"

He set it on the coffee table. I looked up from the cup of tea I was babying near the parlor's front window, as I watched Lottie sleep in her child seat at my feet. "I probably stuck it there in haste to clean up after the season," I answered.

"I also found your missing waterproof coat. Less exciting, but much more practical." He carried the box of paper to his desk, where he was making a large-scale drawing of a garden Giles was persuading him to take on for a friend with an estate gone 'wild and woolly' after its previous owner's bankruptcy.

I set down my teacup and leaned forward, nudging up the lid's box. Inside, I could see the silver glint of sleigh bells, the tiny pipe cleaner arms of a homemade monkey, the work of Heath's five year-old genius some Christmas past, when he thought his handicraft was the best in all the world. *Ah, the simplicity of being young and naive.*

Too early to deck the halls, despite traces of greenery adorning wreaths and doors, the rise of red ribbons and lights in the village, and the lone sprig of plastic mistletoe that my daughter had fastened above our front door as a joke. Even if our tree was already in its corner, I wouldn't be in the mood to decorate just now, with so much else on my mind.

Matt sensed that things at work were difficult, but had refrained from asking thus far. Of which I was glad, truthfully, because I didn't want to tell him that my latest bold impulse was a total misstep. Knowing how much I valued our event planning firm's reputation, I could see him shake his head with wonder that I could be this stupid.

How could I be? But I had been taking wrong steps for the past month, from taking too much interest in Jillian's life to encouraging Paula to go to a dance just to be a wallflower, as the boy who asked could either deny he asked her or laugh at her for being on the fringes yet again.

When I lifted the lid all the way, I discovered the box was filled with other 'treasures' like the pipe cleaner monkey, mostly things we had all made, or things we had gathered across our timeline, not any of the mass-produced Christmas balls that all looked alike. Here was Matt's childhood reindeer, and my souvenir snow globe in miniature. Sylvia's baby

ornament, and the one from Joel's first Christmas with us, a T-Rex with glitter that I had made from a department store figurine, to commemorate that moment of bonding between us in the car at the beginning of things.

This would be his first Christmas with us permanently, now that his mother had decided to let him go. This, at least, brought a smile to my lips as I lifted a paper-mache balloon with a string, then tucked it back in with the rest, beside a faded plastic cherubic angel that looked a lot like my sleeping baby.

A toy car, a Statue of Liberty, a little dressmaker's mannequin wearing a glitzy dress. This last one I selected from the pile, holding it in my hand as I remembered receiving it in a Christmas gift package from Aimee, my friend back in the states, who loved vintage clothes hunting and making over garments in need of TLC. In the palm of my hand, it seemed to be calling me to rethink everything in my problem, just like pulling out stitches to begin again.

“Are you free?” I asked Paula.

She was sitting behind the desk, making a memo about one of the phone calls. “Not for five minutes,” she said with dead seriousness, after looking at the clock on the wall.

“Forget about the times of your shift,” I said. “We’re closing up anyway, because Kitty won’t be in today, she has an appointment in Truro in a half hour, and I don’t have a sitter

for Lottie, so I cancelled our client meeting for the afternoon.” I had the baby in her push chair, where she was playing with a Teletubby ring dangling just above her head.

“I suppose it’s only five minutes.” Paula sounded mystified by this. She closed the appointment book and picked up her bag as I switched the sign on the door to ‘closed.’ “Why do you want to know if I’m busy after work?”

“No important reason,’ I said. “I just want to take you to see the friend of a friend of mine. I thought of the Christmas present I’m giving you, and thought now was the perfect time to let you choose it.”

“Me?” She blushed. “You don’t have to give me anything.”

“I’m going to anyway, so you might as well help choose it,” I said. “My friend probably has the perfect one marked out, so if you want someone else to choose instead, I’m okay with that.”

I could see my words had puzzled her completely, because nothing about this made sense. “It’s okay,” I reassured her. “Come with me and it will explain itself in a few minutes. It’s only a short walk.”

“Okay.”

She sounded dubious as she stepped outside, and I locked the door. We walked up the lane, then turned and took the back stair between gardens, through one of the residential lanes of cottages, the same path Kitty and I took as a shortcut to the W.I. headquarters these past few weeks. I stopped at the same gate as the first time, where Kitty was waiting.

“She said ‘yes’, did she?” she asked me, seeing Paula was with me.

“Of course,” I said. “More importantly, what did Birdie say?”

“Birdie’s all right with it. Nobody’s asked her lately, so she has free time.” Kitty unlatched the gate. “She has some books all ready. I told her what you were wanting, roughly speaking.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Especially for arranging this. I thought a favor from you would seem more important — coming from Madge’s granddaughter, I mean.”

Madge, Kitty’s legendary grandmother who had been skilled with sewing, flower arranging, and a dozen other creative and practical talents that bestowed themselves on Kitty today, had one other protege of great talent, as I knew for certain, having seen Kitty in her forties-era dress. Birdie Phillips had a gift with a needle, and I was in need of that gift in time for Paula’s university ball.

“Sorry, what is this about?” Paula piped up. “Should I stay or should I come back another time? If this is important, I can go home instead, I don’t mind.”

“This is about you, so don’t go anywhere,” I said. “Kitty’s friend is a seamstress, and makes clothes that look better than any party frock on a shop hanger, so I asked her if she would take your measurements and make you a dress.”

“A dress for me?” Paula looked astonished. “But — that’s couture — that’s expensive, isn’t it? And I bought a dress — not a posh frock, exactly, I know, but —”

“But this is what I want to do for you,” I said. “I’m being serious, Paula.”

“Half of Birdie’s fabric was my grandmum’s, stuff she bought to sew for me and the rest of my family, only never used. Think of it as half paid for already,” suggested Kitty. “I figure she’d make a few things for Tige someday, but this is better.”

Paula looked at us both with a look caught between uncertainty and curiosity. Kitty held the gate open and I guided her through, and up the path to Birdie’s kitchen door. I knocked once, then waited for Madge’s old friend to answer, who had clearly been expecting us.

“Let’s see ...” Birdie looped her measuring tape around her neck. “Long waist, small hips and chest both, so it’d be a good idea to build it with good tucks in the waist and support up top — maybe with a padded tulle petticoat also.”

She stood in the middle of her sewing room, where an uncomfortable Paula stood by a velvet sewing mannequin like my Christmas ornament, draped in various fabrics — satin, blue silk, and something with a transparent lace effect, sheer and delicate.

“Is that good?” Paula sounded hesitant. Kitty was nodding in agreement, however, as she studied Paula’s figure.

“Put in a corset frame, maybe,” said Kitty. “That would help reinforce the bodice.”

“I need a corset?” Paula looked unsure, to match her voice from before.

“It’s not to make your waist smaller, it’s to create an hourglass shape,” I explained. “It won’t be squeezing you, just defining your figure, so it looks its best.”

“I’m thinking sweetheart neckline,” said Birdie, tapping a pencil against her teeth. She lifted down her reading glasses from the top of her head. “What about silk?”

“How about something lighter?” I suggested. “Chiffon?”

“Nah. Satin,” said Kitty. “I know the color.” She stalked from the room, and Birdie followed, leaving me and Paula alone. There were questions in her eyes, and I wasn’t entirely sure of anything except that I trusted Kitty’s judgment, and Birdie’s by proxy.

“Kitty’s dress is beautiful,” I said. “Trust me, Birdie knows her stuff. She learned from one of the best seamstresses in the county.”

“I guess I’m just trying to imagine if I’ll look good in the sort of thing they’re talking about,” she ventured. “What if I look sort of ... wrong?”

I looked her in the eye. “Paula, you could never look wrong in a beautiful dress,” I said. “You’re an amazing young woman in t-shirts and jeans, so why wouldn’t you still be one wearing something else?”

My answer had taken her by surprise, and I could see she had never thought of it this way. Probably because she had never thought of herself as amazing before.

“It’s true,” I said. “You’ve come so far, and learned so many things. I think your resourcefulness isn’t limited to learning how to navigate mathematics or what makes the universe work on a physical level.”

“I wish it could be true,” said Paula, with a little blush. She sat down on one of Birdie’s chairs, moving aside a half-trimmed hat first.

“Why shouldn’t it be?” I shrugged my shoulders. There wasn’t any need to say anything else, since I knew Paula was smart enough to figure out my meaning.

