



BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

A. R. CAPETTA

The
Heartbreak
Bakery

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and incidents are either products of the author's
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Cory

all of the love stories are for you

1

The splintered crack of my egg on the counter sounds like an ending. I raise my hand and tip the runny liquid into the bowl, letting the yolk slip out. It's bright, orange, unbroken. It's beautiful, and I want to keep it that way.

Maybe forever.

But I have to whisk it, and with a few turns of my wrist the batter swallows it up. The yolk disappears like it was never there.

I dump the dry ingredients in with the wet, then check my recipe card for the fourth time. Red velvet. My hands know how to do this. Snap the bowl into place on the stand mixer. Stir on the lowest setting until everything barely swirls

together. Don't overmix, or the cake comes out stodgy. I flick the switch at the perfect moment, as the last of the dry, crummy bits dissolve into silk. My hands are good at this. Which is helpful, because the rest of me isn't really here.

I slap butter-flour paste into four round cake pans, then pour batter into each one. It folds on top of itself like a ribbon. This part usually feels like I'm finishing off a present, and the people who eat the cake later will be able to taste that it's a gift I made with them in mind. Even if we're strangers. They'll taste it, and they'll know I want them to be happy.

Baking is magic that way.

But I don't feel like giving presents right now. And I'm not really here because I'm still in her bedroom, wrapped in her towel, shivering as she peers at me without her glasses on and says, "Maybe this isn't working."

Like we're a recipe that isn't coming together right.

"Syd, do you have a minute to take muffins to the front?" Marisol calls from across the kitchen.

She's being delicate with me. Marisol isn't delicate with anything, not even meringues. On a normal day she'd let me know how unacceptable it is that I'm four cakes behind when we're about to open. She'd remind me that I'm *so* young, too young to be a full-time baker, even though she's only a few years older than I am. I do the whole routine in my head. Then I throw my red velvet rounds in the oven.

I grab the muffins, warm and waiting. Drop them in pale wicker baskets, inhaling the comforts of triple ginger, oatmeal and peaches with a brown sugar crumb topping, cherry

vanilla strewn with dark chocolate. Each smell hits my nose and burrows into the part of my brain that believes things will be all right. But then I get to the savory breakfast muffins, sharp cheddar and smoky bacon and green onion. Those are W's favorites.

I don't know whether I should put one aside for her. I don't know what she wants anymore.

I head to the front, where Vin is standing at the cash register, settling rolls of change into the little nooks. "Hey, Syd darlin'." His voice is a dark crackle, his southern accent like a drizzle of honey on top of burnt popcorn. Actually, that sounds good. I start a recipe in my head. Anything to avoid thinking about W.

"Need to talk?" Vin asks, without looking up from the quarters.

"What?"

"Seems like you're holding something in," he says. "That's not good for your constitution."

I look around the bakery. The front room is filled with early morning light and nooks where people can have private conversations. Beyond that is the wooden porch painted in thick rainbow stripes, and wrought iron tables set in a lush, wild garden. Upstairs is a wide-open community space lined in vintage couches and bookshelves stuffed with queer literature. Vin and Alec have done everything they could to make this place safe and comfortable for someone like me. Every day since I found it on a lucky wander through South Austin, that's how I've felt. Safe. Comfortable.

But right now the Proud Muffin's magic isn't working. I feel foul.

And Vin can tell just by looking at me.

"Don't worry," I chirp. This isn't my normal voice. Did I leave it behind at W's? How much of me is missing?

"It's my job to worry about all of you," Vin says. He means it, too. He and Alec treat everyone who work for them like the ever-expanding family that seems standard in Texas. I was born in Illinois. I have parents, a sister, a scattering of aunts, and a single awkward cousin. When I told her I was dating W, she said, and I quote, "That's a bad idea, but okay."

"Syd, you still with me?" Vin asks.

I can't let him think that my feelings about W are shaking my ability to get through a shift. I could lose the best job in the world. No matter how nice Vin and Alec are, I'm the youngest person they've taken on as a baker—and it wasn't a picnic to convince them.

Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, every picnic I've been on has felt like a high-stakes situation involving me making lots of food with the likelihood that the entire outing will be ruined by some unforeseen factor.

Convincing them was *exactly* like a picnic.

"I think I'm hungry," I say, and my voice sounds as least halfway mine. "Didn't get a chance to eat this morning. I'm going to grab a Texas Breakfast if that's okay." Those are the peachy oatmeal muffins.

Vin nods sagely. He does everything sagely. He rides a motorcycle and listens to endless history podcasts and works

out constantly. His tanned white skin is heavily tattooed, mostly with poetry running in all directions, and even though he's as friendly as Alec, he hides it better—which all adds up to a burly dad vibe. “Take the register for a few minutes, will you? Gemma’s coming in, but I need to run to the bank and get change. Y’all keep going through my singles like this is a strip bakery.”

