

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# THE MARRIAGE TEST

A Short Story



SUZANNE REDFEARN

Bestselling Author of *In an Instant*

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Once in a while,  
Right in the middle of an ordinary life,  
Love gives us a fairy tale.

—Anonymous

## The Marriage Cake

The key to a happy marriage  
Is in traits yet unseen,  
In the quiet strength that lies below  
Like bedrock in a stream.  
Two as one begin, o brave travail,  
To prove love false or true  
O'er peak and stream and gale.  
Return triumphant, your fate assured,  
To eternal happiness evermore.

# 1

I hurry toward him, my hair damp from my shower and the taste of seawater still on my lips. “Sorry,” I say as I throw my arms around his neck and lift up on my toes to kiss him, his lips always surprisingly soft for a man so tall and strong.

“Mmmm,” he mumbles. “Salty.”

“And spicy and sweet,” I say, dropping down to cradle his face in my hands and look him over, a habit inherited from my grandmother, who likes to check that those she hasn’t seen for a while are well.

For Justin and me, it’s been two weeks since I returned from his home in New York City. He is freshly shaved, his bronze eyes bright, his black hair recently cut. I catch the scent of his aftershave and notice his shirt is new and freshly pressed. Thick emotion wells in my throat, as it does every time I see him after we’ve been apart, like I’ve not drawn a full breath since we saw each other last.

Satisfied that he’s really here, I release him.

He holds out my chair. “How was the rig?”

“Amazing. Best one yet. It’s why I’m late. I couldn’t help it. Blame it on the sea lion cub who captured my heart.”

“Should I be jealous?”

“Maybe. He was almost as cute as you, and a better swimmer.”

“I’m wounded.” He slaps his hand to his chest. “About the swimming part, of course.”

I scoot my chair so it is beside instead of across from him and drape my leg over his, wanting to be close. He sets his

hand on my knee, warm through the thin cotton of my dress, and his touch sends a current down my spine that causes a blush.

Noticing, he arches a brow, and a secret smile passes between us.

Never before have I felt such attraction to someone, like there's an electromagnetic connection between us that causes my skin to flame whenever he's near.

"I can't believe you got a reservation at this place," I say as I scan the magnificent deck that overlooks the Pacific and, tonight, twinkles with holiday lights and garlands. "The chef is my favorite."

"I know. I actually listen . . . sometimes."

I open the menu, though I already know what I want. "Mushroom stroganoff," I announce. "Annabelle's famous for it. She even has her own mushroom forager who she sends all over the world in search of wild mushrooms."

"Mushroom forager, now there's a job I never considered."

"Could you imagine? Traveling to the world's forests in search of mushrooms for one of the world's greatest chefs?"

"Sort of like diving in the world's oceans to save the marine ecosystem," Justin says with an eyebrow lift.

"Yeah, I know. My job sucks." I glance at the ocean stretched out beyond the rocky beach, a billion stars and the moon glinting off its surface, and sigh a happy sigh. The dive today was stupendous, the reef Walton and I are trying to save the biggest one yet, the size of a city block and teeming with life. "You should have seen it. We saw a pair of seahorses. Do you know how rare that is? Incredibly romantic animals."

He sets his menu aside. "More romantic than sea lions?"

"Way. They grow up floating the ocean in search of another, and when their paths finally cross, they spend days dancing together, trying to sync their rhythms to see if they are

compatible, and if they manage it, they tether their tails and spend the rest of their short lives drifting the ocean as one.”

“Wow, days? That’s serious commitment.”

“In seahorse terms, that’s a very long time. Walton couldn’t stop photographing them; they were so beautiful.”

Justin tries not to react to the mention of his former best friend but does a poor job of it, his body tensing and his smile going stiff. “Seahorses and sea lion cubs. I’m surprised you came up at all.”

“I might not have if I had more air.”

The server appears. “Something to drink?”

“Do you have a white burgundy?” I ask, feeling like something bright to match my mood.

The server points to the French section of the wine list.

“Oh,” I say, as the list is limited and pricey. “I only want a glass. I’ll just take a—”

“A bottle of the finest white burgundy you have,” Justin interrupts.

“Justin—”

He waves me off.

The server leaves, and I lean in to kiss him. “I love you.”

“For ordering a bottle of wine?”

“For ordering a bottle of wine to make me happy.”

I sit back again, and he returns his hand to my knee.

“Good evening.”

I look up, and my breath catches. Standing a foot from our table is Annabelle Winters, my chef idol since college. She’s five feet tall with narrow shoulders and wide hips. Curls of wild black hair escape her white cap, flour dusts her black chef coat, and in her hands is a cutting board with a round loaf of bread.



“I understand tonight is a special occasion,” she says, a Mediterranean accent rounding the words. I tilt my head as Justin nods. “In my home country, we have a tradition: remarkable moments are celebrated by the breaking of bread. So, I made this loaf specially for you.” She sets the board on the table, wisps of steam spiraling from the golden, flaky crust. “This is pogača, the bread of my childhood and a symbol of love.”

With a small bow, she pivots away.

“That . . . that was . . . I can’t believe it . . . that was Annabelle Winters.”

Justin smiles wide, a proud grin that crinkles his cheeks.

“You told her it was a special occasion?”

“It is,” he says. “We are together.”

I look at the loaf. “Wow. Pogača. My grandmother told me about this bread. It doesn’t use eggs or milk, and it’s cooked on a hearth over an open fire.”

“It’s still warm,” he says. “It must have just come out of the oven.”

I lift it to my face and inhale deeply, warm yeast and flour filling my nose. “Mmmm.” I hold it toward him.

He takes a breath, then leans back and nods. “Well, go on . . . break bread.”

Grinning like a kid at Christmas, I grip the edges and start to twist.

“Wait!” Justin yelps, stopping me, the loaf suspended.

He falls from his chair to the deck, my leg flopping from his lap along with his napkin.

I giggle. “What are you doing?”

“Okay,” he says, now kneeling on one knee. “Keep going.”

The people at the table behind us have stopped what they were doing and are now looking at us, and I notice Annabelle

Winters beside the entrance watching as well. I look at the bread, then at Justin, then back again, and blood rushes to my face as I realize what is happening.

“Really?” I say.

He nods toward the bread.

Cheeks spread wide, I tear it in two, sending gold crumbs raining onto the tablecloth.

Poking from the steaming center is the edge of a stainless-steel cylinder.

I dig my fingers in to pry it loose and set it on the palm of my hand. An inch and a half tall and two inches in diameter, it’s engraved on top with two doves surrounded by a ring of leaves.

The woman behind us shifts for a better view.

Heart pounding, I prize off the lid. Sitting on a bed of white satin is a stunning sapphire ring, the center stone blue as the deepest ocean, a single diamond baguette on either side.

“Ava Nicole Barnes,” Justin says, his voice elevated for the audience, “keeper of my heart, guardian of my soul, and woman of my dreams, will you make me the happiest man on this earth and do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

I look at him, then back at the ring—dazzling, glittery, and blue—the sort of ring you would see on a queen or Elizabeth Taylor.

“Babe?”

“Huh?” I lift my face and realize I haven’t answered. My skin goes pink half a second before I cry, “Yes! Yes, yes, yes!” My answer instant and certain. Like recognizing my own hand, from the moment I met Justin, I knew he was the one.

The world around us erupts, people clapping and cheering as Justin stands and sweeps me into his arms. He twirls me as people slap him on the back and congratulate us.

When the brouhaha settles and we are seated again, he asks, “Do you like it? The sapphire is because you love the

ocean. And it's reclaimed, not new." He smiles. "No humans or animals were harmed in the making of this ring."

I touch his cheek. "I love it. This whole night is perfect. I was just so surprised. I really wasn't expecting it."

He takes my hands and looks deep into my eyes, gold sparks in the bronze reflecting the flickering candle on the table. "I want us to be together," he says, "always. A family."

The last word carries weight. For me because my family is everything, my foundation and my strength. For Justin, the opposite, a void of hurt he hopes to fill someday with a family of his own.

I look again at the ring, foreign on my hand. "What made you ask . . . I mean, tonight, now . . . so soon?"

"I know how much it means for your grandmother to be at your wedding."

The words are gentle but still cause an ache, the possibility of Granmama not being in my future still impossible to accept. A month ago, she was diagnosed with stage-three colon cancer, the tumor the size of a walnut. Because of its location and my grandmother's age, the doctors feel they need to shrink it to the size of a pistachio before they can operate. Since Granmama told me this, I can't pass a bag of walnuts or pistachios without crying. She's one of the most important people in the world to me, the light that's guided me all my life.

"Thank you," I say, lifting my face to his.

Behind him, the holiday garland on the railing blinks red to white.

"Something wrong?" he asks.

"No," I say. "The opposite. Something very, very right."

I squint suspiciously.

"What?" he asks.

"Walton told you."

His expression drops. “Walton hasn’t told me anything in three months.” Hurt lines the words, the falling-out between them never far from mind.

“So you’re telling me you had no idea about the marriage cake?” I ask.

“You want a wedding cake?”

“Not a wedding cake, a marriage cake.”

“Okay. You can have whatever cake you want.”

I shake my head as a buzz of pure exhilaration runs through me, certain Aphrodite or Cupid or Eros or one of the other love gods is looking down and smiling.

“Not a cake for our wedding,” I say. “The marriage cake is a quest, a tradition in my family that goes back generations. My aunt and uncle did it, and so did my grandparents.” My nerves are lit up as I think of my grandmother and how excited she will be when she hears about the proposal and also realizes the providence of him asking at this moment. “We need to retrieve an egg for a cake, and if we manage it, our marriage will be blessed.”