“Gmbly,” said Lottie, chewing on the foot of a red Teletubby, and gazing at Paula with round eyes of total confidence, the way babies do. Paula smiled back.

“I guess it’s true,” she said. “In terms of hypothetical equations anyway.”

“The universe can’t be predictable at every turn, or we wouldn’t need to study it, right?”

I lifted Lottie from her push chair. “Do you want to go see the fabrics?” I asked. “I trust Kitty to pick it out, but — I think I want your input, too, given the circumstances.”

She nodded. “Okay,” she said. “I’d like that.” She followed me through the passageway, to the closet where Birdie had stacks and bolts of fabric of every imaginable kind. Somewhere in here was the perfect choice for Paula. No need to rely on a proxy’s instincts to find it, I felt.

Birdie’s measurements and patterns continued on to precision, after Kitty had gone to her appointment in Truro. I stayed until Lottie grew too fussy, then left Paula being thoroughly measured and looking at three different styles of bodice that would flatter her body type.

I had to slip into a dress of my own for the evening, that same period piece that was beginning to show a little wear and

tear after several cooking sessions. A little bit of butter on one sleeve, and the sad remains of the tuna loaf's sauce on my collar. I noticed it as I fluffed my hair in its snood, and tried washing it off with a damp rag, but no dice.

I smeared on some lipstick, checked the effect, and sighed. Time for another dark surprise from the annals of wartime cookbooks.

“Given that as of late we've had some ... doubts ... among the institute's members, regarding our plans, I thought tonight the best course would be to test the menu I have been working on for the past two weeks,” announced Amanda. “The grand feature of our fundraiser, so to speak. So, without further ado, I give you this Christmas's feast, World War II style.”

She whipped the cloth off her basket, and we crowded closer. Inside, a very broad, flat, desiccated fish stared mournfully up, beside a round bundle of greasy white that could only be suet, and the scent of pine nuts from a small jar. Uneasy stares were already being exchanged.

“And that's not all,” said Amanda. “I took the liberty of preparing the dessert myself, from great-grandmamma's favorite recipe, so we can all sample it. “

She untied the string wrapped around the aforementioned bundle, peeling back its layers to reveal a large, pale lump resembling a loaf of soggy white bread — or, possibly, a cannonball made out of rice pudding cooked to mush.

Cherish raised her hand. “What is it?” she asked, tentatively.

“The classic ‘milk boil,’” explained Amanda, triumphantly. “It was a pudding made with powdered milk, clarified lard, and a handful of dried gooseberries soaked in sugar beet juice, with the entire product sweetened with just a tiny bit of additional sugar.”

“Imagine,” said Charlotte, but not in the voice of someone imagining good things.

“Let’s dig in before we worry about the fish,” said Amanda, shoveling a slice onto a plate, using the pie server retrieved from her basket.

We were still eyeing the dehydrated fish in part, imagining how it and pine nuts would become something edible that constituted an actual feast. As the soggy pudding flopped on the plate, however, we were distracted by its appearance. Definitely not the pudding of today, I thought — *maybe at home with a Victorian boiled pudding, eaten after one’s daily eel pie.*

“Here we are,” said Amanda. “Here’s to the joys of Christmas, my dears.” She took a bite, as did the rest of us. Immediately, Marian’s came back out into a napkin on the counter, as the rest of us tried not to gag.

“Merciful heavens, it’s the stewed bread me mum fed me when I had toothache,” said Bets, making a terrible face.

“It’s like eating a pudding gone horribly wrong, isn’t it?” said Charlotte.

“Only a sadist would enjoy this, I fear,” said Cherish, with a giggle.

“Unless one had a tipple on hand, perhaps,” said Charlotte, who joined in the laugh.

“Maybe it’s not as bad as we think,” I said, trying to swallow my bite, and finding it was having a difficult time descending.

“For pity’s sake, give it a chance, at least,” said Amanda. She scooped up another bite and put it into her mouth, chewing. I could tell that she was wrestling hard to make it go down, no doubt pretending she was baby Charles being told to eat his hot cereal long after it had gone cold, with milk skim on top.

Her face turned and she coughed into a handkerchief. “It is awful, isn’t it?” she said, croaking. “How did our ancestors survive eating this?”

“I think they ate fish sandwiches and veg salads and counted themselves lucky to be alive,” said Charlotte. “Probably half of them burnt the cookbooks afterwards, that had them making that wretched white sauce to cover the lot for variety.”

Amanda sank down on the nearby kitchen stool. “The entire theme is a disaster,” she said. “It’s all utterly ruined. All those plans — the idea for the braised milk fish, the stuffed ox heart with imitation blood sausage croquettes — all of it as horrible as all the attempts we’ve made thus far. It’s an utter, complete disaster, and the fundraiser is only three weeks away.”

For the first time, I saw defeat in Amanda’s eyes, and heard a tear in her voice. A sob caught in her throat as she wiped her eyes, where a tear had escaped. “I’ve failed you all

miserably — I’ve failed my first year as president as far as that goes, and nothing could be worse. I should’ve stayed on the council, quite clearly, because I’m the absolute worst the Institute has ever put in charge.”

We melted. “There, there, love,” said Marian, putting an arm around her. “It was a good learning experience. It never hurts to try, does it? That’s what you’ve always told us. Try and fix the mistakes that come along afterwards.”

“We never realized how strong that generation was — nor how resourceful they were,” I contributed, as I put my arm around Amanda from the opposite side, sandwiching her between myself and Marian.

“But what about the fundraiser? I have to have a menu so we can cook and serve, otherwise there’s no point — it’s just a dance with people milling about, and that will be a complete failure.”

The other women closed ranks around us, forming a group hug. “We’ll plan a new menu,” said Charlotte. “You’ll do it in a click — it’ll be a victory menu this time, instead of a disparity one, and that’ll be better for the fundraiser, won’t it?”

We all laughed a little at this joke. “I think a victory dinner would be perfect,” said Cherish. “I know you’ll think of the right dishes, you simply need a bit of time after this.”

“But not another slice of pudding,” I said, giving Amanda’s shoulder a squeeze.

“It *was* awful, wasn’t it?” She daubed her eyes with her handkerchief. “It was the worst of the lot. And I didn’t think anything could be worse than that faux blood sausage.”

“I think my melted aspic salad wins that contest,” I said. We all laughed again.

“What should we do with this lot?” Bets was peering into the basket, making a face at the desiccated fish. “Should I give him the soak?”

“Heavens, don’t,” said Amanda, with a quick laugh. “Let’s forget about him. I think we need to talk about a new strategy. I can’t let this event lie in shambles, even if I am steeped in disappointment. We may have to chuck the whole lot, theme and all.”

“Oh, let’s not,” pleaded Cherish. We all looked at her, and she blushed. “It’s only, I’ve grown rather fond of this dress. And the hats — I simply hate not to have an excuse to wear one.”

“I might second that motion,” I said. I wondered if Birdie would have time to make a second dress to size before the night of the dance.

Chapter Eighteen

At the first of December, snow didn't come to dust our Christmas greenery, except for the kind which comes in a can, which Pete's wife was using to dress the garland of holly adorning the front entrance of the Fisherman's Rest. I walked past, my thermos of coffee cradled between two hands with fingerless gloves — a nod to the slight chill in the air today, putting some briskness in my pace.

Dancing and dresses were on my horizon today, two weeks after the W.I. disaster — not for the annual charity fundraiser, however, but an event a little further from home. Kitty and I had scored a job as substitute catering supervisors for a friend of ours, who happened to be assigned to the university's Christmas ball. Dwight was grateful for a break during the busy season, with his wife expecting their second child; I was glad for the only feasible opportunity I had to be a fly on the wall for Paula's debut at a university event.

The entry bell for Save the Date jingled. "I found a sober-enough skirt and blouse to pass as a uniform," said Kitty, entering with a garment bag slung over her shoulder. "Reckon the waistcoats he loaned us will probably be a bit knackered, but I have a sewing kit and some extra buttons."

"Don't forget the ties," I said. "Dwight said even he wears one, just so no one mistakes him for one of the guests at a party."

“They’re fair ugly, so I reckon that’s true also,” said Kitty, pulling a couple of clip-on ties from her pocket and laying them on the counter. “Did you ring the staff list?”

“This morning. Everyone knows the time and the two senior employees on the crew will be helping us unload the food.” I hung Kitty’s bag with my own outfit, a near-matching black skirt and white blouse with tights and slip-on shoes.