Marisol would have laughed at that. I just nod at Vin, completely mature and trustworthy.

Saturday is our second-busiest morning of the week, and the moment Vin opens the doors customers start flying in. The black coffee flock comes first, mostly teachers from the Texas School for the Deaf down the street. You’d think they would sleep in on the weekend, but people get attached to their morning caffeine rituals. I sign the basics back and forth and pour brown liquid into cups. Gemma comes through the front door just in time for the morning muffin rush. She throws her *I’m a Proud Muffin* tank top over a basic black one. Her box braids swing and her track shorts shimmer as she moves at high speed, making sure the espresso machine is always gleaming and ready to go.

“Can you stay up front until Vin gets back?” she asks.

I hesitate for just a second. “Sure.” She doesn’t need to know how behind I am in the kitchen.

I make myself look busy, keep my head down, but some of our regulars aren’t deterred by things like body language and how many cakes I still have to pop out before noon. They’re going to make small talk at any cost.

Jessalee, one of our day-old-pastry hunters, pushes through the basket of rejects for the least squished croissant. “Syd! I haven’t seen you out here in weeks!”

“Baking, baking, baking,” I say.

“Words, words, words!” she responds brightly. She’s always writing on the porch.

Jessalee’s youngish, but she wears boxy vintage dresses and lace slips, as if her entire life is a rehearsal for being an old lady. Even her hair, which she dyes Easter-egg pastels, has a throwback feel to it. Today it’s the color of a blueberry, pieces flying out of her bun as she holds up evidence of victory: a perfectly wrapped almond croissant. “How are you, sweetie?” she asks, flushed with the rare find.

“I’m fine,” I say, testing the words on my tongue. They’re not as bitter as I thought they would be. Maybe I *am* fine. *W* and I had a fight. A marathon fight. Our first real one. But couples do that, right?

Maybe this makes us *more* of a couple than we were before.

Jessalee reverently sets the almond croissant on the counter as I ring up her usual latte, which Gemma is already making, head down, looking at anything but Jessalee.

“How is *W*?” Jessalee asks with the delighted smile of a stranger who knows exactly one personal thing about you.

“*W* is good,” I say. “I think she’s great, actually.” That was one of the main points in our fight. I think she’s great, and she thinks I like having a girlfriend too much to notice that sometimes she isn’t.

“That pretty girl of yours coming around today?” Mr. Trujillo asks, nosing in with his large coffee. I pour the thinnest trickle of almond milk into his cup, even though I know he likes more.

I have no idea what W is doing. Where she’s going, what piece of her day she’s delighted about or dreading. This is the first time in a very long time that I don’t know every little detail.

The door swings open. It’s Vin with a black zippered bag from the bank down the street. He looks off, like the heat is getting to him. I’ve never seen that happen before, even when the temperature slides up past 110 degrees, creeping toward the certain doom of 120. “Syd, get to the kitchen,” he says. “Give me a special to write on the board, get everyone out here excited.”

I give an oversized nod, which turns out to be a good way to keep tears inside someone’s face.

“Brownies,” I say. “I’m making brownies.”

Vin doesn’t show any surprise, just chalks *Syd’s Unexpected Brownies* on the specials board and sets the price at two-fifty.

Brownies are simpler than what I usually go for. They require three things: a single bowl, a sturdy spoon, and a dedication to dark chocolate. Brownies are also W’s favorite. I’ll set one aside and bring it to her later. She’ll see it, take a single bite, and everything will melt back to okay.

“Are those red velvets going to be finished soon?” Marisol asks the second I set foot in the kitchen.

“Damn.”

I forgot them while I was up front. Marisol pulled the rounds out of the oven for me, but I have to finish off those cakes before I start anything new. Even though they're a little warm to frost, I rush through the steps. Crumb coat first. A thicker layer of cream cheese frosting with the offset spatula, one generous swipe at a time. I pipe a shaky *Happy Anniversary Bob and Barb* and squish a few half-hearted roses along the border. It looks like a lie, like the cake knows that I didn't want Bob and Barb to be happy until I know that W and I can be happy, too.

"Done," I shout.

Then I rattle around the kitchen, gathering what I need for brownies, setting some ingredients in my favorite mixing bowl and nestling the others along my arm. This feels better already. This is baking for *me*, not Bob and Barb or the regulars. This is baking because my hands are twitching and my heart is raw and I need to get out of my head, even if it's just until the timer goes off.

The second I dip my measuring cup into the flour, there's a knock at the back door.

"Harley," Marisol announces while boxing up her cakes. She slides cardboard panels together, sharp and exact.

"Right," I mutter. "Of course."

I always answer the door for Harley.