“A quest?” His left brow lifts, the athlete in him rising.

I look at the ring, the sapphire catching the glint of the moon. “I can’t believe how perfect the timing is.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because magnificent frigate bird eggs are only laid in December.”

## 2

**B**etter not dive with that on,” Walton says with a nod toward my ring, his expression unreadable. We are in the parking lot, the dive bag in the bed of his truck. Walton’s wet suit is on to his waist, his thick chest pale compared to his neck and hands, a hazard of being a diver.

My cheeks warm as I look at my hand and the sparkly ring. I didn’t tell Walton about the proposal. I called my grandmother right away and my parents and my aunt, but each time I picked up the phone to tell Walton, I stopped, unsure what to say, knowing he wouldn’t be happy about the news.

I’m still not entirely sure why he’s so against Justin and me being together, if it’s because he doesn’t approve of me for Justin or of Justin for me. But from the moment he found out we were dating, he’s made his opinion clear. He can barely look at me when I mention Justin’s name, and he has stopped talking to Justin altogether.

“It will end up on the ocean floor,” he says and holds out his hand.

I pull it off, and he tucks it into the Velcro pouch of the dive bag, then zips the bag and shrugs it onto his shoulder.

“We’re engaged,” I say, stating the obvious.

“I gathered by the bling.” There’s no intonation in the words, but I feel the roll of his eyes, possibly for his disapproval of us as a couple, or perhaps for the ring itself, which I admit is a lot, especially for someone who spends her days sifting through seaweed and who is notorious for losing things. My mom says I’m scatterbrained; my dad says distracted. I prefer my dad’s view on the matter. But whatever the word, the fact is I constantly misplace things, frequently retracing my steps, emptying trash bins, and calling up

restaurants to see if they have my wallet or sunglasses or phone.

Of course, Justin doesn't know that. How could he? We've only been together three months, all of it spent long distance, and in that time, marriage never came up, not once. Not that I didn't think about it, daydreaming in that fairy-tale way you do when you are newly in love, scrawling my name with his and imagining what our kids might look like. But rings never came up. If they had, I'd have told him the only ring anyone should trust me with is one tattooed on my finger.

But now he's proposed, in the most grand and romantic way, presenting me with this incredibly precious gift, not only in cost but in meaning, and had Walton not said something, it would have indeed ended up on the ocean floor.

"We're doing the marriage-cake journey," I say.

Walton's blue eyes pulse once before narrowing. "Justin agreed?"

I lower my gaze, lying to Walton never easy. "He did, but only if you agree to come along as our witness."

"That's what he said?" Skepticism pierces the words.

"Uh-huh," I answer. Though what Justin actually said was that he didn't think he could take a week off work to go on an egg hunt, which sent a jolt of panic through me, so I blurted out the idea of Walton coming along as our witness and what a great opportunity it would be for them to work out their differences. And Justin responded by saying that if Walton agreed, he'd figure out a way to make it happen. I'm fairly certain he was banking on Walton saying no.

"So, if I say no, Justin's off the hook?" Walton says, seeing right through it.

I look up, tears in my eyes. "Please, Walton, please don't say no. You know how important this is to me."

Walton knows all about the marriage cake. He's been to my grandmother's house and has read the remarkable stories in our heirloom Bible, where the journeys are recorded, over a

hundred trips completed over the past 250 years and all the marriages successful until death did them part.

Walton's gaze hardens, and I feel how angry he is at being manipulated in this way. And though I feel terrible, I also feel desperate; the quest has been a dream of mine since I was a child. My parents scoffed at the tradition, and their marriage ended in divorce, while my grandparents and my aunt and uncle did the quest and had remarkable marriages. Perhaps it's superstitious, but for me, the marriage-cake journey is real, a portent that presages a marriage's fate, as well as a blessing, a mystical spell of good fortune and protection cast over any couple that completes it.

"Fine," he says, "but only because I know how much it will mean to your grandmother."

"Thank you," I say, immense gratitude and relief flooding over me and causing the tears I was holding to leak from my eyes.

### 3

I am lying on the bed in our room at the famed Hotel Sam, a place straight out of a storybook—a brightly painted Victorian inn outside Coral Springs, Florida. I watch the wooden palm-frond fan spin over my head as I float in a puddle of bliss. Our lovemaking of a few minutes earlier was naughty and nice, like we were getting away with something, a growing swell of sexual energy having built since Justin had picked me and Walton up at the Miami airport two hours ago.

“A whole life of this,” Justin said after and leaned over to brush a kiss across my head, “of going to sleep and waking up in each other’s arms.”

“Forever,” I said, still astonished it was true and almost afraid of how quickly it had happened, like it still wasn’t quite real and could evaporate as quickly as it had formed.

“Mr. and Mrs. Puglisi,” he said, drawing circles with his finger on my shoulder.

“Mmmm,” I purred, though it’s strange each time he says it. My whole life I’ve been Ava Nicole Barnes. But in a week, after we’re married, I will be Ava Nicole Puglisi—a petite, pale, blue-eyed blonde with a very Sicilian last name.

My alarm beeps, interrupting my languidness, and I leap from the bed, tug on my sneakers, then race from the room.

One door over, I knock. “Yo, banana boy,” I say through the wood.

“Too hot to hoot,” Walton answers. The palindrome exchange has been our way of telling each other it’s time to go since we first became friends when I was a freshman and Walton was a sophomore in college.



The door opens. Walton's russet-brown curls are sticking up every which way, and his blue eyes are bright. He wears a T-shirt that advertises sardines and his favorite faded jeans. "Where's J?" he asks.

"He needed to make a call."

"So, this is it. You're finally going to meet the great Madame Charlemagne."

"I can't believe it." My voice bounces. Madame Charlemagne is a woman as renowned for her wit and charm as she is for her pastries and cakes. She hosted my aunt and uncle when they made the journey thirty years ago, and my grandparents twenty-five years before that. I was always worried I wouldn't get married in time to meet her.

As we walk down the stairs, Walton says, "The lab called."

I tense, knowing by his tone that the report wasn't what we had hoped.

"The magnesium block needs to be replaced."

This is very bad news. A month ago, we convinced Chevron to reconsider dismantling its largest abandoned rig, a behemoth platform a mile off the coast of Santa Barbara whose underwater structure has become a haven of life for an enormous wealth of sea creatures. They agreed under the condition that the rig showed no evidence of corrosion, a state reliant on the negative charge supplied by the magnesium block at its base.

"How much?" I ask.

"Ten to buy it and another ten to install it."

I shake my head. Twenty grand is an amount our floundering nonprofit doesn't have.

"We can't lose this one," I say, thinking of the sea lion cubs, precious seahorses, and thousands of other sea animals we saw swimming between the kelp-laden pylons.

Natural ocean habitats have been disappearing at an alarming rate, making accidental man-made reefs like

abandoned oil rigs a last hope for saving the fragile ocean ecosystem. And this particular one, so large and in an area where so many natural reefs have been destroyed, is especially important.

“We’ll figure it out,” Walton says, the eternal optimist. “But not right now. Right now, it’s time to make a cake.” With great flourish, he flings open the swinging doors to the hotel’s kitchen. Normally the kitchen services the restaurant, but Mondays the restaurant is closed.

Justin is already here, seated across a marble table from a woman who is definitely not Madame Charlemagne. At least six feet tall and lean as a gazelle, she has umber skin and black hair shorn close to her scalp.

“I’ll tell you what I think of marriage,” she says, laughter in her voice. “Exactly what my papa told me. Marriage is a three-ring circus. You’ve got the engagement ring, the wedding ring, and the suffer-*ring*.” She enumerates the points on her fingers as she names them, her nails long and painted chartreuse green and brilliant red for the holidays.

I laugh, and she turns, and I’m struck speechless by her beauty—her eyes are hypnotic gold green and spaced wide over extraordinary cheekbones.

“Wow,” Walton says almost silently beside me.

“I will definitely provide plenty of the third,” I say, recovering. “Hi, I’m Ava.”

She runs her eyes over me, then, with a great big smile, says, “I imagine you will.”

“Hey, babe,” Justin says. “This is Esther. Esther, my fiancée, Ava, and my best friend, Walt.”

I feel Walton tense at Justin’s use of the words *best friend*.

“Enchantée. Justin m’a tout dit sur toi,” Esther says in French, a smirk on her face as if she’s playing a game.

“Et tu as entendu de bonnes choses, non?” Walton answers back. Walton has a big brain, and learning languages is a hobby of his.

“Bien sûr!” Esther exclaims with an eyebrow lift. “Grann Gwo will be down in a minute,” she adds, reverting to English.

“Will you be joining us to make the cake?” I ask as I slide onto Justin’s lap.

He wraps his arms around my waist.

“Yes, while my grandmother still has her magic, she does not get around like she used to.”

“Oh,” I say, “you are Madame Charlemagne’s granddaughter?”

“I am.” She looks from me and Justin back to Walton. “So, there are four of us?” A mischievous grin curls her lips. “Two”—she points to me and Justin—“and two.” She points between herself and Walton. “I think perhaps we should make this more fun. A competition, oui?”

“A competition?” I repeat, my insides lighting up, always game for any sort of contest.

“Best cake wins,” Esther says. “Grann Gwo will be the judge.”

“You’re on.” I turn to Walton. “You are going *dowwwn*. You know how much I love to bake.”

Walton looks at Esther, and Esther winks, which turns Walton’s skin crimson. He turns back to me. “Put your money where your mouth is. Losers clean.”