The phone rang and I picked it up. “Save the Date, this is Julianne speaking,” I said. “Your appointment time confirmed? One moment, let me look in our diary ... our assistant has been out this week, she’s probably the one you spoke with before”

Paula had this week off, in order to finish research on part of her paper, since term holiday was approaching. Not having seen her for the past five days, I began to worry that maybe she had had second thoughts during the long interval at university.

Wanting to go and actually going were two different things. So what if she had a tailored dress and people in her corner, encouraging her? She was a little shy at heart, and the boy she had secretly fancied for years had pretended to make up for it by asking her to this dance. That might be enough to make me give up on the notion of going before the day of the big event.

“Have you heard from Paula?” Kitty read my mind, apparently, as she unzipped her jacket.

“No. I sent a message, but there was no answer.” I closed our diary and tucked it under the desk again. “I know

she's probably busy studying, or whatever she's doing for her degree."

"Reckon she's rethinking things?" Kitty tucked both hands in her back pockets, gazing at the wall of success behind me, with the photos of various happy events in our past. "The bit about the boy you mentioned, that'll be the hardest part for her. Nobody wants to show up and see an ex-crush hanging about, ready to make sly fun of the fact they're alone."

"Because he won't be, I know," I said. It wasn't the fact he hadn't asked Paula that convinced me Tristan was going to be there with a beautiful girl who wasn't a bookworm. He was the sort of boy who always had his eye on someone — he was good-looking enough that plenty of girls would overlook his smugness and feel flattered. I'd been similarly stupid in my early twenties, as I could now painfully recall.

Kitty didn't say anything to this, but I knew she agreed. She could sympathize — she'd been entangled with one of those selfish types during her walk on the wild side. She'd been the castout in local society in her youth, too, as the girl treated with contempt and suspicion by her more popular peers. In some ways, she understood what it was like to be Paula better than I did.

"Did you ring the bakery about the engagement cake?" Kitty asked.

"I tried a couple of our favorites, but they're booked up due to the Christmas season," I said. "I think I might can call in a favor, though, at one of the posh places. I'm thinking of using the 'I owe you' we generated with the extra orders for the Arnold-Thompson wedding."

She nodded. “Whatever it takes, I guess. Morgan probably wants to see public reaction to the winner’s cake before the wedding makes the magazine cover. She’s not the type who wants to risk a debut that disappoints.”

“I sense that vibe from her, too,” I said, sardonically. “She doesn’t have to worry. I’ll find a baker and the cake will be perfect by the time it’s on the banquet table.”

We had already seen the menu for the engagement party, and arranged for flowers to decorate the tables. With it being held at Bon Cuisine, there was less for us to do than usual, except for overseeing all the details from the outside world, like the cake and the decor. Mark had chosen a friend of his to be the caterer for the evening, so we helped coordinate the details, but not the food.

It was a relief to have a lighter load, but the remaining details were still galling for me after the disaster with Morgan. Jillian hadn’t been rehired, despite Mark’s evident disagreement with his fiancée’s decision. She was still seeking new employment, according to the last message I received from her, which made me feel even worse.

Maybe I could help her find another job, as the least I could do for getting her fired inadvertently. I would look through my list of professional friends this weekend and make some calls, because one of them surely needed an excellent young baker. Maybe Morgan’s black mark against her in the restaurant world would be erased by a recommendation from me, among the people I knew better from long association.

Another problem for tomorrow. Tonight, I had a bad feeling it was my lot to circulate a tray of punch cups or

cheese and crackers in a crowd of total strangers. No familiar face suddenly appearing, with a smile that proved she was having a wonderful time outside the world of facts and figures.

I had time to go back to the cottage before we were due at the university's temporary dance hall, after picking Lottie up from Gemma's mom. I made a quick dinner of spaghetti with frozen meatballs for my hungry crew who returned home around the same hour — Sylvia with a stack of homemade Christmas cards she and a friend had been making for class, Heath with a turtle shell he had dug out of a friend's garden, and Joel with an assignment to read Shakespeare's *The Tempest* for which he looked extremely unhappy.

"Think of Shakespeare like a metaphor for physics," I suggested. "The storms of life are actually storms in the atmosphere."

"It's boring," he said, not buying this idea. "It's just people standing around, talking. Some of them are weird."

"Well, Shakespeare isn't for everyone, but it's required that you know it to get through life," I joked. "Most people actually like it, if they give it a chance." From Joel's expression, I could see he didn't intend to be one of them.

"Can I have some chocolate biscuits?" Heath wolfed down his portion before I even coaxed Lottie to eat a few bites of her beef and peas.

"That's up to your dad, not me," I said. "He's on pudding duty tonight."

Matt entered, hanging up his jacket on the kitchen hook, then brushing some leaf debris from his hair. He noted dinner

in progress and the uniform underneath my apron, remembering that I had somewhere to be tonight. He leaned to kiss my lips after I closed the fridge, and its door was no longer between us. “Off soon?” he asked, with a little disappointment.

“As soon as this lot eats and washes up,” I said, giving a pointed look to the kids at the table. “I’ll probably be late.”

He kissed my forehead. “Call me when you’re leaving to come home,” he said. “I’ll be awake.”

“Don’t sit up for me, you need your sleep,” I said, giving his chest a light push with my hand. “Go wash up. I’ll make a plate for you.” After a day spent with mulch and compost piles, Matt’s clothes and hands were in need of cleaning.

Kitty picked me up at the front gate, and we set off to meet Dwight’s van, which we needed to load with the trays of food already prepared at his kitchen. I loaded the ‘refill’ items, prepared and stored in plastic containers, which consisted of finger foods for restocking the serving trays when they began to be depleted by hungry partiers.

“Is that everything?” One of Dwight’s staff was checking the master list as I emerged from the caterer’s kitchen one last time with a punch bowl.

“That’s it,” I said, locking the door. “Kitty, you have the boxes of punch cups loaded already?”

“They’re in the back,” she answered. “We’d better go. We only have an hour to set things up before the dance begins.”

I hurried to stow the punch bowl's box in our back seat, then hopped into the passenger one. Kitty shifted into gear and we pulled into the lane behind the catering van, driving on to the university.

The temporary dance hall was in the university's debate hall — all the chairs were removed, along with the speaker's podium, replaced by a band. The long tables for the food were located on the opposite side of the room from the double doors of entry, where we carried through our trays of food, punch bowl, cups, and the large vat of punch for pouring into the crystal bowls.

I hoped I was still as good at this as I was in my college years, otherwise the university's floor was going to be a sea of raspberry bubbles in no time.

The room was decorated for the event — champagne-gold streamers, a gold mirrored ball, and lots of frosted garlands with glittering gold Christmas balls attached were hung like swags around the perimeter. Two frosted Christmas trees stood in opposite corners from each other, decorated in gold ornaments and gold-colored silk poinsettias. Someone was testing the lights as we carried in the last of the food, putting them on a 'dimmer and shimmer' setting, in Kitty's words. It made the gold streamers of tinsel and baubles hanging above shimmer like metallic confetti raining down.

We peeled open the trays as we laid out the stuffed mushrooms and miniature sandwiches rolled in thin flatbreads, similar to a kind Michael made with shaved meat and piccalilli at a recent luncheon. I arranged some parsley decoratively

around the rows of finger foods, as a couple of servers put on their aprons.

We made small talk with Dwight's crew as we worked and waited — I didn't know most of them very well, but I recognized a few who had signed on to cater for us at some events, including one who worked with Michael from time to time. By seven forty-five, the band was warming up, and the early arrivals were coming in, looking like hesitant mice afraid a cat was in the next corner.

I expected if Paula was coming, this would be her moment. Arriving to find a quiet chair near the back, to be a wallflower watching everybody else dance, drink punch, and chatter away in lively little pockets of conversation. But the few who came early were strangers, a couple of boys making awkward conversation near the punch table, and a girl who was sitting on one of the chairs, reading the screen of her phone.

More people trickled in as the clock ticked five past eight. The room was beginning to fill up, but I didn't recognize anybody thus far. At ten past, the event's M.C. took the stage, one of the university's dons.

“Good evening everyone, and welcome to the annual Christmas Ball.” To a round of polite applause, he continued. “We wish you all a wonderful time, and best of British on your exams, which will be coming shortly.” He chuckled, with lukewarm laughter from the room in general as a response. “To ensure you have a good time we have catered food, decorations provided by our committee, and of course, our

wonderful band for the evening, the Moonglow. Please give them a welcoming round of applause.”