I settle my brownie makings on one of the long wooden tables and hurry for the back door. For the first time, I wonder if I look like someone who's been fighting with their girlfriend.

How blotchy is my face? How curdled is my expression?

As soon as the door opens, I check the pin on Harley's bag: he.

I look down at my feet. Harley's sneakers dance lightly, back and forth. It feels like we're at a party and my smile forgot to show up.

"Here for deliveries," he finally says, twisting the front lock of his hair. He's always roughing up his reddish-brown curls to revive them after they've been smashed down under a bike helmet. Harley is a single inch taller than me, with brown eyes that I can clock for their exact chocolate content. Sixty percent. Semisweet.

"You're always here for deliveries," I say.

"You don't know," he says with an elaborate shrug. "Someday I might be here for a completely different reason."

On most mornings Harley takes the cardboard boxes out of my arms, talks to me in the alley for two to five minutes while balancing the weight on his bike baskets, and then takes off. Today I haven't brought the boxes to the door, so he follows me inside and I point out where everything is stacked. Then I go back to my brownies, and Harley keeps following. He leans over the baking table as I spread out my ingredients.

"W and I got into an argument," I say without Harley even asking. I've spent hours avoiding the truth, stepping around it. Now I'm pouring sugar and telling the cute bike delivery person.

The weird part is, Harley already knows more than a little

about my relationship with W. Not that I go out of my way to tell him about my personal life, just that it's easy to talk to someone you see for two to five minutes at a time.

"Was it a big fight?" he asks.

I dump the sugar.

"How long did it last?"

I poke at the sugar with my wooden spoon. I won't add it to the batter until the chocolate melts.

"Hours."

"How many?"

"Eight?" That math does not make me feel better. Math has always been on my side in this relationship. W and I have been together for almost four years. We've had zero fights—until yesterday. We've kissed thousands of times. We've been each other's dates at twelve school dances and two weddings. We've named our future kids, then changed the names three times.

"What did you fight about?" Harley asks.

"Nothing. Everything." I can't remember how it started. It kept stretching and taking up more of the night, and by the time I tried to trace the whole thing back to an origin point, it was lost in a haze of held-back tears.

"How did it end?" Harley asks.

"I had to leave for work."

"Huh."

Harley drums his fingers on the wooden tabletop. Long fingers, blunt nails. "*Where* did you fight for eight hours?"

Does that matter? “It started at the Thai place on South First, you know the one with the great patio?” Harley nods. “They have those long tables that you share with other people. They call them community tables, although I’ve seriously never seen anyone spontaneously become best friends at a restaurant just because they were squished together like that. Anyway, W and I were sort of half fighting over our food and half pretending it wasn’t happening so the people on a first date next to us wouldn’t notice.” I’d felt like a bad representative of coupledness. “W’s parents went on a last-minute business trip and my parents thought some of our other friends were there, which they were at the beginning of the night, but by the time we went out to dinner it was just us so we decided to go back to her place—”

“Full parental workaround,” he says. “Got it.”

“And the fight kept going, but then we . . .” I make a sort of rolling motion with my spoon.

“You spooned.”

“We had sex.”

Harley’s eyes go a little wild, like I really threw him off the scent with the whole spoon thing. “Ohhh.”

“I thought everything was better, but it wasn’t, and by the time it got really bad, we were in the shower. We stayed there until the water got cold and we had to turn it off, but we weren’t done fighting so we just stood there wet *and* cold.”

“She broke up with you in the shower?” Harley shaves his voice down to a whisper. “*After* sex?” His current level of

eyebrow intensity makes him look so worried that I want to hug him. Then I remember that *I'm* the one with the problem. "Please tell me it wasn't your first time," he adds.

"Fighting?"

Harley squints at me. "No. Your first *tiiiiiiime*."

"Oh." I check to make sure nobody else is paying attention, then shake my head. "We didn't *break up*, though. We fought."

Harley blows out a dramatic breath, and Marisol shoots us both a look over her shoulder. Harley and I inch a little closer to each other. "What you described doesn't sound like a fight."

"What does it sound like?"

He winces, looking sincerely uncomfortable with what he's about to say. "Being dumped."

"Oh," I say, grabbing the baking chocolate, hacking into the bar. "Oh. Okay. And you're sure about this, why?"

"Because I've been dumped," Harley says apologetically. "I know what it looks, feels, walks, and talks like."

"Have you ever been told 'maybe this isn't working'?" I ask without looking up from my knifework. "As part of the dumping process?"

"Oh, sure. If you're looking for a list of generic ingredients, that's the flour."

I laugh, but it doesn't sound like laughing; it sounds like chocolate snapping into pieces.

"You're telling me I didn't just get broken up with, I got the grocery store *box mix* equivalent of being broken up with."