Esther giggles with delight just as the doors to the kitchen open, and I turn to see a woman straight out of another century walk into the room—her hair steel wool gray and tied in a knot, her blue dress Victorian with a high lace collar and a dozen silk buttons on each cuff, and her posture overly erect as she shuffles toward us. Her eyes are milky and unblinking, and the overall effect is mystifying and slightly eerie, like an elegant corpse has risen from the grave.

“Oh, Madame Charlemagne,” I say, leaping off Justin’s lap. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

The woman’s wrinkles realign to crease into a smile, and she reaches out to touch my face, her fingers like crepe. “Ti

kè?” she asks in Haitian.

“Here, Grann Gwo,” Esther says, causing the woman to turn, and I realize Madame Charlemagne is blind or mostly so.

She lifts her face to the ceiling, and I watch her nose open as if sniffing the air. “Flour, sugar, chocolate, eggs, butter, pecans, coconut, molasses, and vanilla,” she announces.

“Oh!” Esther says excitedly. “Chocolate, pecan, and coconut. We are going to have some fun tonight.” She bustles around the kitchen collecting the ingredients, and I find myself staring. It is impossible not to, like a sparkly butterfly is flittering before my eyes.

“Justin?” I say when I turn my head and see him transfixed as well.

“Huh?” He blinks. “Hey, babe.”

I slide back onto his lap, and he nuzzles his nose into my neck to breathe in the remnants of our lovemaking, the secret language of our intimacy like a private conspiracy between us.

Esther sets a silver tin on the table, and I pick it up, twist off the lid, then bring the silky cocoa to my nose. “Mmmm,” I say, then hold it for Justin to smell as well.

“Wow, like how I imagine Willy Wonka’s chocolate river would smell.”

I smile at the comparison and set it back on the table, and Justin reaches past to put the lid back on.

“Ingredients are the key,” Madame Charlemagne says, setting my nerves abuzz. I’m unable to believe I’m at the legendary Hotel Sam getting baking tips from the great Madame Charlemagne. “A cake is a lot like a marriage. Both require love, patience, care, and certain essential ingredients you can’t do without.”

There’s an echo of my grandmother in her words. Granmama is a big believer that great food starts with the best ingredients.

“Like the cocoa,” Madame Charlemagne says with a nod toward the tin, and I cannot tell if she knows where it is by the

sound that was made when I set it down or by the lingering smell in the air. “It was discovered by my late husband on a trip he took to Honduras, unique and one of a kind, and while a cake can be made without it, it could never be as good.”

Esther has stopped, her gaze soft on her grandmother, and I feel a pang of empathy, knowing time has grown dear for her and Madame Charlemagne, just as it has for me and Granmama. A familiar lump forms in my chest, and I do my best to push it away.

As I grew up, my grandmother was my summer sun. My parents had big careers, so as soon as the school year ended, I was sent to Pennsylvania to live with my grandparents, three months of grand adventure as my grandmother and I explored the world and everything it had to offer. She taught me my love of cooking, the ocean, all earth’s creatures, and travel.

“Exponential!” she would exclaim whenever we did something wonderful. “One plus one is so much more than two.”

I’ve always loved that word because of it.

This summer will be the first summer we won’t take a trip together. God willing, in six months, her tumor will have shrunk enough for it to be removed, and she will be recovering.

I look at the tin of cocoa and think how much Granmama would like it, not only for its deliciousness but for the amazing story of how I came to discover it. I memorize the label, knowing it will make the perfect Christmas gift.

“Where’s the recipe?” Justin asks.

“No recipe,” Madame Charlemagne says. “Cooking is all about choices.” She turns to him. “A little of this, a little of that. Choose wisely, and you end up with something worthwhile and delicious.”

“And choose wrong?” Justin asks.

“Well, then you are in trouble.”

Madame Charlemagne smiles the same mischievous grin Esther likes to use, and I feel the shared soul between them, mettle and mirth that's been passed down from one generation to the next, and my heart sings. This place and this moment are everything I dreamed.

"I suggest you start with the butter and sugar," Madame Charlemagne says, "since the success is all about the foundation, the balance between sweetness and substance."

She shuffles away to sit in an armchair beside the door, her back straight and her ears perked, as if watching what is happening through the sounds around her.

"Where's the mixer?" Walton asks.

Walton loves gizmos and gadgets. If he had the money, he would have a kitchen full of appliances and a garage full of power tools.

Esther turns, grabs his hands, and lifts them in front of his face. "Here are your mixers, mon canard."

My French is a bit rusty, but I believe Esther just called Walton her duck. Though it doesn't really matter what she called him. She could have called him a worm, a slug, or a cow. So long as she did it while holding his hands and looking at him with those dazzling hazel eyes, Walton would be completely bewitched and ready to use his "duck mixers" for whatever Esther asked.

"Justin, grab the butter," I say, my adrenaline pumping. "And the sugar. Let's do this."

"How much butter?" he asks, holding up the slab.

I take it from him, lop off a chunk, and plop it in the bowl, then pour a heap of sugar over it. I push the bowl in front of him and hand him a wooden spoon. "Stir."

Obediently, he starts mashing.

Across from us, Esther says, "Taste," and I lift my face to see her holding a small bit of butter on her finger in front of Walton.

Walton's face pinkens, and the tips of his ears turn crimson as he looks at the pale dollop of yellow on Esther's brown finger, unsure exactly how she intends for him to do that. He reaches for it, and Esther frowns, so he blushes deeper and bends down to wrap his mouth around her finger. Beside me, Justin has stopped stirring and is staring.

"Stir!" I snap, harsher than I intend, and he turns his attention back to the bowl.

"What do you think?" Esther asks.

"Creamy," Walton answers thoughtfully. "Not like our butter at home."

"Exactly," Esther says. "So how we stir it is important."

My eyes dart to Justin, who is dutifully mashing the butter and sugar together. I grab his arm to stop him, and he looks up, clearly irritated. I dip my finger into the mixture to taste it, and it tastes fine, but across from us, Esther is cutting her butter into thin slices, then coating each with sugar.

"Roll these like cinnamon sticks," she says to Walton.

"May I ask why?" Walton asks, and I lean in, curious as well.

"It's important to aerate the butter so it is not too dense," Esther says. "The sugar creates space, and when you fold it into the butter, the air remains, making the batter light."

I stare at our unaerated, dense batter.

"Are we okay?" Justin asks.

"Fine," I answer. While Walton likes to cook, he doesn't bake, which means this is a contest between me and Esther, and I'll be darned if I'm going to lose. Granmama taught me everything she knows about baking, which means her honor is at stake. I might have gotten the butter wrong, but I'm great with proportions and knowing combinations of ingredients that work.

"Close the sugar, babe," Justin says as I reach for the pecans. I ignore him, my focus on the nuts and the cocoa and how much to use of each.

Justin reaches past and seals the sugar bag.

“If you cream the butter and sugar right,” Esther says, “the mixture will sit up tall and have peaks like meringue.”

I try to ignore her, though the words roar and repeat like a siren in my brain, and what I really want is to toss our batter in the trash and start again, but that would mean wasting food, and I really don’t believe in that. The difference is already obvious. While our mix looks like chunky peanut butter, Esther and Walton’s is smooth as buttercream.

“Babe, put the milk back in the fridge,” Justin says as I set the carton beside him.

“I’ll put it away when we’re done.”

He pushes noisily from his stool, walks around me, and returns the milk to the fridge. I ignore it, my thoughts on the tin of coffee I pulled from the pantry and whether or not to add it. The right amount will temper the sweetness. Too much, and the cake will be bitter. I decide on a teaspoon.

“What do you want me to do?” Justin asks.

*Nothing.* “Do you know how to separate egg whites?”

He looks bored and irritated, and I know his impatience will lead to shells in the batter.

“Never mind,” I say. “I’ve got it.” I go for a supportive smile, but my face is tight, and I realize by his unhappy expression that it might have come off as a patronizing smirk.

I grab the eggs, separate them quickly, add a pinch of salt, and start to whisk, hoping this extra step might compensate for the misstep with the butter.

Justin sweeps the eggshells from the table into his hand.

“Babe, leave them,” I say. “We can clean after, or they can.” I thumb my hand at Walton and Esther, who are laughing, competing in some sort of chopping contest with the pecans.

“I’m not *doing* anything, so I might as well clean up the *mess*,” he says.



I glance at the flour, cocoa, butter wrappers, dirty spoons, and bowls around us. “We’re making a cake. It’s messy.”

I can tell he disagrees, but he lets it go with only a sigh through his nose.

As I set the double boiler on the stove, I try not to be bothered by how uptight he is. I understand he likes things neat. So do I . . . *sort of*. But not when I’m in the middle of something. When you’re having fun, you should just let loose and enjoy.

“Here, hon,” I say, “taste.” I hold out my finger with a scoop of batter on it in the same way Esther did with the butter.

“It has raw egg in it,” he says, recoiling.

“Right. Of course.” I just suppress a groan and stop myself from tasting the delicious-smelling batter myself. Wiping my finger on a paper towel, I say, “Do you want to grease the pans?”

“Sure,” he answers with the enthusiasm of a slug. He pulls the tins in front of him and grabs the butter.

Meanwhile, Esther and Walton are laughing again, and I look up to see Walton unsuccessfully trying to catch pecans with his mouth as Esther tosses them across the table.

“I need to make a call,” Justin says, pushing away a half-greased tin and standing as he looks down at his phone, which is lit up with a message.

“But we’re making a cake,” I say.

Either he doesn’t hear or he isn’t listening, his brow furrowed tight as he continues to look at the screen. I pull the pans in front of me, finish greasing them, and pour in the batter.

“Okay, mon canard,” Esther says the moment I finish, “this is key—how you pour the batter is as important as how you mixed it. You need to fold it in gently so as not to undo all the love we put in by dumping it in without a thought.”