Everyone clapped, then the band began playing their first song of the evening. Russell, who was Dwight’s main employee, lifted the first tray, and looked to us for the signal. Kitty was ladling punch cups, so I took on the first duty of sending out our circulating wait staff.

Feeling as if I had been sucked back in time to my own college dances, I leaned against the wall behind the buffet, watching the room. Memories of good times, bad ones, and evenings both boring and memorable were prompted — I could have taken a walk down memory lane if it wasn’t for the distraction of looking for Paula in nearly every new arrival. I knew I should give up soon, because she wasn’t the type who typically made a late entrance — that meant facing crowds, including all the peers who were so indifferent to her, and actually making a path through them.

Kitty poked me in the arm. “He’s here,” she said. *Tristan*, I realized a second later, and peered through the crowd in the semi darkness for the boy I had seen at choir practice.

He had arrived alone, although in the typical pack of friends I would expect him to be with, all boys who looked like the same type. Already, I could see them joking with each other, as they scanned the crowd of girls in formal dresses who were clustered near the catering station.

Was he looking for Paula? I felt a little hope — and a little apprehension — when I thought of this. But it didn’t take me long to see that I shouldn’t worry on that score. Tristan had spotted a girl in a black and pink cocktail dress, who looked

exactly the same type as the girl he had been flirting with at choir practice. She was glamorous, thin, with a slight pout on her lips as she listened to her friend talk.

Even though he didn't have a girl with him, I had a feeling that he wouldn't come to a dance like this without a partner in mind already. As he squeezed his way towards the glam girl, I knew that he'd made his choice. In a way, I was glad Paula wasn't here to watch.

Kitty could sense my disappointment. I could see the look of sympathy on her face. I shrugged. "You were right," I said.

"I didn't want to be," she said. "I thought maybe he'd turn out to be better than a prat, somehow."

"Then you did better than me, because I was pretending," I said. "I knew ... he wasn't the kind of guy who would do the right thing."

She shrugged. "At least we tried," she said.

"You did the biggest part," I said to her. "You had Birdie design that beautiful dress. I could never have found something that beautiful for her on my own."

"Like I said, Birdie owed me a favor," said Kitty. "You were the one who paid for it. The one who thought of it, too."

I nodded. "Lately, though, you've been the better of the two of us," I said to her. "That makes me realize that you always are the better of the two of us. Probably I'd have to shutter the business if you ever left, because I couldn't do it without you."

A sarcastic laugh from Kitty. “Yeah, right,” she said. “You used to be my boss, remember? It’s not like I was a genius out there making it happen for myself.”

“I’m being serious,” I said. “I forget to thank you for being you.”

Kitty glanced at me. Her gaze softened. “It goes two ways, I figure,” she answered.

My turn to laugh, but like hers, it was a short one. It was next to impossible to get Kitty to admit how good she was at anything — like getting a politician to admit they changed their opinion.

I studied the floor as I reflected on whether I should tell Paula about this at any point, or let her go on thinking he might have come to this dance hoping to see her, disappointed she didn’t show. Sometimes harmless thoughts of fantasy are better than the disillusioning truths that don’t do us any real good. But Paula was smarter than that, and deserved better than some pretense. If I was lucky, she wouldn’t ask about the dance at all.

We watched the couples dance, in between refreshing the punch and unwrapping new trays from the coolers. I helped one of our servers clean up a mess involving a couple of spilled cups, then washed up before returning to see if the tables needed anything else, tidying the parsley around the cheese and crackers to look more attractive again.

As I turned back to the main room, I spotted someone just entering. The lights were still dim, but I recognized the dress immediately, with the embroidered bodice’s beadwork, the sweetheart neckline and satin skirts with tulle beneath

them, giving them a gentle flare. All in creamy pale satin that was almost a pink-tinted champagne shade, under a silver lace overlay which matched the beadwork on the dress's upper half.

I recognized her face, the eyes highlighted with the eye shadow we had bought at the salon, a tiny bit of lipstick shaping the mouth, and the mass of chestnut hair pulled back in a French twist. It was like watching Audrey Hepburn walk into the ball in *My Fair Lady*, seeing Paula transformed like this.

A few students had noticed her, with the same shock I had. Paula walked in, not shrinking from the stares, some of which were evident. She kept her chin up, and a tiny smile on her lips, even though I could tell she was nervous.

“Look at her,” said Kitty. It wasn't a suggestion, but a statement. It said it all about Paula coming in the way she had, and I felt my heart swell a little bit with pride. *She actually made it.*

She said hello to a couple of classmates, one of whom was complimenting her dress. A little of Paula's familiar blush flashed, and she nodded before answering.

As I helped one of the servers with the new tray of apricot biscuits, I noticed the girls in Tristan's circle were watching Paula, and making comments. Tristan turned his head in response to something they said, then spotted her in the crowd. I could see the shock in his face as he recognized her.

One of his friends said something and nudged him, but he didn't laugh. The shock had taken off the cocky veneer he

usually wore, unable to prop itself back in place in time for the response. That almost made me glad.

I watched Paula make small talk with some people, and gaze around herself, at the room's glittering decorations, and the fake snow the projector was casting over the band as it played. She paused near one of the tables for a cup of punch, and spotted me across the way as I exchanged trays with Russell. I had time to wave, and see the eager smile on her face before the crowd closed again.

My heart lifted, watching her have a nice time. I caught glimpses of her circulating and saying hello to some university acquaintances, in between the time I spent unwrapping the next tray of petit fours with Christmas roses and the university logo piped atop them, and arranging them on a circulating tray for one of the waiters.

“Here comes trouble,” breathed Kitty. She was beside me, as she unwrapped the mini eclairs. I looked away from our work, and saw that Tristan had left his friends and was moving in Paula's direction.

My heart was in my throat when she turned away from the professor who had just greeted her, and saw him close by. For a moment, I saw the emotion flash in her eyes, and thought a tiny bit of the blush was coming back to her cheeks — not the rosy powder we had bought at the salon, but the genuine kind.

I didn't want my heart to sink, but it was beginning to slip downwards. I didn't want Paula to fall into the trap of those handsome eyes, or that smile that knew just how to

manipulate. Not because she looked so different that he could probably pretend she was a different person altogether.

I inched closer, nudging my way through the crowd's fringes on the pretext of swapping trays with one of the other servers. I knew I shouldn't — as if I could do anything if Paula found herself flirting with him ten minutes from now, like he'd never insulted her in the past.

"Hey," he said to her. I thought her blush deepened.

"Hi," she said. Her hands were in a tight clasp in front of her.

"I didn't think you'd be here tonight. You never come to uni parties or dances," he said.

"I thought I'd like a change," she said. "It's nice. It's really pretty here tonight." She looked around again.

"Yeah, they did a good job," he said. "Um ... you look nice. Really."

"Thanks." This time, the blush flowered, dying away quickly. "You, too." She smiled at him.

I could see by his stare, from the angle I was at with Angela the server, that he didn't know what to make of all this. He was looking at Paula in a way that made me think he was sorry he hadn't asked her to the dance for real, instead of playing it as a joke.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked. "I'm free." He gazed at her, expectantly, after he said this. Confident of a 'yes', like always, I thought. I didn't blame him, because I had seen the look in her eyes, too.

Paula hesitated. She looked at him again, and I could see the struggle in her physically, just beneath the surface. She looked down.

“Thanks, but ... I think I’ll sit this one out,” she said. “Maybe your friend would like to dance instead.” She looked across the way at the girl in pink and black, who was quite clearly scowling as she watched Tristan’s back, with him in conversation with another.

He turned around, glanced at the girl from earlier, then back at Paula, doing a poor job of covering his guilt momentarily. Paula took this opportunity to smile. She turned and made her way in the opposite direction, leaving him speechless in that spot.

Yes. I closed my eyes, feeling my heart leap back into place. A surge of victory inside, for Paula walking away from the only really terrible choice she’d ever made, to like someone who wasn’t worth her time. She looked like a confident young woman, her chin still level as she approached the fringes of the dance floor, watching everyone else take their turn. But not with disappointment that she wasn’t dancing among them with Tristan.

As Tristan slunk off to his original object for this evening, I found Kitty’s glance across the way. She merely lifted one eyebrow, which conveyed her feelings perfectly.