"Did you just carve a *W* into that chocolate?" Harley asks.

I look down and there it is: a big, sharp *W*. I don't remember doing that.

Marisol comes over, bumping my hip with hers, putting an arm around my shoulder. "Harley, can you come back after your first round of drop-offs? We got behind on some orders this morning."

"Sure." He flicks a worried glance at me as he backs away. Then he spins and starts loading his arm with cake boxes.

Marisol squeezes me to her side. "Let's bake," she whispers, and I can't tell if this is a threat or a really nice suggestion.

Marisol is one of the best bakers in all of Austin. She's also the Proud Muffin's resident heartthrob. A steady stream of her significant and not-so-significant others hangs around, hoping to see her stride out of the kitchen in her white tank top, dark hair slicked back, arms strong from carrying enormous bricks of butter. Marisol has probably endured a dozen relationships ending while we've worked together, and I've never once seen her break. Maybe I should ask her for advice.

No. No.

I'm not breaking.

W and I aren't broken.

I shrug away from Marisol. She smells like cinnamon and hair wax and it lingers in a weirdly comforting way. "Almost done with the special," I say through a thick, pre-crying throat. "I'll get the rest of the cakes and you do lunch rolls, okay?"

Marisol nods.

Harley peeks around the tower of cake boxes in his arms and gives me a quick, bright "See you tomorrow!"

Tomorrow is Sunday. W and I have a standing date to split an eggs Benedict at Counter Café after my early shift. Then we usually walk down to the Alamo Drafthouse and cram two movies into the hottest part of the day, drinking brown sugar lemonade, kissing every time a character makes a dramatic exit. Her lips tart and sugary. Her hands cold from clutching the glass.

I have brownies to make, but I can't go another minute without knowing. I pull my absolutely-banned-from-the-kitchen phone out of my back pocket.

Did we just break up?

W is quick to respond if she's anywhere near her phone. So when she doesn't, I know she's busy, or she's angry. Either of those is okay. She's cooling off; she'll text me back when she's ready to talk.

I get back to my brownies, whisking the thin batter. Just as I'm about to slide them in the oven, I hear a commotion in the front. This sort of minor celebration happens anytime someone we all know enters the bakery.

I get the sweaty cold sense that I know *exactly* who walked in.

Her lemony voice cuts through everything. That same voice found me at a party in eighth grade, when I was new in Austin and she was newly out. She asked if I wanted to skip the game of spin the bottle and just kiss. I said yes. I waited an excruciating two days until homeroom on Monday and asked her out, and she said yes. By the end of that first date, she asked me if I wanted to skip the part where we weren't sure

about each other and just be a couple. I said yes. There's hope in my throat, swelling until I can't breathe around it.

"Is Syd here?" W asks.

Gemma yells, "Syd!" without coming back.

It feels like a long walk from the kitchen to the front counter.

The last time I saw her, she was as wrecked and naked as I was. Now W is wearing a low-cut black T-shirt, her perfectly distressed jeans, and the black cowboy boots with the turquoise details. It's early spring, but her freckles are already out in force. Her lips are a straight line, betraying nothing. I can't see her eyes. Her sunglasses are firmly on, even though she's inside.

I wish I could go back to not knowing the contents of her day.

"I can't believe you had to ask me that," she says, skipping right over any kind of greeting. But W isn't whispering, and I take that as a good sign. Nothing we're saying is a secret. We're two people who love each other, two people who had an argument and are now talking in normal voices.

"Ask . . . what?" Like there's any other question in the world right now.

W looks around as though she's memorizing the Proud Muffin. Like she has to re-create this place from scratch later.

That's when I realize she's leaving.

Everything slows down to syrup.

"We broke up." She pauses, then says it slightly louder. "We're not together, Syd."

She turns away from me, giving Gemma a hug over the counter. They know each other. They're friends. W is friends with everyone, but she's *with* me. At least, she was until a few hours ago. Now she's pointing at the basket filled with savory muffins, the ones that she likes to douse in hot sauce until she can barely taste anything.

"I'll take these to go." She looks right at me and says, "I don't think I'll be back for a while."

RECIPE

Breakup Brownies

INGREDIENTS

4 oz unsweetened chocolate, broken up (I mean, it's right there, how did I not see this coming?)

½ cup (1 stick) butter

1 cup granulated sugar

2 large eggs

1 tsp vanilla extract

½ tsp sea salt

⅔ cup all-purpose flour

1 cup dried cherries

Powdered sugar for decorating

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter your pan before starting. This works best in an 8 x 8 pan for a single batch, though you can double and use a 9 x 13 pan if you've been left at the altar or something.

Carve the name of your ex into the chocolate.