I look down at my tins, filled with batter I very unceremoniously dumped into them. My brain on fire, I dip my finger into the pan closest and taste it. *Delicious!* Esther's cake might be lighter, but it will not be tastier. Feeling better, I slide the pans into the oven and set the timer, ignoring Esther and Walton, who are using their graters to shave coconut.

"Come, mon canard," she says after she slides their cakes into the oven beside mine, and she links her arm through Walton's and leads him out the back door and into the night.

Alone, I slump to the stool and drop my face in my hands. I thought this would be so much more fun. Through the open window, I hear Esther laugh, and I shake my head against my palms.

"Not everyone can cook together."

I look up to see Madame Charlemagne in front of me. I had forgotten she was still in the kitchen. I watch as she lifts her wrinkled face and opens her nose wide. "Mmmm," she says, inhaling deeply. "There is nothing so joyous as a cake."

I silently disagree; "joyous" is the opposite of how I feel, and I'm glad Madame Charlemagne can't see my face.

"My husband and I couldn't share a kitchen," she says.

"Really?" I say, my heart heavy for how bad Justin and I were together.

"And we were married nearly seventy years. Early on, we figured out it was best not to be together in a confined space filled with knives and cleavers."

I want to smile but can't quite manage it. I was so looking forward to this day. "We were terrible at it," I mumble, and Madame Charlemagne nods.

"No marriage is perfect," she says. "And not everything you do together will work. The question is what you can live with and what you can't live without. For me, I could live with my husband not sharing my love of cooking, but I could not live with a man who did not understand my love of cooking."

I consider this. One of my greatest joys has always been cooking with other people—my mom, my grandmother, my roommates in college, Walton. But also for other people: something about cooking is a direct expression of love.

“You and Justin are different,” Madame Charlemagne goes on, “which is good.”

I sniffle and realize I’m crying.

“It’s only a cake,” Madame Charlemagne says. “Nothing but a few ingredients mixed in a pan to make something delicious. You and Justin, you are like butter and sugar.”

“Fatty and sweet?”

Madame Charlemagne smiles. “More together than apart.”

“Oh,” I say, thinking that’s a much better way to look at it.

“And when you are together is when the magic happens.”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks, realizing she’s right. Me and Justin, we make each other better.

“It was nice meeting you,” Madame Charlemagne says. “I’m going to bed.”

“But you can’t. You’re supposed to be the judge.”

“You lose,” Madame Charlemagne says matter-of-factly. “My granddaughter is the best baker I know, and you did not put air in your butter.”

She shuffles away, and with a deep sigh, I push to my feet and begin to clean. As I wash the dishes, I think about what Madame Charlemagne said about me being sugar and Justin being butter and idly wonder what that makes Walton.

*Flour*, I think, the answer certain—solid and reliable, an ingredient you can’t do without and that you only really notice when it’s gone.

## 4

The first forkful of Esther and Walton's cake causes my eyes to roll up in my head and a moan to escape. It's the lightest, moistest cake I've ever tasted—a chocolate-pecan explosion followed by a hint of coconut, then a lingering of vanilla. I take another bite, then another, my mood lightening with each forkful, finding it simply impossible to be unhappy when I am eating something so delicious.

When I'm done, I cut two more slices, grab the carton of milk from the fridge, and race up the stairs. Justin needs to taste this—the greatest chocolate cake in the world.

He is on the bed, his computer on his lap and a deep frown on his face.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He paints on a false smile. "Yeah, good."

He's lying; something's up with his company's merger, which we are counting on for him to be able to transfer to California. But I let it go. Now is the time for cake. I hand him a plate, pour us each a glass of milk, then climb on the bed beside him.

"Man, this is good," he exclaims around his first mouthful.

"I know. Right?" I fork another delicious bite into my mouth. "Esther's a genius."

"You're a genius," he says, taking the hand I'm not holding the fork with. "Sorry about not staying to help with the cake." He brushes a kiss across my knuckles, then freezes. Pulling my hand away, he looks at it. "Where's your ring?"

I stare at my naked finger, the question floating. *Where's my ring?*

"Oh," I say, heart screaming but my voice surprisingly calm. "I took it off so it wouldn't get frosting on it." I leap from the bed. "I just forgot to put it back on."

I race from the room, down the stairs, and into the kitchen and charge straight for the sink. I stare at the drain, the holes of which are just large enough for a ring to fall through.

I text Walton: S.O.S. I'm an idiot!!! I attach a photo of my bare left hand, then another of the sink drain.

**You r an idiot. On my way.**

Five minutes later, he walks through the doors, Esther at his side and his head bald.

"You're bald," I say, staring at his glowing scalp, his ruddy face a startling contrast.

"Baldness is a sign of virility," Esther says, her mischievous grin twitching.

"I lost a bet," Walton says.

Esther smirks wider. "I'll get the tool kit." She saunters away, her perfect behind swaying in her painted-on jeans.

"Sorry," I mumble, thinking I might have interrupted something more than head shaving.

Walton waves me off and bends down to look beneath the sink. "There's a trap. It should be fine."

But it's not fine. In less than a week, I've almost lost my ring twice.

He straightens.

"What was the bet?" I ask, holding back a smile at the white circle on his head where his hair was.

"I told Esther your cake would win."

"You bet on me?" I say, stunned.

"Hence the bald head." He runs his hand over it as Esther walks in holding an enormous metal toolbox.

“Wrench, wench,” Walton commands, holding out his hand like a surgeon. Esther rummages through the trays, then slaps the tool into his palm, and a private look passes between them that causes something ugly to well inside me.

Surprised and angry at my reaction, I push it away. Walton deserves to be flirted with, and Esther is awesome—beautiful, funny, kind . . . a wonderful baker, granddaughter to the amazing Madame Charlemagne.

But even as I slide my rescued ring back on my finger, gushing apologies and my gratitude, the feeling remains, stubborn and disturbingly strong.

## 5

**W**e are at the end of the Broad River trail in the Everglades National Park at a place called Camp Lonesome.

“You sure this is right?” Justin asks, shrugging off his pack to reveal a large swath of sweat down his back. When we started at daybreak, it was already eighty degrees, and the temperature has steadily crept up since. Now, it is late afternoon and sweltering.

Walton also drops his pack, along with my own. The boys took over carrying my load when it became clear I was struggling. Since puberty, I have suffered debilitating migraines, and unfortunately, humidity is a trigger. I managed to make it here and have put on a brave front, lying that I’m fine so Justin will not insist we turn back. But the truth is I’m close to collapse, my head pounding like a jackhammer is trying to chisel through my skull and my stomach roiling dangerously.

“Ava, rest,” Walton says, pointing to a picnic table near the edge of the marsh.

I stagger to the bench and collapse onto it, then, realizing that’s still not enough, lie down and drape my arm over my eyes.

“Babe?” Justin says, worry in his voice.

“I’m fine. I just need a minute.”

I listen as Walton and Justin set up the tent, both of them cussing and swatting the mosquitoes that have rallied in the late-afternoon heat. My own flesh is also being feasted on, but I’m too done in to care.

“Why didn’t she tell me she gets migraines?” Justin hisses, thinking I can’t hear. But the breeze carries his words, and my hearing has always been exceptional.

“Because you’ve known each other all of five minutes,” Walton says.

“Walt, I get you’re mad.” A smack of skin on skin. “Damn mosquitoes.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. But it’s not my fault.”

“Really? Which part? Asking her out when I specifically told you not to? Or asking her to marry you before she really knows you?”

I tense.

“She does know me. She knows me better than anyone’s ever known me in my life.”

I nod. It’s true. From the moment we met, I’ve felt like our souls were connected.

“Yeah. So she knows about your past?”

My ears burn. Though I do. For three months, Justin and I have spent endless hours on the phone, discussing his life, my life, our favorite movies, music, colors, ice cream flavors, brands of gum, mouthwash, toothpaste.

“She knows about your *conquest list*?” Walton says.

*Conquest list?*

“That was in high school.”

While Justin and I have talked about almost everything, we’ve avoided the subject of our past dating lives, knowing nothing good would come from it. I assumed he dated lots of women. After all, he’s good looking and successful, but knowing the specifics would only lead to jealousy, insecurity, and pain.

*But a conquest list?* Even if it was high school, the idea is distinctly unsettling and definitely goes against my impression



of him.

“Walt, this isn’t some fling,” Justin says, frustration in his voice, and I immediately feel bad about my reaction. After all, I have a horrible history when it comes to past relationships—a long string of short-lived romances that shows an extraordinary lack of discernment for both competence and moral character.

“So what is it, J? What’s your angle? Money?”

My breath catches, and my whole body tenses.

“Hand me that stake,” Walton says before Justin can answer.

Justin slaps his skin again. “This place is a hellhole.”

“It’s a marsh. The mosquitoes belong here; we don’t.”

“I agree with that,” Justin says. “I didn’t even know she had money when I met her.”

“But you did when you asked her to marry you,” Walton accuses. “Pull that corner tighter. Use a rock to pound it in.”

I hear the rock slamming into the stake. My muscles are coiled. My family’s money is like an albatross that’s dangled around my neck since I discovered my grandmother was rich at the tender age of six, when a boy in my class threw mud at me and told me my servants could clean it up. I didn’t have servants. I had my mom and my dad. But when I got home and told my dad what had happened, he explained Granmama had a lot of money and that unfortunately brought with it a good deal of grief along with some unwarranted spite. I’ve hated that part of our lives since.

“I don’t care about her money,” Justin says when the pounding stops. “I care about her.”