Someone else was going to ask Paula to dance before tonight was over, because I had a feeling this evening was hers, even if no one else present knew it.

Chapter Nineteen

“I’ve given considerable thought to our charity fundraiser’s theme and menu over the weekend, and I’ve decided that we will keep the wartime theme of dress and decoration — but with a completely new menu,” Amanda announced.

The old wartime cookbook of great-grandmother Caroline’s culinary prowess in adversity was tucked back in a drawer at Cliffs House, and Amanda was starting fresh after the dried fish and ox heart were taken off the list of options. We were all relieved, even without knowing what the change might be — unless, of course we were moving to something even more difficult than stuffing a dried fish.

“Charlotte made a very inspiring suggestion at last meeting that we switch our cuisine to a victory theme, and I think that’s the most sensible tack to accept at this stage,” Amanda continued, gesturing towards the fish and chips shop owner, who took a joking little bow from her chair. “I’ll be asking her help in designing a menu that reflects the life in England that our brave soldiers fought to preserve and, eventually, restore to villages like this one — something old-fashioned and simple, but extremely delicious.”

The rest of us laughed at this, and I raised my hand. “What sort of food?” I asked.

“Think of the dances in James Herriot’s books,” said Marian, joking.

“Actually, that’s quite close,” said Amanda. “We want the staples — pies, pickles, and lovely sausage buns, for example.”

Charlotte spoke up. “I think ham and egg pie would be lovely, with a good herbal crust — something for all the quiche lovers,” she added, with a chuckle. “And everybody’s old-fashioned favorite, steak and kidney in hand pies — sausage buns with brioche with a little mustard — and plenty of oggies with Cornish filling.”

“It sounds delicious to me,” said Cherish. “But what do we do for pudding?”

“I say an old-fashioned plum pudding with hard sauce would be just right,” said Charlotte. “And Amanda’s suggested we serve some lovely hand portions — chelsea buns, ginger biscuits, and fruit cake slices as well. Goes nicely with the spiced wassail.”

“We need a proper show stopper, don’t we?” I said, speaking up again. “Do you want me to help with that?”

I thought of my various contacts in the culinary world — Michael excepted — and wondered if this might be an opportunity to help Jillian by hiring her freelance. She could make something that would be creatively-fitting for a World War II - themed Christmas dance if any baker could.

Bets sniffed. “One of those frippery bits from telly, you mean,” she said. “The sort of thing where it’s shaped like the Hindenburg.” She scratched her head, accidentally tilting her little cherry-trimmed hat forward.

Amanda ignored that statement. “I think we might opt for an impressive Rule Britannia-themed trifle,” she said. “I spoke to Michael, because we served one at a dinner for some dignitaries last year, and recreating it would be simple enough. And it’s quite elegant. But if you want to speak to Michael, I’m certain he’ll let you know if he needs support.”

She checked her notes. “Well, that issue is solved,” she said, as we chuckled. “Now we should discuss the decorations. The marquee has been booked already, and I’ve hired a band — a very excellent jazz and swing five-piece orchestra, judging from their internet videos. Flags — buntings — anyone have some suggestions?”

We discussed the various ways to create a patriotic victory theme in the tent for the next half hour, taking a little break for a cuppa in the middle. I helped Amanda pour, and laid out the biscuits on the tray.

I glanced her way. “I was proud of you for bending,” I said.

She looked up from refilling the teapot. “What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

“As much as the cookbook meant, you let it go and started the plans from scratch,” I said.

“I hardly think I had a choice,” she answered, with a short laugh. “You saw the faces of our dear fellow institute members when they tasted milk pudding. It simply wasn’t going to work. Imagine trying to win over the villagers paying money to eat it, not merely participating for free.”

“I know, but I respected that,” I answered. “You gave it your absolute best try, but you conceded that it didn’t work. That’s the part almost nobody can ever do.”

“It’s not as if I could force everyone to cook ox heart, could I?” she answered. I could see the flash of disappointment, followed by an accepting smile.

“Probably not,” I admitted. “Kitty wouldn’t have been the only rebellion, probably.” I looked across the room, where Kitty was having a clear disagreement with Bets on some topic — probably that of centerpiece cakes at events.

“Sometimes we simply have to know when to change,” said Amanda. “This was an occasion which called for it, if ever one did.”

“Still, I’m glad you tried,” I said. “Sometimes great ambitions deserve a shot, even if they have a rough beginning. Beginnings aren’t always good to judge by. Anybody who can accept that can accept failure, too, in most cases.”

“If my worst failure in life is over aspic salad versus jelly rolls, I’ll be satisfied.” Amanda gave me a better smile this time, with some of its usual winning enthusiasm.

Wouldn’t we all? I thought to myself.

I went to see Michael at Cliffs House’s kitchen the next day, bringing along a large vase I needed to return to the crystal cabinet at the manor. As I walked the long drive, I could see something glinting in a garden topiary — tinsel, as it turned out, and several Christmas balls hanging from the upright branches of a pencil cypress. It must be the work of Edward and little Charles, I thought.

Mrs. Norris answered the door. “This is a call upon the kitchen, I trust,” she said.

“Hi, Mrs. Norris. Yes, I’m here for Michael.” After she let me in, I shed my coat. “The vase is for you, however,” I added, as she laid claim to it.

“I surmised as much. Michael is below, consulting upon the issue of the trifle. If you wish anything, you may ring. I’ll be hoovering the portrait gallery.”

“Where is Clemmie today?” I referred to one of the longest-standing, part-time maids still present in Cliffs House’s oft-changing staff.

“The dentist, Ma’am.” With that, the housekeeper retreated noiselessly, without even the crisp rustle of her starched dress.

Michael was in the kitchen bedecked for Christmas with lots of fresh-cut greenery and little silver bells and baubles wired on with red ribbons, making a smaller version of the trifle using fresh berries and his spiced cream to which I had a secret addiction. He heard me on the stairs, turning his head with a brief nod.

“I’m making a sample,” he said. “Have some.” He topped it off with a dollop of whipped cream and a sprinkle of crushed seasonal candy, and served it to me.

“Shouldn’t you try it first?” I asked.

“You should. I’m making it for other people, not myself,” he pointed out. He made a note on the list magnetized to the fridge. I couldn’t help but notice the picture pinned above it was of him and Kimmie at the local Christmas

market. Her grin looked like a million quid with her arms wrapped around him for the selfie, expressing that fiery affection within.

I took a bite from the cup, and rolled my eyes. “Mmm. No more meals for me today,” I said, digging in. “Are those raspberries and —?”

“Hydrated dried red currants in strawberry syrup,” he answered. “The blue layer is blueberry with imported honeyberries.” He stirred whip cream atop the second cup. “The cake layers are Victoria sponge and a blonde duchess dowager fruitcake with golden fruits.”

It tastes amazing,” I said, between my second and third mouthfuls.

“I’m thinking of changing the sponge. Maybe a shortcake, or mixing biscuits and shortbread with some ginger spice seasoning.” He tasted it himself now, and I could see he was weighing the possibilities.

“I can’t imagine having your level of culinary talent ... trying to decide between delicious and delicious-er,” I said, not caring about the grammatical incorrectness of this. “Lately I’ve been appreciating how difficult it is to elevate food to art. We think of all of it as falling into the category of necessity.”

Michael set aside his portion. “I talked to Sadie about your friend,” he said. “She said she’d try to help her find a place to work in Penzance. She knows some of the restaurant chefs pretty well, so she knows which ones won’t feel like they’re crossing Bon Cuisine’s owners.”

“Morgan didn’t put in a good word for her, did she?” I found I had lost a little of my appetite for the delicious fruits and sponge.

“She said some harsh things. She didn’t blacklist her, but she made it known she thought she overstepped. Implied she wasn’t trustworthy.” He wiped his hands on a towel. “Not the kind of words you want spreading in the restaurant community.”

“Jillian will have a hard time staying in Penzance until the rumor dies down, won’t she?” That was the point, probably — to force her to move on, to somewhere more obscure, where no one would ever make the connection between her talent and some of Morgan’s latest recipe successes. Jillian probably wasn’t the first one who had been banished for those reasons.

Michael shrugged. “That depends,” he said. “But I wouldn’t want to be in her place.” He covered the rest of the ingredients. “Sadie might be able to help, because she has a good reputation. The hotel hated to lose her when she took the new job.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I really appreciate the help.”