In a microwave, melt the butter and chocolate in a large bowl in 30-second intervals, stirring between each. If your breakup has driven you to a tiny cabin on a mountaintop or somewhere equally dramatic where there's no microwave, you can do this step in a double boiler, or fake one with a small metal bowl over a simmering pot of water, stirring until the butter and chocolate mixture is smooth.

Let the melted chocolate mixture cool slightly. Whisk in the sugar, then the eggs one at a time, the vanilla, and salt. Toss the cherries lightly in the flour before folding them both in. This coats them so they don't all sink to the bottom when you bake. Stir all the ingredients until the moment when the white disappears and everything becomes the same gooey dark brown: be careful not to overmix.

Pour the batter into the prepared pan, and spread the top until even, remembering when your relationship looked shiny and unbroken just like this. It's a good thing that your fingers are covered in brownie goo or you might be tempted to text your ex again.

Don't.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes.

Test for doneness with a toothpick, fork, or cake tester. It should come out JUST clean. Let cool slightly. Slice the brownies generously. Cut a heart into a sheet of parchment paper and sift powdered sugar over the cut-out shape on top of each brownie, creating a series of perfect hearts.

Misery loves to look pretty.

2

You know what's not pretty?

Standing in your first gay bar alone, surrounded by sweaty darkness and lasers and the pushy bass of dance music even though no one is dancing.

A handful of Twizzler-thin boys in muscle tees are circled up, laughing at jokes I can't hear. Pretty femmes are grouped together at the bar, pulling up hair and pushing down necklines, touching the skin where each other's crop tops end, while they down the sugary fake cocktails that this place serves for its eighteen-and-over night. I turned seventeen in January, but it's not that hard to get in when your bakery caters events all over the city and you're not actually trying to drink. My

neon green “don’t give this one alcohol” bracelet feels like a beacon in the sweaty darkness of the oldest gay bar in Austin.

I’ve never been here before. I’m not even remotely sure that this was a good idea. But I needed to spend my first night without W somewhere other than at home, stretched out on the floor, listening to the banshee wail of her favorite indie bands and thinking about what to bake next.

It felt good to pour my feelings in those brownies and then walk away.

This place isn’t what I expected, though. I don’t want to break it to anyone, but it looks like a regular bar for straight people and maybe that one closeted uncle. The space is split down the middle: a sports-focused area with the TVs set to football—European, not American—on one side, and an ancient black-painted dance floor on the other. Even the music is mostly straight artists with a little Kesha thrown in for good measure.

I ease into the beat of the first Beyoncé song that comes on, thinking I’ll be a magnet for everyone else who needed to be out tonight, everybody young and queer and freshly single, so fresh we can still taste our breakups.

But I’m out here alone, dancing to “Crazy in Love,” trying to make it look like this solo act is what I wanted to do. I’m a solid backup dancer, but W is incredible, her body fused to the beat. Now that the spotlight is on me, I keep swiveling things, hoping for some kind of miracle.

The beat changes, the lights get more dramatic, and I

think the main event must be starting. A single twenty-ish guy comes out of a back room wearing a G-string. Some wilted old Madonna starts up, and he struts out onto a platform and starts dancing without a whiff of enthusiasm.

“Let’s turn this party up to eleven!” shouts a bouncy DJ voice.

I try to shuffle off the dance floor, but the voice bursts out of the speakers again, coming at me from everywhere. “Don’t stop now! We’re just heating up!” I freeze abruptly, afraid to get called out again, like I’m being sent to the Big Gay Principal’s office. G-string guy notices me and looks down with understanding, even pity.

I try to smile, but my face is broken.

“You okay, honey?” he shouts.

Even this half-hearted, ninety-percent naked dancer feels bad for me.

I run to a dark crevice of the room. I’m ready to call this a horrible time and go home, when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I check it, thinking maybe it’s my sister, trying to make up for how unhelpful she was a few hours ago.

It’s Marisol. Which is weird. She’s never talked to me outside of work.

Harley left a # in case you need to talk to someone

I’m about to thank her and maybe ask if she wants to hang out next weekend, because I can’t ever do this again.

Don’t text back I’m on a date

I add Harley’s number to my phone, saving it with an

exclamation point. *Harley!* Usually I would let it sit in my phone for weeks before I sent an exploratory text, but tonight I'm doing new things. I let my hands take the lead, the way I do when I'm baking. I let them type whatever they want.

Help I'm stranded in a gay disaster

Harley texts back half a song later.

Prepared to rubberneck

In less than twenty minutes, Harley bounds into the bar, smiling so big that it makes up for the smiles I messed up earlier. Those red-brown curls are shining from a recent shower—no sign of helmet hair tonight. As soon as Harley's close enough, I look for the omnipresent bag and Harley's pronoun pin: they.

"Thanks for coming!" I shout over the music.