“So why the rush?” Walton shoots back.

*Because of Granmama.* Love, pure and simple—his love for me and my love for my grandmother.

But that’s not what Justin says. Instead, his voice low and thick with emotion, he says, “Because, Walt, she’s the one.

Look, I know you're pissed and you want me to apologize, but I can't. It wouldn't be sincere." He slaps his skin again. "Asking Ava out was the single greatest decision of my life. And asking her to marry me was the second."

It's all I can do to remain where I am and not leap up and tell him I feel the same.

"I guess we'll see," Walton says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means the marriage-cake quest has never been wrong."

## 6

Walton and I are standing at the edge of the marl prairie, a reedy marsh with rivulets of water winding through it that lead to the frigate bird nesting grounds. Early-morning mist drifts across the surface, making it almost heavenly. The sun is still below the horizon and the humidity only half what it was last night, and though my head still pounds, I no longer feel on the verge of collapse. Justin suggested several times, last night and this morning, that we turn around, and though he says it's because he's worried about me, I think it might be more that he is worried about the merger, so I am determined to make it seem as if I'm fine.

At the moment, he is on the trail searching for cell reception.

I smile at Walton. "You look good bald. Very Howie Mandel."

"Really? I don't get Vin Diesel, or the Rock, or at least Bruce Willis?"

"Fine. Bruce Willis." I nod at his head. "Well, Mr. Die Hard, you might want to put on a hat; looks like your noggin's getting sunburned."

He pulls a Bass Pro Shops cap from the back pocket of his cargo shorts and puts it on. "Better?"

I nod. *Much*, I think. *Almost good looking . . . no . . . actually good looking.*

The thought is surprising. Without his russet curls, which exaggerate the size of his head and emphasize his receding hairline, Walton is attractive—strong jawed and rugged, a lot like his dad—and I understand why Esther might have been flirting.

He points to my ring. “Yeah, well, Princess Di, you might want to tuck that trinket away so you don’t lose it in the marsh.”

My cheeks burn as I pull it off and zip it in the side pocket of my hiking pants. “Thanks again for the other night.”

He shrugs. Since he rescued my ring from the sink trap, my hand’s been in a clench, my fear of losing it an underlying current of constant stress. And yet, had Walton not just said something, I never would have thought to take it off before we went slogging through a swamp.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Walton says.

“A reef.”

“Exactly! Eerie but peaceful, and also like we don’t belong.”

“Interlopers for sure,” I say, happy to be sharing this moment with him. “Did Chevron get back to you?”

“They did. It’s not good. They’ll reimburse us, but only if the board says yes to preserving the rig, which they’re not going to decide until they convene next month.”

I sigh out heavily, wondering if we should send a Hail Mary to our supporters asking for emergency donations. I doubt it will work, but it might be worth a try.

“Hey, I think that’s our guide,” Walton says, and I swivel my head and squint into the mist at a boat motoring toward us with a single person at the rudder. I peer closer at the long purple hair and curvy figure and think the driver is not at all what I pictured when my grandmother told me a guide would be meeting us to take us to the nesting grounds.

When the boat is twenty yards from shore, the driver cuts the motor and lifts the rudder, and the boat coasts to a stop a few feet from the beach. Walton rushes forward and tugs it ashore.

“Thanks.” The woman is young, perhaps twenty, her hair the color of purple coral and her eyes onyx.

“I’m Aylan,” she says, “your ‘guide.’” She makes quote marks around her face. “You must be Ava, and I assume one of these men is your groom-to-be?” She nods toward Walton, then Justin, who has just walked up. “Or maybe you’re still deciding?” She says it deadpan, and I like her immediately, her dry humor reminding me of my dad.

Walton and Justin stand dumbfounded, and I realize it’s because she is pretty, edgy cool. I’ve always admired girls who can carry off funk, mostly because it’s not something you can fake. You either have it or you don’t, and Aylan—with her wild hair, bewitching eyes, cutoff jeans, and combat boots—has it in spades.

“Justin,” Justin says, stepping forward. “Humble fiancé at your service.”

“Walton,” Walton says, lifting his hand in a wave. “Marriage-cake-expedition witness.”

“You and the gods,” Aylan says. “Good company.”

We load into the small boat, Aylan at the motor, Walton across from her, and me and Justin at the bow. The day has heated up, and the air is thick, larded with steam and the cloying smell of moss and wet leaves. We are coated with insect repellent and sun lotion, and my nose tickles with all the competing scents.

Aylan drives carefully, expertly maneuvering through the winding canals of open water, eyes alert to avoid the tangles of roots that could easily snag the propeller.

I lean my head on Justin’s shoulder, close my eyes, and allow myself to drift to the peaceful sounds around us—the purr of the motor, the million birds trilling from the giant cypresses that sprout like weeds from the water, and the soft conversation and laughter between Aylan and Walton, who seem to be getting on like wildfire—the world serene, like we are floating through a dream.

I think of our wedding in four days—my dress, the flowers, my vows. My mom and grandmother are arranging everything, a small affair in the old stone millhouse at the edge

of Granmama's property, a holiday wedding with thousands of sparkling lights, poinsettia flowers, and pine garlands wrapped around the rafters. My family will be there, along with a few childhood friends, Justin's partner, and Walton's parents, who are flying in from Idaho.

After the wedding, Justin and I will head to New York so Justin can finalize the merger, and then we will return to California, where we will begin the search for our first home. The idea makes me giddy, and I get lost in the idea of a small house with a yard so we can have a garden and a dog.

Walton laughs, and my thoughts shift, wondering about the rig and if, with this last blow, it might be time to consider hanging up our fins. After all, Justin and I are going to be married, which means I can no longer simply pick up on a whim and fly off to some faraway place to try and save a reef. And Walton needs to start thinking about his future as well. He's twenty-seven, and he only went into this because of me and is completely broke because of it.

"I think we should get a boat," Justin says, jostling me from my thoughts.

"A boat?"

"Yeah. Not a boat like this but a sailboat. What do you think?"

"Do you sail?" I ask, knowing he grew up in Idaho.

"I could learn."

"Boats are expensive."

He shrugs.

I pull away and turn to face him. "You know I'm poor? I work for a nonprofit, and it really doesn't make any money."

"True. But someday we're going to have money." He says it casually, like it's no big deal, but every follicle on my skin bristles, my well-honed instinct for people looking to exploit the Bennett wealth always on high alert.

Carefully, I say, "Perhaps at some point we might be able to afford it, but I don't think that's going to be for a while."

My heart pulses out of rhythm, thoughts of my grandmother's money always creating strange vertigo, the distinct feeling that the fortune is also tied to misfortune and that considering it in regard to myself is akin to wishing ill on the people I love. Since I graduated college, I've proudly stood on my own two penniless feet, and as far as I'm concerned, I intend to continue to do so.

"You okay?" Justin asks, looking at me peculiarly.

"Yeah, good," I say, leaning my elbows on my knees and rubbing my temples between my fingers, my headache returned and throbbing.

"Do you see him?" Aylan says.

I lift my face to look where she's pointing, and it takes a moment, but then I see it, a snout and pair of eyes floating just above the water.

"Alligator," Aylan says. "Round nose and no grinning teeth. That's how you know it's not a croc."

"Only place in the world where the two coexist," Walton says, and Aylan cocks her head and smiles, impressed and perhaps a bit smitten that he knows such a thing. Of course, Walton knows a little about a lot of things, and a lot about a few things. It's one of the things I've always liked best about him, his fascination with the minutiae of the world that make life infinitely interesting.

"Alligators you don't have to worry about," Aylan says, "too small and timid to bother with people. But crocs, they're another story. Definitely want to steer clear of their turf if you know what's good for you."

"Look, babe, an otter," Justin says, and I look over the rail to see a sleek brown body swimming past. Justin wraps his arm around my shoulder and kisses the side of my head. "This is amazing," he says. "I'm glad we decided to do it."

And I realize how ridiculous I'm being. The lull of the boat and the disturbing conversation I overheard between him and Walton last night twisting things in my head. Justin's still

Justin, and I'm still me, our love as rooted as the giant cypresses around us.

Walton has his camera out and is snapping photos. Suddenly, he stops. "There," he says, pointing.

I look with him to see a crude nest of pale sticks in a bramble near the shore, and my pulse ticks up a notch. It is definitely a frigate bird nest, a female standing guard, her sleek black body with its bright-white chest perched on the edge.

I would feel bad for the mother that we are looking to steal her egg, except the frigate bird is a cruel and plentiful bird, known for cannibalizing the chicks of other birds, some on the endangered species list, so by taking her egg, we are actually sparing hundreds of other lives.

"We should wait," Aylan says, "find a nest that's closer."

"Nonsense," Justin says, waving off her concern. "That one's right there. We get the egg, and we're done."

I hear the impatience in his voice and know it's because he's anxious to get back to civilization and the call he's so worried about.

"J, it's at least fifty yards of reedy marsh, not 'right there,'" Walton says. "I think we should listen to Aylan."

But Justin has already pulled off his shirt and is emptying his pockets.

I stand, ready to do the same, then waver as my head spins.

"Babe, I've got this," Justin says, steadying me and guiding me back to the bench. "One magnificent frigate bird egg coming up."

Walton is frowning, but his shirt is also off, and the padded cooler we brought to stow the egg is strapped across his chest.

"Carpe diem," Justin says with a great big grin.



“Let’s make our lives extraordinary,” Walton answers, a sly smile crossing his face as their eyes connect, something brotherly passing between them that lets me know the exchange is sacred and has been used many times before.

Justin’s jaw twitches, emotions rising, and Walton offers a small nod. And suddenly, I’m incredibly grateful for this journey, knowing that without it, Walton might never have witnessed how true our love is and forgiven Justin for his betrayal.