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “What are friends for?” He shrugged, and I was reminded how much his personality shared with Kitty’s, the same tough attitude on the outside that bounced off compliments.

I smiled. “Fine,” I said. “But — at least you’ll accept how delicious this is when I tell you, right? Because I need somebody to believe me when I tell them they’re great.”

He scoffed. “What is it with you and the need to equate everything?” he asked. “Just be happy.” He shoved the bowls of whipped cream and custard into the fridge, as I polished off the portion he had given me, regretting that I was down to the last bite.

Michael’s trifle would be the centerpiece, but we decided to commission some petit fours with the symbol of the British flag on them, as well as some depicting Cornish holly and evergreen and berries, to surround the beautiful trifle. I promised to talk to Chez Cakes about it when I dropped off the sketch and recipe for the smaller version of Morgan’s new wedding cake for the upcoming engagement party. That would complete the table, and provide an extra-festive touch for the occasion.

At Save the Date, I collected the notebook with the sketches, and the special folder containing the copies of the wedding cake competition’s winning recipe and design, and put them in my work portfolio. This new design was going to look pretty on the wedding table, of that I had no doubt — and felt none whatsoever for the talent of the baker who created it — but I still tasted the sour feelings from before, for the rejected designs that were victims of Morgan’s ego.

So what? It’s not your business, Julianne. Common sense me posted this reminder, yet again, that I was the neutral party, and that nothing I had personally done violated my own ethics ... except for that covert cake competition entry. That one had crossed the line of my professional boundaries, and I was lucky it hadn’t cost Kitty and I more than it had.

Penzance's traffic was heavier when I arrived, with tour buses looking for parking for the hordes of shoppers who still visited even in the off season for travel. I found a place to park one lane over from Chez Cakes and walked the rest of the distance. At least this route didn't take me past Bon Cuisine, where I was destined to go a few nights from now, and oversee the engagement party itself.

At Chez Cakes, Bernice was boxing up a mint cream and chocolate cake for another customer as I walked in, waving to let her know I was here. As soon as she oversaw the latest tray of bakes for the front cases — these with tiny candied acorns decorating their tops, she ushered me to the kitchen.

"You're here about the cake for the party, right?" she said, as she tied an apron over her chef's coat, which was already dusted heavily with confectioner's sugar. "I have it on the calendar, and I'll be handling it myself. D.J.'s assisting me, she'll be doing the decoration, so I think we have the time and people penciled in. Are you dropping off the sketches for me?"

"I am," I said. "I just wanted to thank you, because I know you typically don't use other people's designs, since that's not the point of being artisan bakers with a couture bakery."

"I'm happy to help out this time," she said. "Luckily for your client, I had a couple of cancellations. Bad breaks in the engagement world." Her smile was wry.

"None of them were mine, I promise," I said. "But I know how it happens, having been involved in a few weddings that weren't meant to take flight." I turned an admiring eye

towards a beautiful cake that the staff were assembling, which had an almost cloud-like effect in sugar wrapping around its layers.

“We’ll have it ready for you, but I can’t spare the staff for delivery. Will that be a problem?” she asked. “I thought being you and Kitty, you could probably handle it. Have a few catering staff who might be willing to lend a hand. I’ll discount the fee for your clients, obviously, since we can’t fulfill the last step.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll call a couple of people who will help us bring it to the restaurant intact,” I said. “I can’t ask you to spare employees when you’re obviously busy, and this is obviously outside your typical job.”

“If we were any busier right now, I’d have to give up sleep,” she joked. “I’ll have it ready early on the day of — you can call me any time between now and then if you have questions.” She glanced towards the cake being finished. “Larry, hold a moment — there’s a cake topper to go with that one, it’s in the box by the mixer.”

She turned to go. “Julianne, leave the sketches with Margot,” she said, over her shoulder, as she went to help. She pointed towards one of her assistants, who was busy piping thick royal icing in spirals on a sheet of parchment paper to dry.

I reached into the portfolio and drew out the sketch and the recipe in their plastic sleeve, handing them over to their new keeper. I exited through the front again, where some customers were trying to decide between a slice of blueberry cake and an unusual gooseberry-rhubarb combo.

In my car again, I shut the door and put the key into the ignition. My chest was pounding, not with anxiety, but with a sense of anger. I realized I was angry at myself right now, and at the fact that I had let this wedding's vision be cheated, and an innocent third party with it, too.

The client's right, except when they're wrong. Morgan had ruined her own showstopper moment by being petty and dishonest. I could live with that choice, as I had with clients who insisted on mistakes before, but the rest was becoming too difficult for me to accept. Jillian might never work again in Penzance, and it wasn't her fault. Every moment that should have been hers had been stolen by someone else.

I drew a deep breath. Shutting off the ignition, I opened the car door again.

Through the back door of the kitchen I encountered no foot traffic except a young cook changing aprons. As expected, Bernice was already in front, with the young chef I had spoken to before piping flowers onto wax paper.

"I just realized that I made a mistake," I said to her, apologetically. "Where's the design I gave you?"

She pointed towards the table by Bernice's office, where it lay atop the work diary. Reaching into my portfolio, I pulled out a different sleeve, one with a different cake and recipe inside, and swapped it with the one I had left before. I tucked the wedding's future cake back into my bag, then turned and smiled.

"Thanks," I said. "Sorry about the mix up. I should have made it right in the first place."

“No problem,” she said. “It’s in safe hands now. We’ll see to it that it’s perfect.”

“I know,” I answered. “Thanks.” I showed myself out again.

Chapter Twenty

Posters for Lady Amanda's new and improved charity fundraiser dinner adorned the parish notice board and the windows of shops on the high street. The dancing silhouettes beneath the marquee would be living ones the week before Christmas — World War II dress encouraged, but not required, for entry into the tent for dinner and dancing.

I walked by, carrying a wreath frame for Kitty, who needed a larger one for the barn's main entrance, and a tin of shop shortbread, which would be the last ones I would have to eat before Dinah's return. I was looking forward to delicious fresh-baked varieties yet again.

Paula's bicycle wasn't out front, but Kitty had suggested she have an extra day off this week to concentrate on studies and Christmas shopping. The main event on our calendar was Morgan and Mark's engagement dinner, which only needed the attention of two of us tomorrow night.

After I let myself into Save the Date, I opened the latest emails and confirmed that everything was in place for the party. Mark's friend had sent detailed menu copies to me and to the head of the catering team typically hired for events like these; the wine list was already set, the bottles ordered in advance by Mark. The decoration, a touch of greenery with Mediterranean herbs, was all we were providing, and Kitty had finished the decorative wreaths for the tables already.

Bernice had emailed me yesterday to confirm the centerpiece cake would be ready for us to pick up tomorrow afternoon, and asked if we had found help. I texted back that we had, and we'd be on time to collect it before we arrived on site at the restaurant.

Everything was falling into place. I closed my email account and closed the file on Morgan and Mark's big day.

Bon Cuisine had been decorated for Christmas already, even though it was operating at one half capacity during the ongoing construction. Guests who dined on the main floor would enjoy the beautiful little pencil trees adorned with twinkle lights and gold and cream ornaments, and the fluffy wreath made of pleated gold and cream wide ribbon with gilded edging, which hung in the picture window. Candles in faux crystal cups rimmed with gold decorated a table near the new fountain, the forehead of which was garlanded with a flexible spray of gilded leaves.

All the tables were covered with matching gold linens, which Kitty and I had ordered from one of our favorite suppliers, with one of Kitty's little wreaths in the middle of each one, along with some simple pillar candles which varied in height.

She had installed the centerpieces earlier today — good thing, because three of us were handling the cake in its delicate journey from the car to the serving cart. Anything could happen between those two points, and no back-up cake was waiting in the restaurant pantry in case of an accident.

“There,” I said, as we eased the large box into pride of place in the kitchen. “That should do it. Now we only have to

unbox it when it's time, and I have a touch-up kit with me if something needs attention.”

“Should I go?” Jillian asked. “I don't want Morgan to see me. I think there's been enough difficulty for all of us without stirring it again.”

It had been my doing to ask Jillian for help today, since most of our typical catering team was already assigned jobs in the kitchen by Mark's culinary friend, and because there was no one I trusted more to be careful with a stunning and delicate cake in transport. It was a risk, of course, in more ways than one, to ask her to help. If Morgan knew, she might be livid that I invited an ex-employee back on the restaurant grounds, one who had a negative history with her.