"I never turn down a gay disaster," they shout back, and I swear it's flirty, and I swear I didn't realize we were flirting until this moment.

We're standing close together. In the dark. In a place I invited them to, right after I told them about my relationship probably ending.

"Are you okay?" Harley asks.

"Today has been a lot," I admit.

"Did you and W talk?" they ask, peering into the laser-strewn darkness like she might be hiding somewhere.

"You were right." My neck feels hot. Not as hot as a stack of ovens in a Texas spring, but close. "She broke up with me."

"So we're going to dance it out?" Harley asks. They're wearing artfully loose jeans, a fitted T-shirt. I feel certain their

finger-combed waves of hair would do all kinds of adorable things while they dance.

“Already tried that,” I shout. “It’s hopeless.”

Harley shoves their hands in their pockets and leans forward to make sure the words reach me. “It’s not you. This music is stale!”

As if to prove them right, a song comes on that I don’t think I’ve heard since elementary school. It’s dully electronic, the lyrics all about heartbreak. About being bulletproof the next time it comes around. The music video glares at us from three different TVs, and I get caught up in how androgynous the singer is, mesmerized by a broad, freckled face and lean body. I used to think I should look like that. I used to be confused every single time I stared at the mirror and what I saw screamed back *girl*.

I’m used to the way I look now, the hips I can’t hide no matter what pants I wear, the broad waist and the small feet, the combination of round cheeks and rough jaw. For a long time, I thought my body should be different. Now I’m pretty sure that no particular body would make sense to me all of the time. That’s one of the reasons I like dancing, or baking, or anything where I’m inundated by what I’m doing, too busy *feeling* to feel wrong.

“Wait,” Harley says, closer to my ear than before, close enough that they don’t have to shout. “Something’s happening.”

The guy in the G-string has a friend now, wearing an equally tiny string and nothing else all the way up to his head. “Is that . . . a baseball cap?”

“A bright purple one,” Harley confirms. “Do you think he came straight from a game?”

“Of what?” I ask. “Sexball?”

Harley gives a few shy blinks. They try not to smile. But their dimples are winning.

“I’m in love with this look.” I wave at the leather-and-cap combo. “It’s like two ingredients that shouldn’t work together, but they do.”

It’s more than that, though. He’s dancing. *Really* dancing, with brazen moves and zero self-awareness, to a song nobody’s thought about for ten years. He fills up the entire platform, arms wild and lunge-steps shameless. The singer in the video sounds so bored with the idea of becoming bulletproof, eyes sad like they already know it isn’t going to work. But this guy dances like he believes it. We hit the chorus, and he does the shopping cart. It’s glorious. He’s buying *everything*.

“He owns this song!” Harley shouts.

“He *is* this song.”

“I’d say we should join him, but I think we have to let him have this one.”

“Tonight belongs to Red,” I agree.

His enthusiasm must be contagious, though, because Harley and I look at each other and a bolt of energy passes between us. Five minutes ago I felt ready to end the night, but now it seems like it’s just starting. Grabbing Harley’s hand, I sprint out of the bar before the DJ can yell at us.

Sixth Street is what a bloodstream must look like during a sugar rush. On weekend nights they close it off to cars,

because there are too many people out partying. Harley and I try to walk next to each other, but the sidewalk gets choked up. They fall behind, their fingertips still linked with mine. I don't know where we're going, but I'm not giving up. *W* can break up with me, but she can't make me miserable.

Not unless I let her.

I walk confidently past block after block of restaurants and bars. Above us the sharp teeth of high-rises chew up the sky. Greenery all around us and live music leaking from every doorway keep Austin from feeling like every other interchangeable city.

Besides, this is just downtown.

We walk south, toward the lake, and even though I can't see it, I can feel it there, a natural barrier separating us from South Austin, where I live, where I work, where most of my life takes place. *W* lives downtown. She's the reason I came here all the time, browsing at BookPeople while I waited for her to meet me, driving down to Mozart's on the water and sitting under trees wrapped in white string lights while we clutched our hot chocolates in Austin's never-truly-winter weather. I wonder how often I'll cross the bridges now that I know she's not waiting on the other side.

"I picked the last place," I say. "Where should we go now?"

"Wherever you feel better," Harley says.

And maybe just by saying that they've summoned it, but the next window we pass is a popsicle shop. The entire wall facing the street is made of windows. We can see the toppings sorted into a rainbow of options, the menu plastered with

sweet, icy suggestions. It might be getting late, but that doesn't mean it's getting any colder. It's definitely still hot enough to want one.

"I don't know this place," Harley says.

"Neither do I. That's what makes it an adventure."

There are new places in Austin all the time. Some days it feels like the city won't stop to catch its breath, like whenever you look up, it's trampled something you love.