They slide over the rail into the mossy water, sinking to their chests, then wade with their arms above the surface toward the shore.

I glance sideways at Aylan to see a worried look on her face and her eyes scanning the water. I turn and scan as well, sensing danger but not entirely sure what I’m looking for.

Justin and Walton are halfway to the shore when something moves in the reeds on Justin’s left and my heart jumps.

“Otter,” Aylan says, her voice low.

It takes a long time for them to make their way through the reeds, each step a slog as the mire below pulls at their boots and the jagged stalks create a gauntlet they need to carefully pick their way through.

“Just like old times,” Justin says.

“Yep, you stepping in a pile of bleep, and me making sure you find your way out of it,” Walton answers.

A great blue heron swoops close, startling me, and I gasp; then, with a deep, slow inhale, I return to scanning, watching, and waiting for a swamp creature to rise from the water and swallow Walton and Justin whole.

When Walton’s a yard from the nest, the mother bird notices and flaps her wings and caws. Justin falls back as Walton charges, his arms wide and waving.

The bird flees, and Walton closes the distance. I watch as he reaches into the nest, then turns with a white egg held high

in his hand.

I cheer, while Aylan hisses, “Thank Elvis. Now, get your butts back here.”

Walton swaddles the egg in Bubble Wrap, places it in the cooler, then slings the strap back over his neck.

“Justin! Right!” Aylan screeches, causing my heart to jump and my face to snap sideways. Justin spins, then freezes when he sees the pair of eyes and snout slithering toward him, narrower and pointier than a gator’s.

Everything else happens quickly but in slow motion. Justin launches himself sideways as Walton hurls himself back into the water, disappearing in a splash as he and the crocodile crash beneath the surface. Half a second later, Walton pops up, flailing to get to his feet as the croc spins toward him, his wide jaws opening.

I whimper as I wait for the world to end, but when the beast’s teeth snap shut, they clamp only air, the crocodile’s body changing direction as he’s knocked sideways, Justin falling and then screaming as he pops to his feet, “Run!”

He and Walton race for the boat, half swimming, half running, no longer concerned about the reeds or the slashes and gashes being inflicted along the way. Aylan drives straight toward them, the propeller grinding as it tangles on the stalks below.

Justin gets to us first and launches himself onto the rail. I grab hold of his shoulders to help him, but he slips from my grasp. Terrified, I reach into the water and grab hold of his waistband. I tug with all my might, and we topple into the boat. He rebounds instantly, popping to his knees, and then, with superhuman strength, hauls Walton aboard as well.

The three of us lie in a tangle of bodies and limbs, speechless and stunned, until Justin starts to giggle, and then Walton laughs as well, and in the next second, all four of us are laughing, cracking up in a fit of hysteria, until I am crying, tears streaming down my face as I pound on Justin’s chest, and then we are kissing as tears and mucus continue to leak.

“I’m okay,” he mumbles. “Babe, I’m fine.”

I pull away to confirm it. His right cheek is scratched, as are his arms and legs, and a large welt is forming on his right forearm, but when I count his limbs and fingers, all of them are there.

“Really,” he says. Then he twitches his head to the side. “Looks like Walt’s okay as well.”

I follow his glance to see Walton a few feet away, his arm around Aylan, who is crying as well.

## 7

I am resting inside the tent while Aylan and Walton cook dinner outside and Justin is off still trying to find a bar of reception to make his vital call. Walton and Aylan have been talking since we got back, easy conversation and frequent spits of laughter. It stuns me as I listen. It's like they've known each other forever, though they only met this morning.

*Like me and Justin, I think. Instant and right.*

“You know what getting the egg is about?” Aylan asks. Her voice is raspy, distinct like the rest of her, low and melodic like running water over rocks.

“Devotion?” Walton says, and I nod, thinking that's right, a test of mettle to see how far two people will go for each other.

“No?” he asks, and I imagine Aylan has shaken her head.

“Friendship,” she says. “It's a tradition passed on from my family to Ava's a long, long time ago.”

I smile as I think of the story my grandmother told me of how the marriage cake began. A young couple—the woman from a wealthy British family, and the man an infantryman in the Spanish Army—declared their love and said they intended to marry. The bride's grandmother had her reservations, the man's low station bringing into question his intentions. A tradesman who sold goods to the grandmother suggested she do what his family did and send the groom-to-be on a mission to retrieve a frigate bird egg in the marshes as a way to prove his worthiness.

The grandmother cleverly changed the idea to include the couple doing it together and then needing to use the egg to

make a cake, knowing the young man in question had plenty of valor but far less certain about his temperament.

They failed. Granmama chuckles each time she tells this part of the story. “The man had no problem facing a swamp of razor-toothed reptiles but couldn’t hold his temper for a single hour in the kitchen with his beloved.”

A year later, the woman attempted the quest again with a different man, and they passed with flying colors. They were married until her death fifty-three years later. The couple were my grandmother’s great-great-great-grandparents.

“Really, friendship?” Walton says. “How do you figure?”

“It’s a test of chivalry and honor,” Aylan says. “But to another. It’s why there’s a witness. It’s easy to be loyal to family or your wife-to-be, but to be a friend under any and all trials, that is the true mark of character.”

“Hmmm,” Walton says thoughtfully. “Well, J definitely proved that today.”

I nod, my heart swelling with how brave he was.

“I’m jealous,” she says.

“Of almost being a crocodile’s dinner?”

“Of having a friend like you, one willing to climb out of a boat knowing it was the wrong thing to do.”

“It goes both ways,” Walton says. “J would have done the same for me.”

After that, there is silence, and I imagine them holding hands and looking at the night sky or maybe even kissing. Only a day of knowing each other, yet something undeniable is between them, blue and magnetic, obvious to anyone who is near.

And unlike the other night with Esther, there’s no ugly feeling at all, and I wonder if it’s because he and Aylan seem so right. In all the time I’ve known Walton, he’s never been serious about anyone. But with Aylan, he is nervous. I hear it in his voice, like he doesn’t want to say the wrong thing or

blow it, making me cringe and smile and root for him all at the same time.

Justin walks into the tent.

“Hey, were you able to find reception?” I ask.

He shakes his head and settles beside me with a wince. I touch his arm beneath the welt, which has now formed into a hard knot with a bruise around it.

“The egg made it,” he says.

I shrug. I don’t care. Since the crocodile appeared, I haven’t thought about the egg or the marriage cake once. All I want is to go home, get married, and start our life. I love Justin, and he loves me, and I don’t need a frigate bird egg or marriage cake to prove it.

He pulls me close, and I lay my head on his chest, his strong heart thrumming against my ear.

“Oh no,” he says. “I think Walt is telling Aylan the scuba joke.”

*Why do scuba divers fall backward off the boat? Because if they fell forward, they’d still be in the boat.*

Walton loves that joke.

Aylan laughs.

“Wow, I think she might be the one,” Justin says. “Any girl who likes that joke is definitely Walt’s soul mate.” He sighs out contentedly and strokes my arm. “See, babe, look at that—the quest is turning out okay. We got our egg. I fixed things with Walt. And Walt found a girl who actually thinks he’s funny.” Tenderly, he brushes a kiss across my hair. “Now, all that’s left is to make the cake and start our bliss-promised life.”

I close my eyes, the marriage-cake prophecy in my head: *Return triumphant, your fate assured, to eternal happiness evermore.*

## 8

**W**e've made it to our hotel in Miami and are waiting for our rooms to be ready. Aylan spared us the hike back by motoring us through the marsh to the park entrance. I threw up twice along the way, the thick dampness causing my migraine to return with a vengeance.

We stopped at a local clinic, where Walton got a particularly deep gash on his arm stitched and I was given a sumatriptan injection. It helped, and now my headache is only half as bad, like a throbbing hangover instead of a grenade explosion in my brain.

I look at my pack on the ground beside me, the egg stowed safely inside, and try to be happy, my dream since childhood fulfilled. But instead, what I actually feel is somehow let down and unable to shake the feeling I am missing something.

Perhaps I'm just tired. It's been a long few days. But each time I think of what we've done, my thought is: *What was the point?* We hiked to a marsh, retrieved an egg from a nest, and brought it back. Yes, there was a crocodile, but even that feels flat—more anecdote than metamorphic event.

I suppose I should be grateful, relieved we accomplished it so easily, but I feel more like a boxer who spent her whole life training for a title match only to discover her opponent dropped dead the night before the fight. I expected more, to have some sort of epiphany where the secret of life was revealed, or at the very least to gain some sort of insight or clarity.

I rub my temples between my fingers. Tomorrow we go home. The day after, Justin and I will make the cake. And the following day, we will be married. All of it ordained by the

mystic confectionary legend of my ancestors, my grandmother there to witness it, exactly as I've always wanted.

I look up to watch Walton playing soccer with a group of local kids across the street. Leave it to Walton to make friends and insert himself into a game. He laughs as a boy nearly his height steals the ball by kicking it against Walton's large foot.

"No fair!" Walton says, still laughing as he races after him.

A hundred yards away, Justin talks on the phone. He's been making calls since his cell picked up service just outside the park. He glances over with a look of apology, offers a thumbs-up, and I give a supportive smile back.

Walton laughs again, and I look up to see a little girl hanging on his leg. He carries her along as he chases after the ball, the little girl giggling hysterically.

"Are the rooms ready yet?" Justin yells over, his hand covering the mouthpiece of his phone.

I glance at my watch. Check-in is at noon, and it's only eleven thirty.

"Still a few more minutes," I say.