“You can, but I wish you wouldn't feel like it's necessary,” I said. “Again, I'm the one who asked you here. I needed your help, and Morgan should understand why when she sees the centerpiece.” I glanced at the large bakery box, which was still in need of unfolding. “I might need assistance when I open this thing, because a baker would do a better job of covering up any little frosting flaws than I would. Let's face it, things are going to be a bit crazy tonight.”

She nodded. “Maybe I can keep out of sight,” she said. “Morgan's not likely to come into the kitchen when she's entertaining, since Mark was the one who made the kitchen arrangements.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It's only for a couple of hours, then you won't have to come back ever again if you don't want to.”

“Here.” One of the caterers handed her an apron. “If you're staying, we could use a hand with the antipasto trays.”

Jillian smiled. “I’ve love to. Paycheck, right?” She glanced at me, and I remembered that Sadie still hadn’t found someone in need of a reliable kitchen assistant. Even with the season being a busy one, most restaurants had already hired the staff they needed. It couldn’t be easy, being unemployed at a time when everyone she knew had the security of a job.

“A good paycheck,” I said. “Morgan told me to only hire the best to show off for her friends tonight.” I smiled back.

Kitty was helping lay out the bar when I came back. “Almost time,” she said. “Mark’s upstairs with a few early arrivals, showing off the progress. I think Morgan’s running late from the salon.”

“No rush,” I said. “I’d rather have a party start a few minutes late and get off the ground running than start on time with a weak trickle-in.” I helped one of the servers who was trying to move some bakery boxes out of sight, which contained individual croquenbouche glazed with candied lemon, before the guests came back downstairs.

The party was fully in swing by a quarter past eight — a large crowd of the couples’ friends and some of their culinary competition were here, including several who wouldn’t make it to the wedding. Like the bigwig culinary friend on his way back to Italy to write a cookbook and film a program on expatriates and Tuscan cuisine, who had brought a special bottle of wine for toasting the occasion.

Morgan looked happier than at her last meeting with me and Kitty, wearing a beautiful new posh frock, and with her hair perfectly-coiffed at the salon. She showed off her ring to a few friends from out of town as the drinks circulated, and

laughed about the latest comments from her editor on the cookbook. Mark looked happier than usual also, even wearing a suit and tie. Their friends seemed impressed with the renovations to the restaurant's upstairs, and several were enchanted by the new fountain downstairs. This was a moment for them both to show how perfect their new life was going to be, at least the parts of it they were showing off publicly.

At eight-thirty, we served dinner, beginning with the salad course, followed by a combined seafood and soup course featuring a flaked tuna filet in cream soup with Italian parsley, then the main course of pasta. It looked delicious, and I was tempted to sneak a taste when I returned to the kitchen to help with the plates.

“We need a replacement set of silver at the main table, there's been a fumble,” Kitty announced, as one of our servers sprang into action by grabbing another cluster of the basic utensils. “I need to grab a new set of tongs for the ice bucket, too.”

“Try the box of emergency supplies,” I said, as I helped slice lemons to replenish the bowl on the bar. Kitty opened it and searched.

Jillian had made herself at home by helping grate parmesan and cream more pesto for decorating the little tomato rosettes served to the side of each plate. She knew where everything was located in the kitchen, which made her help invaluable to our friends on the catering staff, who generally had to guess where things were kept in kitchens. So far, neither Mark nor Morgan had spotted her, so we were still safe.

The big toast came at the end of the meal, when Kitty and I made certain the special bottle of wine was opened, and trays of small toasting glasses were made ready for the moment. Beaming, Morgan leaned on Mark's arm as they gathered near the dessert buffet, where the decorative pastry bites and after-dinner biscotti were soon to be laid out by our staff.

"It is a pity that I will have to miss their beautiful day, but needs must," their friend was saying. "I'm so immensely happy for them, however, and I have no doubts it will be perfect. With these two in a joint venture, one expects nothing but success."

"Such sweet nothings," teased Morgan, giving him a hug. "I know more than one person here will miss our important day, and we're devastated about that." She took Mark's hand.

"We'd postpone it until you could all be here, if we could," he added, joking. "As it is, though, we feel we should do the deed, so we're sharing everything equally, not just Bon Cuisine's ownership." Everybody chuckled at his remark, and Morgan leaned closer to him as they linked hands.

"We do have something special to share with those of you who won't be here, however," said Morgan. "Tonight's main dessert is a tribute to our wedding and our culinary passion, created especially for us. We want to share it with all of you *before* we share it with our nearest and dearest on our wedding day."

That was the cue. During the minutes before, while Morgan was speaking, I had been in the hall between here and

the kitchen, slicing open the bakery box so the cake would be on full display. It was perfect, no need for touch ups, just as I had hoped.

I had tapped two of our serving team to wheel it out at the end of Morgan's speech, so it came into view now, and the gasps from her listeners were audible. Morgan turned her head, expecting to see the wedding cake designed by the contest's winner — immediately, her face became pale and blank, all expression wiped away.

It was Jillian's wedding cake for the competition being ushered in on that trolley. The beautiful one with the floral motif and wisteria vine, created in perfect sugar paste and chocolate. The team at Chez Cakes had done as brilliant a job as Jillian herself would have in making her creation reality, and I knew the delicious sponge underneath would taste exactly like the original recipes.

"It's beautiful," someone said.

"Morgan, I love it — it's absolutely you."

"Stunning. Simply stunning," someone else remarked.

The servers carefully lifted the cake into pride of place on the buffet table. I thought Morgan was livid beneath that calm face, and I waited for her fury to make itself known. Her gaze turned on me, and I gazed back innocently, as if nothing was wrong.

"Who created it? Was it you? It certainly looks brilliant enough for you," teased one her friends. "What a marvel."

"Actually, the cake's designer is here tonight," I said. "You can meet them if you like."

Morgan said nothing. I didn't try to imagine what reaction was taking place inside. I spoke to one of the servers. "Ask Jillian to come out here, if you would."

Murmurs of praise for the cake continued. Mark looked befuddled, but was trying to cover his confusion with a laugh and some offhand remarks about the designs perfect parallels with the wedding's theme.

Jillian appeared, hesitantly. "Jillian, some of the guests want to congratulate you on the amazing cake you designed for Morgan and Mark," I said.

She saw it on the table, seeing for the first time what had been in the box, and her eyes grew wide with astonishment. Bewildered, she glanced around the room as if the explanation must be there — at everything, until she turned to me again, where I smiled at her, and squeezed her shoulder.

"From the moment I saw it in your notebook, I knew it was perfect for the wedding," I said. "I couldn't resist it for tonight's centerpiece." I put this carefully, so Jillian would understand what I was saying. "Morgan loved it so much, it only made sense to have it here tonight."

"It's marvelous." Morgan had found her voice. "Stunning, as you said, Patrice. I would have done something exactly like it on my own, if it hadn't been for the beastly surgical rest the doctor prescribed."

"That was such a pity," said one of her friends, tsking.

"This lovely little baker has come as close to artistic perfection with this sponge as you would have," another friend reassured her. "It's a tribute to your work, really."

“Perhaps I should write a book on perfect baking techniques for the up-and-coming bakers in the professional world,” joked Morgan, with a laugh.

“Shall we cut it?” Mark asked.

“Of course,” she said, putting down her glass. They both held the knife that sliced through the first layer, putting a perfect triangle of sponge onto the plate for themselves, then more to be passed to their guests. There were murmurs about its deliciousness, how soft the sponge was, the spring in the crumb, the delectability of its flavors. Morgan smiled through them all.

One of the catering staff took over with the job of slicing the cake, and I checked to see that all the trays of biscuits had been retrieved from the kitchen. It was no surprise to me that Morgan was waiting for me in the passageway when I turned around.

“You did this,” she said. “Deliberately. You ambushed me at my own party. How *dare* you?”

“I had to option the best cake possible for this party,” I said. “I couldn’t bring myself not to make the right choice for this event. Everyone will see the contest winner at the wedding, but the best one for this occasion was clearly the original design. It fit the bill perfectly.”

“You served them a cake that belonged to an employee I sacked.” Her tone was hard. “You told them I wanted that design at my party. I don’t know where to begin beyond the obvious point, which is that you and your partner both are sacked.”

“If that’s how you feel, then I understand,” I answered. “After tonight, we’ll withdraw our names from the contacts for the wedding, and send you a modified bill that covers only services rendered.”