Tonight, I'm glad this is here.

Tonight, I need new.

"Do you think the employees wear G-strings?" Harley asks. "You set a high bar for the evening."

I push their shoulder and laugh.

We get coconut dipped in chocolate, and half-dipped strawberry, and pineapple with coconut flakes, and banana with a shaggy coat of sprinkles. One popsicle for each of our hands. Harley bumps the door open with their back, then spins out into the night. I follow, and in the single moment it takes me to catch up, everything that felt complicated in the bar is simple again. I have sweet things and a slight breeze, and someone to share them with.

We walk the last block to the lake. It's down a slope from where we're standing, so we're not on the bank but above the water, looking across the trio of flat bridges that lead to South Austin. It's calmer there, and the lights look warm. I try to pick out the Proud Muffin.

"Want to walk over?" Harley asks.

"Maybe just halfway."

It takes longer than I think it will. We stop and stare out at the dark ripples and get really invested in our popsicles. I want a bite of the strawberry one, so I sort of dive for it, and Harley holds it out.

I lean in and bite. It tastes good, with patches of real strawberry. And then this feels weird, because it's how I would share with W. And then it feels weirder, because her family's condo is only a few blocks from the bridge, and all I can think about is her looking down and seeing me share dessert with Harley the day after we broke up. Technically, it's the same day.

I swallow and retreat a few steps.

"How did you end up in that bar?" Harley asks.

"It's my sister's fault."

"Your sister brought you to a gay bar and then ditched you?"

"Well . . . no."

Harley laughs and then waits, like they did at the bakery. Like they're making room for me to say more.

"My sister Tess is at Northwestern," I say, sticking to my pineapple popsicle. It's good, but not as good as the strawberry. "I didn't want to tell my parents about W yet. They kind of love her. I thought calling my sister would be like . . ."

"A warm-up?" Harley offers.

"When I told her what happened, Tess said that it sounds rough, because I don't really have a life without W."

Harley winces. "I'm glad my siblings are little. They just accidentally pee on me and hit me with foam swords." I

imagine Harley surrounded by tiny people, clinging to their arms and legs, demanding snacks.

I have to stop. It's way too sweet.

"I wanted to prove that I could go out and have fun," I say. But when you move somewhere and find an amazing girlfriend right away, all of your memories of that place have the person baked right in. "I just . . . needed somewhere W and I have never been together."

Harley nods, like this makes complete sense.

"Was she your first girlfriend?" they ask.

"Yeah."

We're still close to the intensity of downtown, but here above the water, the night is so quiet.

"And . . . did W call you her girlfriend?"

It takes me a second to see the whole question Harley's asking. "W thought it was funny that I like to bake. Most people think cupcakes and kitchens are girly, but I'll throw on a frilly apron over cut-offs and boots and shave my head like it's no big deal. She called me her *Bold Baker Girl*." I remember the feel of her playing a hand over my freshly shaved scalp, and I shiver, even though the night's as warm as her skin. "After a while, I told her I'm not a girl. At least, not most of the time."

I look down at the lake. It's dark but covered in shine, the city lights trembling on its surface. During the day, the water is a pretty but boring blue, covered in paddleboards and ringed by joggers. Right now, it feels like we're the only ones who know about it. Like it's a huge secret, right in the middle of everything.

“What are you most of the time?” Harley asks.

“Agender.”

That word takes a lot to say out loud. I reward myself with the rest of the banana popsicle.

“Got it. And W . . . got that?”

“It didn’t seem to bother her.” It still took me six months to work up to saying it out loud to a single person, and when W broke up with me, it felt like I lost that moment of bravery as much as I lost her.

Everyone at school knows I’m queer. My family knows. I know how lucky I am that I was never scared to say it out loud. I don’t know why it’s harder to tell people that I don’t feel attached to a specific gender. That some days wearing a femme outfit or acting a masc way feels nice, but neither of those things is *me*.

Harley leans with their back on the stone railing. “I’ve been thinking.” They take their time with the last bite of coconut. “You and W were together for a long time, right? Don’t they say that you need to be sad for at least as many months as you dated the person, in years?”

Four miserable months?

I can’t feel the way that I felt today for *four months*.

“Who is *they*?” I ask, ready to fight whoever came up with that rule. “Who says that?”

Harley shrugs the casually stubborn shrug of someone who thinks they’re right. “People who research relationships. Love scientists?”

“Love isn’t science,” I push back. “The chemistry matters,

that makes sense, but that's where it starts, not where it ends. Baking is like that. It's not just a predictable set of reactions. It's—"

"It's what?" Harley asks with a quirk of the lips that feels like a dare. They lean one elbow against the railing, cross their boots at the ankle.