Justin gives an irritated frown, then returns to his call, and I return to watching the game. The tall boy is now taunting Walton, dribbling the ball around him as Walton tries to get a boot on it.

I stand and wipe the dust off my behind. "This is embarrassing," I say. "Walton, play goalie." I point to the cones set up to my left.

The girl who has been hanging on Walton bounds forward. She has wide gray eyes, spindly legs, and long black hair held back with a Santa-print headband. "I'm on your team," she announces with a great big smile, and I hold out my hand for a high five.

The teams split up from there, five players on each, Walton tending the single goal.



I haven't played in years, not since college, but my skills return quickly, and I lose myself in the joy of it, my headache fading with the rush. Walton does a decent job defending the goal, except when the little girl shoots; then he misses every time, and because of that, my team wins.

"You're such a softy," I say, nudging his shoulder as we walk back toward the hotel.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Elena had a killer shot."

"Hey," Justin says, walking toward us, a tense look on his face.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"I'm going to see if I can get an earlier flight home."

"Yeah . . . okay." I try not to sound disappointed. Tonight is the last night of the journey, and I was looking forward to celebrating. We have reservations at a restaurant known for its Cuban tapas, and Aylan was going to join us.

Justin hoists his pack from beside the door.

"Hey," I say. "Where's my pack?" I look at the empty spot beside the steps where I left it. "Did you take it inside?"

"I was on the phone," Justin says.

"It was right here," I say.

"The egg?" Walton says, alarm in his voice, and a wave of dread washes over me.

"You lost the egg?" Justin says.

"I didn't *lose* it. Someone *took* it."

He looks at the spot where I left my pack. "You left your pack beside the road?"

I did. I left it beside the steps, right where someone could take it.

"So, now you've lost the egg *and* your ring," he accuses, the words like a slap that causes me to rear back as I lift my left hand, which is in fact bare.

I open my mouth to explain the ring is in my pocket, but Justin gets there first. “Only someone who grew up rich could be so careless.”

I blanch with the second blow as Walton says, “J . . . ,” warning in his voice.

“Stay out of it!” Justin snaps. “This is none of your business.” He runs his hand hard through his hair. “I need to get a flight home. I need to get back to my life.”

He marches away, and Walton hurries after him while I stand frozen. Justin has never spoken to me that way. He’s never even uttered a harsh word.

“J,” Walton says when he catches up. “If we leave now, just you and me, we can make it to the marsh by sunset.”

Justin shakes his head, but Walton persists. “You saw the nests that were just a little farther from the one we poached. We can grab an egg and be back in time for our flight in the morning.”

I step toward them. “No,” I say. “I’m the one who lost the egg. I should be the one who goes back.”

“No!” they both say together.

Justin takes a deep breath, turns, and sets his hands on my shoulders. “Babe, it’s an egg. The cake will taste the same whether we use an egg from a nest in the Everglades or from the grocer down the street.”

And though I nod, a siren blares in my head, telling me *this* is the test. But how can I say that? It’s illogical and superstitious, and like he said, it’s only an egg—slightly larger than a hen’s egg and with no mystical or magical properties except the crazy notion that retrieving it means something.

“I need to call the airline.” He kisses the top of my head and walks away to make his call.

“Justin,” I say, my voice cracking.

He turns.

“I’m sorry.”

I see a softening and think he might turn back, perhaps apologize as well. Instead, he says, “That ring was special,” and continues on his way.

Walton steps beside me. “He’s just stressed.”

“Do you think I’m careless?”

“I think you’re you.”

“Which means what?”

“Which means, rich or poor, you can’t help but get lost in the things you do.”

“But is it because I’m spoiled?”

“You’re the least spoiled person I know. You’d give your last slice of bread to someone who was hungrier than you.”

I watch Justin pacing, his concern solely on getting home, and something hot rises inside me because Walton’s right: while I may be a lot of things, spoiled is not one of them. Unzipping the side pocket of my pants, I pull out the ring, grab Walton’s hand, and press it into his palm. “This will pay for the magnesium.”

“Ava—” Walton starts, his head shaking.

I keep my hands gripped around his. “He thinks I lost it,” I say. “And I *will* lose it. You know I will. At least this way it does some good.”

“What’s going on?” Justin says, reappearing suddenly, his eyes on our clasped hands.

Walton snatches his hand away, the ring fisted in his palm, and panic races through me, terror he will tell Justin what I’ve done.

“I was telling Ava it’s going to be okay,” Walton says, flooding me with relief.

“I’m not the bad guy here,” Justin says. “I got the egg. I did it.”

I nod. He did. He took time off work, came with me on this cockamamie excursion, almost got mauled by a crocodile,

and got the egg. And then I lost it.

Tears leak from my eyes, and I snivel, unable to believe this is happening. Only ten minutes before, everything was fine. We had the egg, and Justin and I were on our way to happily ever after. And now, in less time than it takes to brew a pot of coffee, all of it's come undone.

"J," Walton says calmly, the ring no longer in his hand, "you're so close. You need to finish."

"It's an egg," Justin says.

"It's not," Walton says. "You know it's not."

"Justin," I say, my eyes pleading, hoping he will realize the precipice we're on and take a step back.

"If you get the egg," Walton goes on, "it's done, and you'll have accomplished something wonderful."

I nod, incredibly grateful Walton recognizes the importance and is rooting for us, earnestly trying to help.

"For the rest of your lives," he says, "you will *know* your marriage was meant to be."

Justin's head snaps to Walton's, and his eyes flash.

Instantly, Walton realizes his mistake and opens his mouth to take it back or say something to amend it, but Justin beats him to it. "*I* know our marriage is meant to be," he snarls.

Walton drops his eyes, and for a long moment, that is how we remain—me sniveling, Walton looking at the ground, and Justin stewing in anger.

Finally, he looks from Walton to me, and with his face set in an expression I don't recognize, he asks, "Babe, this is still important to you?"

I nod, tears continuing to spill from my eyes and my pulse pinging all over the place.

"Fine. If it's important to you, it's important to me. So, I promise, we will have our egg."

## 9

Oh,” my mom says, bouncing in place with her hands held to her lips and her eyes brimming with tears.

“Don’t start crying yet,” I say. “The wedding’s not for an hour.”

“You’re just so . . . so . . . so . . .”

“Yes, she is stunning,” Granmama says. Despite her frailness from the chemotherapy, she is still a force, her blue eyes sparking and her posture ramrod straight. She wears a fashionable wig in shimmering gold, close to her natural color, and a dress the color of violets. She is “radiant,” as Granpapa used to say.

Aunt Nina beams at me as she hugs my mom. “You’re a lovely bride.”

“So beautiful,” my mom echoes. “And the day so perfect, a white wedding, just as you always dreamed.”

It’s true; as if again the love gods were smiling down, they delivered a holiday storm in the wee hours of the morning, and I woke up to the world blanketed in white.

Granmama takes my hands. With her short heels and my tall ones, we are almost the same height, and it’s like looking in a magic mirror of time, her eyes a direct reflection of my own. “You’re sure about this?” she asks.

I start at the question. “We did the quest,” I say, half statement, half question, unsure how she can ask such a thing when we proved it.

Last night, Justin arrived to a hero’s welcome, frigate bird egg in hand. After dinner, we were ushered away to make the cake, and it was a perfect ending to the journey, baking in

Granmama's kitchen like stepping into the best memories of my childhood. The cake turned out brilliant, and the only disappointing part of the evening was the news that Walton wouldn't be at the wedding, the urgency of replacing the magnesium block forcing him to return home.

"I can't believe we're having a marriage-cake wedding after all these years," Aunt Nina says. "It's been so long since anyone's done the quest."

"I'm going to check on the food," my mom says, mention of the marriage cake a sore reminder of her failed marriage and the mistake she made as a young woman when she dismissed the tradition as illogical hogwash.

Aunt Nina goes with her, leaving me and Granmama alone.

"What?" I say, as the circumspect look is still on her face.

"Nothing," she says, then circles me, fretting over my dress—a strapless satin Vera Wang with a long train that bustles into a ripple of pleats. She straightens the bow in the back. "It's only a cake," she says as she bends to brush a speck of dust from the skirt.

The words—an exact echo of Madame Charlemagne's—send a shiver down my spine followed by a flash of anger.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snap. "What is it you don't like about him? He's funny, smart, successful, good looking. He got the egg . . . twice!"

"I never said I didn't like him." She straightens, and her steely blue gaze locks on mine. "I just want to be sure you're certain."

"Very," I say. "I've never been more certain of anything in my life."

To emphasize the point, I snatch Justin's tuxedo, which has been freshly steamed, from the closet door and thrust it at her. "Please bring this to him."

She touches my face gently before taking it. "You are a beautiful bride."

As she turns, I notice a yellow dry cleaning tag fluttering from the sleeve.

“Hold on.”

As I pull it off, my eyes catch on the number in the corner.

“Everything okay?” Granmama asks.

Justin has a distinct way of writing his nines. He writes them like a comma, a single swoop that starts at the center and wraps around.

“Ava?”

I blink several times, trying to make sense of it—Justin in New York picking up his tuxedo on the same day he was in the Everglades getting our second egg. His words resound in my head: . . . *I promise, we will have our egg.*

*We. Will. Have. Our. Egg.*

And I realize he never actually promised he would be the one to get it.

# 10

I've had two days with the truth, to get past the shock of what happened and try to make peace with it—Justin no longer in my life; our wedding canceled; the future I dreamed of gone—two days of not leaving my bed and staring at the ceiling, replaying what happened again and again in my head.