“Don’t think this will be the last you hear about this, you or that baker,” said Morgan, furiously.

I turned at that. “I think it will be,” I said, quietly. “Didn’t you wonder how I got Jillian’s design to enter in the contest in the first place?”

Opening the photo app on my phone, I showed her the photos I had taken in the old notebook, the one with its years labeled by little color-coded tabs. I showed her the pictures of tonight’s cake, then I showed her two more. The wedding cake that she had presented as her own original design and its matching recipe, both in Jillian’s hand, both signed — both showing signs of age, compared to the sketches that Morgan herself had made.

She became very quiet.

“I am willing to guess that there are more things in this notebook that would be similar to things in your latest cookbook,” I said. “But I think it would be better for both of us to never mention it again. And for you to say nothing else about Jillian except that she’s a talented young baker who made you a perfect engagement party cake.”

I closed the app. “I’ll go finish looking after your party,” I said. “Goodbye, Morgan.” I walked away, knowing that she wasn’t going to follow me. She wasn’t going to mention it again after tonight, because she knew that if those sketches

could be authenticated, it would prove she had stolen another chef's designs.

Kitty was watching as I came back, but she didn't intercept me. I tried to look as if nothing strange or upsetting had happened as I helped the serving staff pass out the servings of cake.

I told Kitty after the party was over, breaking the news when it was just the two of us in the empty dining room, now a little bit shambles with its stripped-down tables, the crumbs in the rug. We had already helped the catering staff crate the wine glasses and bag the linens for returning to the hiring firms, and boxed the last of the catered menu for the restaurant fridge. Morgan's guests had all gone home, and the two restaurateurs themselves had gone home, with Mark leaving us a key for locking up that I promised to leave under the front pencil fir's pot. I suspected he didn't yet know Morgan had relieved us of our duties, but he would as soon as they were home.

"I'm sorry," I said to Kitty. "I am. It's our first time to be tossed off by a client, and it's my fault."

Her response had been silence up to now. "I reckoned it would happen," she said. "The moment I saw that cake come through." Her lips twitched, an ironic smile trying to show itself.

“I know I shouldn’t have,” I said. “Just ... I couldn’t go on letting Morgan lie through me. I tried. If she had only treated Jillian with some respect, I think I could have stayed quiet, but knowing she tried to bury her just to protect that image of the posh comfort-food baker with the creative mind ...” I trailed off, because I knew Kitty understood.

She sighed. “A posh client with posh fees. It’s not often we get to insult one of them into sacking us, is it?” She sipped a glass of wine, the last little bit from one of the bottles used to toast the happy couple, which she and I shared between us as we sacked up the last of the rubbish.

“No,” I said, ruefully. “This is the kind of thing you warned we shouldn’t do. What if that rumor about a big wedding planning firm moving here had turned out to be true? We’d have a black mark against our name, and they’d be the reliable choice for anyone who wanted an experienced event planner.”

“I did say that,” said Kitty. “Like it or not, the posh clients bring in the money. Money’s what keeps us in business.” She leaned back, gazing up at the ceiling. “We’ll be billing this one at half rates, I expect. Someone else will have to sort out that issue with the marquee and the outdoor tables.”

“Call me crazy ... it was a beautiful wedding in every detail, but ... I’m not all that sorry to lose this one.” I couldn’t help the tiny bit of a smile that was creeping over my lips now — one that was part irony, part relief, for not having to put up with Morgan’s facade of perfection any longer. “Even a client this famous.”

I saw its shadow appear in Kitty's. "Neither am I," she said.

Chapter Twenty-One

“We’ll be closing early today, Paula, because the charity fundraiser is tonight, and Kitty and I both have to help in the marquee,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “I can stay and mind the shop, if you want to leave it open.” She closed her book on particle physics.

“No, there’s no real need,” I said. “Although you could walk to the Christmas market with us if you want. This year, we’re actually enjoying the cocoa and biscuits as opposed to running one of the booths.”

I had brought my wartime ‘party dress’ with me to work to change in the back, into a dress that Birdie had whipped up for me out of some vintage blue fabric that suited my skin tones and shade of hair to a ‘T’ — something a little more glam than my old secondhand one, since I was going to be helping out at the fundraiser’s food tables. When not dancing with Matt, that is.

If he wanted to surprise me, he would turn up in a uniform, and fulfill those fantasies I had when watching movies like *The English Patient* or *Pearl Harbor*, but that was a long shot, I knew. He would be lucky to steal away for an hour whilst Clemmie babysat.

“I would, but I have to meet a classmate from university,” she said. “They’re passing close by the village,

and they needed to borrow one of the books I have so they can read it over the term holiday.”

“I hope you won’t spend the entire break doing research,” I said, as I made a note on the calendar to phone our newest client and give them a quote on marquee prices. “I mean, everybody deserves a break.”

“I’ll be helping my mum do the baking,” she said. “Sometimes we go to Torquay and have Christmas dinner with her cousins. They ask so many questions, I never have time for studying when I’m there.”

“Good,” I said. “I hoped that this term would be the start of something beyond the books.”

She blushed. “Well ... maybe getting as far as going out a bit was a decent start,” she answered.

I started to comment on that occasion — to ask if it was everything she hoped it would be, for being herself and being confident — when the shop door opened and Jillian entered.

“Hi,” I said with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to stop by and thank you both,” she said. “I was coming this way, because I have an appointment in Truro, and I remembered your shop was here.”

“Thank us for what?” I echoed, laughing. “We got you sacked from the restaurant, as anybody else would point out.” That was entirely my fault, and I had been trying hard to rectify it since, through Michael’s various contacts in Penzance.

“For standing up for me,” she answered. “You know ... after the party ... Morgan rang me. She offered to give me my

job back, and said a lot of nice things about the cake, even though I think it was difficult for her to admit she was pleased with it.”

My chest fluttered. “What did you say?” I asked.

“I said no,” she answered. “It was nice of her, but I didn’t want to go back. I knew that I was ready to move on. And, truthfully, I know some things now that make me certain it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

I nodded. “There will be other opportunities, I know,” I said, trying to sound convinced.

“I’ve had one already,” she said. “The baker from Chez Cakes, actually. She found me, and asked if I would like to come train as part of her team. She saw the cake’s photo on social media in some pictures from the party, and saw me tagged in the one ... she recognized me, and was impressed that I designed it.”

She’d be a perfect fit for Chez Cakes’s team, I knew. It couldn’t have turned out better. “Congratulations, Jillian,” I said. “I’m so happy for you. I think it’ll be incredible.”

“I hope so,” she said. “Anyway ... thanks. And Merry Christmas.” She turned to go, almost bumping into a young man who had just entered. I didn’t recognize him, pegging him as someone who wasn’t native to Ceffylgwyn — my friend Rosie would have certainly made a joke about him coming from a fine new crop of masculine candidates, however, if she were here.

“Hi,” he said. “Um — is Paula —?” He peered around me, and I realized he was looking for my assistant, who was

still sitting behind our desk, braid draped over her shoulder as she read about particles moving at astounding speeds.

“Paula, your friend is here,” I said. She looked up, and smiled.

“Hi, Jacob,” she said. “I have your book here. Just a moment.” She dove out of sight and returned with a copy of a scientific-looking hardcover with a complex title printed on it.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting it. They chatted on for several minutes, even laughing a bit, as I finished tidying up for closing time.

I thought I might have to push him out the door gently and lock it behind him, but he eventually peeled himself away and exited. I turned the sign to ‘closed’, smiling to myself as I pondered the signs of flirtation I had just detected. Had he been at the dance, possibly — spotting Paula in the crowd?

“Is he a classmate, you said?” I asked, as I turned around again. Paula was stowing her own book in her bag.

“We have one class that we share in the sciences,” she said. “Funny that he wanted to borrow the book, though. His dissertation’s on a totally different subject, so it doesn’t really apply to his.” She looked puzzled as she said this.

“Wonders never cease,” I said, trying to look as if I was as clueless as she was.

Wonders really don’t, I knew, because the world continued to surprise us with the good and the bad, and with opportunities for bold moves in the future and emancipation from the mistakes of the past. We don’t have to wait for a New

Year's resolution for it to come our way, but find it around us, happening all the time.

It's almost time to say farewell to Julianne, Matt, and all their friends. Find the final book in the series at a favorite retailer [HERE](#)