Beyond the hurt and shock, the part I couldn't make sense of was Walton. Why he agreed to be part of it. But then, this morning, the envelope arrived—inside, a small satin purse with the ring and a one-line note that said: *Tell him the truth.*

For a long time, I turned the ring in my hand, staring at the sapphire and running the puzzle through my head. Until finally, it began to make sense, not entirely, but a little. Walton never intended to use the ring to pay for the magnesium block, but he also didn't want to betray me to Justin and possibly derail the wedding. So he said nothing and let things play out as they would. Then he and Justin made some sort of deal for Walton to return to the marsh alone for the egg while Justin went back to New York.

I still don't understand why Walton went along with it and didn't tell me; his deceit is almost as wounding as Justin's.

I roll to my side as tears leak from my eyes. I've cried so much the past two days I'm amazed there are any tears left. What destroys me most is how much I loved him, that part as real as anything in this world—once-in-a-lifetime kind of love . . . or so I thought.

Justin doesn't understand. He's called. He's texted. He's said he's sorry and begged me to reconsider. What he doesn't understand is it's not that simple. I feel as if it's not even up to me. Since I was a girl, I have believed in the marriage cake



and its presaging power to foretell true love. And while I understand it's superstitious, some would say irrational, I also know I will never be able to fully see past it. My heart now hammers each time I think of marrying Justin, as if I've been pulled back from a cliff a moment before I stepped off the edge.

I start to cry in earnest and curl tight in a ball, my whole body aching. *Broken heart*: the term makes sense now, like the organ has been ripped in two.

The door opens, and I peek from my furl to see Granmama with her arms crossed and a worried frown on her face. She is not wearing her wig, and her hair is shorn short, patchy in spots, dull as dust, and gray. The first time I saw her sickness so plainly displayed, it buckled me, and I couldn't bear to look at her, the evidence of time fading compounding my failure. I was supposed to do the quest and get married, and she was supposed to be there—a fairy-tale ending to her remarkable storybook life.

She steps toward me, and I squeeze my eyes tight, all of it hurting so much.

She sits on the mattress and sweeps a tendril from my face.

“How could I have been so wrong?” I mumble.

“Not wrong,” Granmama says. “Just not perfectly right. There's a difference.”

“I was so certain it was meant to be,” I say, glancing up, then away, her ashen skin more than I can take.

“Ava, look at me.”

I don't want to, but I force myself to sit up and lift my face to hers. Her bright-blue eyes sparkle, her indomitable spirit blazing and belying her mutinying body. “Death is part of life,” she says. I start to shake my head, but she stops me. “It is. It's a fact, even for me. My life has been blessed—a magnificent, wondrous journey. In great part because of you.”

Tears fall again, and I blot them with my hands.

She pulls them away, gripping them tight in hers. “I do not intend to let this thing beat me. Colon cancer, puh.” She rolls her eyes as if it is nothing but an annoyance. “But at some point, you will have no choice but to continue this grand adventure without me.”

I sniffle and shake my head. While intellectually, I understand she’s right, I’m not ready to do that.

“The thing to know is, when that happens, I will not be gone. None of us who are loved and truly known ever disappear. I am a part of you, just as my parents, my grandparents, and your grandfather are a part of me. I carry them with me.” She touches her fist to her heart. “Here. Always. Exponential.”

*Exponential. One plus one, so much more than two.*

Then I am in her arms, and she is rocking me, and the grief I’ve been holding floods out of me and into her, where she releases it like fairy dust into the air until all that’s left is love.

# 11

Walton steps off the boat, the dive bag on his shoulder.

“Ava?” he says when he sees me. He looks good, his bald head now the same ruddy tan as the rest of him.

“How’s the rig?” I ask with a nod toward the oil platform in the distance.

“Good. No sign of corrosion.”

I nod and fight back the emotions that run just beneath the surface these days.

“How you holding up?” he asks.

“Still standing.”

He offers a sympathetic frown, and I look away, ashamed of both the ring deceit and not seeing what he realized from the start, that Justin and I were not the match I believed.

“How’s your grandmother?”

“Okay.” A small smile cracks open in my bruised heart. “Actually, amazing—truly, incredibly amazing. Feisty as ever and determined to beat this thing.”

While it still hurts each time I think of the inevitable someday of being in the world without her, the past few days made me appreciate the gift of time we’ve already had. Constantly, I was reminded of Esther and Madame Charlemagne and the reflection they were of each other, and I realized Granmama was right. Her spirit is etched on my soul, which means I will never fully lose her, and it brings enormous comfort.

“I think colon cancer has met its match,” Walton says. “I certainly wouldn’t want to mess with your grandmother.”

A pulse of silence passes before he asks, “Did you give J the ring?”

I nod. The day it arrived, I sent it on to Justin with a note:

*Our love was real, and you were my almost Mr. Right, and I was your almost Mrs. Wrong. I hope when the hurt recedes, you will be able to see that. When I think of you, it will not be with regret. You were my hero, my champion, my almost soul mate, and you will always hold a place in my heart.*

*Ava*

Walton sets the dive bag at his feet. “Sorry I didn’t tell you about the egg.”

“I almost married him,” I say, hurt splintering the words.

Walton says nothing, his eyes on the ground.

“How could you not have told me?”

“I wanted to.”

He goes to run his hand through his hair, forgetting it’s gone, and hits only air. We both almost smile, but our lips don’t quite make it.

Leveling his eyes on mine, he says, “But I couldn’t.”

“Out of loyalty to J?”

His mouth skews as if he’s thinking about it. “Actually, to both of you. The truth was, I wasn’t fully sure.”

“Sure?”

“About you and J. So much of you was right.”

The statement startles me and throws me off balance. He could have gloated, said *I told you so* or *I knew it*, but instead, he plainly stated the opposite, and it cuts me to the core because it’s true: so much of us was perfect. I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, tired of crying and determined to keep the tears from escaping.

“So I decided to leave it up to the cake,” he says.

I drop my hands and look at him. “You left my future to a cake?”

“It worked,” he says with a shrug.

“It almost didn’t! I was in my wedding dress!” My hands fly with my words. “The ceremony was less than an hour away!”

Infuriatingly, he nods. “Yeah. It was definitely closer than I expected. My parents were already in their seats.”

I groan and drop my eyes at the thought of how many people I disappointed. Walton’s parents left their ranch and flew all the way from Idaho to be there.

“I know it makes no sense,” Walton says, “but some of the greatest mysteries don’t. And I just kept thinking all those couples and all that evidence, over two hundred and fifty years of it, it couldn’t be wrong.”

“But what if we’d gone through with it, our marriage based on a lie, Justin and me believing we’d done the marriage cake?”

“That’s just it. I knew the only way the wedding would happen was if what Justin did counted.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He did it. J got a frigate bird egg. I thought maybe that was enough. But the only way to know for sure was to see if you got married. No couple that ever failed the quest ended up going through with the wedding.”

I furrow my brow, thinking about it. At least fifty couples have failed the quest since the first doomed couple, and not a single one ended up married.

“I know I might have been rationalizing what I did, justifying the deal I made with J, but you have to believe me: I was actually rooting for you guys, hoping it would work out. I was literally at the entrance to the park waiting for Aylan—the money J gave me to get the egg in one pocket and the ring in the other—praying the two of you would get home and that both of you would realize you needed to tell each other the truth, that you’d fess up and somehow it would work out.” He shakes his head. “But that didn’t happen. And instead, you almost got married but didn’t.”

I swallow hard, thinking of the impossible situation we put him in. I gave him the ring, making him complicit in my betrayal of Justin, and then Justin bailed on getting the egg, making him equally complicit in his betrayal of me.

“Sorry,” I mumble, shaking my head at how awful we were.

“I thought maybe that was the point of the quest,” he says, “to test your honesty.”

I sigh out heavily, wondering if it could have been that simple, one decision this way or that—a single truthful conversation—if things would have turned out different.

If so, then perhaps the marriage cake is intended not only to presage but also to influence, a test not only of how far two people are willing to go for each other but also of how much they are willing *to change*, and if in that willingness to transform, like the seahorses altering their rhythms to sync their hearts to each other, lies the answer to becoming one.

“Hey, Ava,” a woman’s voice says behind me, and I turn, surprised to see Aylan walking toward us, her purple hair loose and wild around her face.

She continues past into Walton’s arms, and he kisses her deep. My skin pinkens as I watch them, the intimacy so personal it feels like I shouldn’t be witnessing it.

People have often asked why Walton and I never became a couple. The reason is in front of me, the essential ingredient that's always been missing between us. I have never looked at Walton the way Aylan is looking at him, and Walton has never looked at me that way either. I imagine him and Aylan doing the marriage-cake quest and breezing through it without a hitch, kisses and laughter all along the way.

Walton wraps his arm around her shoulders, and she leans into him. "Sorry to hear about your other half," she says, her deep-black eyes soft on mine and incredibly kind.

I look past her to the vast Pacific, sparkling and endless. "Thanks, but I believe he's still out there," I say as a cool breeze lifts the hair on my neck, almost as if blowing me toward him and letting me know he exists.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © 2021 April Brian*

Suzanne Redfearn is the bestselling author of four novels: *Hush Little Baby*, *No Ordinary Life*, *In an Instant*, and *Hadley and Grace*. In addition to being an author, she's an architect specializing in residential and commercial design. She lives in Laguna Beach, California, where she and her husband own two restaurants: Lumberyard and Slice Pizza and Beer. You can find her at her website, [www.SuzanneRedfearn.com](http://www.SuzanneRedfearn.com), on Facebook ([@SuzanneRedFearnAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/SuzanneRedFearnAuthor)), or on Twitter ([@SuzanneRedfearn](https://twitter.com/SuzanneRedfearn)).



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