I don't talk about this, but then again, I don't talk about *any* of the things I just told Harley. I wouldn't have done it a week ago, and a week from now I might talk myself out of it, but tonight I have this compulsion to tell Harley how I feel about baking, and therefore about love.

"It's magic."

I keep thinking about the brownies I made. How they were more than a simple dessert. They were everything I felt as W broke up with me.

"Magic . . ." Harley echoes. I can't tell if they believe me, if they're not sure, if they're silently judging me.

Then Harley smiles again. It's not the broad grin from when they showed up at the bar. It's the smile of someone who's been let in on a secret. They hold out the last bite of the perfect strawberry popsicle, and I dip my head for it.

I don't care if W's watching from somewhere above us.

This tastes too good to pass up.

RECIPE

A Bad Night

INGREDIENTS

- 1 breakup, fresh if you can get it
- 4 popsicles, eaten earlier in a fit of trying to forget her
 - 1 sister who won't text you back because college is so much fun
- 46 neighbors at a house party next door, most of whom seem to be making out near your window
- 2 assignments you have to finish before Monday because you spent all your homework time on breaking up
 - $\frac{1}{10}$ of your normal confidence
 - A pinch of parental worry
- 10,000,000,000 frantic phone checks to see if your ex texted you (she didn't) to say she wants you back (she doesn't), which you definitely know, and have basically come to accept, so why are you still checking your phone?
- 1 possible new crush at the worst possible moment

DIRECTIONS

Heat the world to 94 degrees.

Add the popsicles to your stomach. Let sit.

Get home late and watch your parents react. Mine skulk around in suspicious silence. Your flavors will vary.

Shut yourself in your room, shut your ex out of your mind, shut off your phone.

Definitely do not look to see if she's gone on social media to post anything cryptic, or sad, or—worst-case scenario—sexy.

After you've checked, shower it off. Wrench the water to a dead stop when you remember how much you hate showers now.

Armor yourself in your comfiest pajamas and climb into bed. Realize that the post-sugar misery pounding inside your head is being echoed by the pulse of a party next door.

Shut your window.

Get too sweaty! Turn up the AC!

Get too cold. Open your window to the sweet smell of lemon blossoms and the less sweet sound of people making out in the alley behind your house.

Slip back in time, to every party you spent in the darkest corner, the backyard shadows, the guest room with the

door gently shut. Relive every middle-of-the-night wonder, every discovery in the dark, all those times you felt too good for words.

Wonder: *If that doesn't work, what does?*

Think about your new crush. Try to stop immediately, but once you've poured in an ingredient, you can't unpour it. It's in the mix now, swirling around. Think about your new crush's secret smile. Their eagerness to talk.

Their hands.

Decide that since you're not sleeping, you might as well do some homework. Fall asleep with your face in the vagina of a textbook.

Wake up the next day.

No, really.

Your alarm is ringing.

3

Most people think you can't have a bad hair day with a shaved head, but my porcupine of frizz and I are here to tell you they are wrong. Fortunately, there's no one around to see me when I slump into the back door of the Proud Muffin. I flip on the kitchen lights, one row of switches at a time. Oil shines on the wooden worktops. The steel of the great big mixing bowls glows, pristine. Rows of darker cake pans wait to be filled.

The bakery counter is beautiful, the porch is bright, the garden welcomes everyone, and the community room upstairs gives them a big queer hug, but this is the heart of the Proud Muffin. A kitchen that gets wrecked every day, and by morning looks perfect and untouched.

Why doesn't my heart feel like that?

I knot my apron with thick, stupid fingers. I thought I would be better today. I thought this would get easier, not harder.

I check the tags for special orders. Not that many, which is normal for Sundays, just a few basic birthday cakes. I line up everything I need to whip through these and get back on Marisol's good side—whichever of her sharply shaved sides that happens to be today—and show Vin and Alec that I'm not the kind of teenager who can be taken down by something as obvious as a broken heart.

But before I start baking, I check on my brownies.

The counter staff hasn't arrived yet, and I keep the front lights dim. The baked goods that keep for more than a day—the cakes and pies and cobblers—are lined up and mummified in plastic wrap. The plate of brownies is exactly where I left it, barely dented by the customers yesterday afternoon. There were twelve of them. There are ten left. As I unwrap the brownies, the scent of midnight-dark chocolate nudges me to the past, a place where I really don't want to go.

But I'm already back at the first time I made her brownies. We made it through three whole months of dating before I asked if I could bake for her. Somehow that felt more official than saying the word *girlfriend*. Somehow that was a bigger deal than telling my parents I was going on a date and letting them take a thousand pictures like it was prom, even though I was wearing chewed-up jeans and W was trying to hide a tiny halter top under her jacket.

A dozen dates after that first one, I sat her down in my

living room and put on a movie—*Jane Eyre*, the good version with Ruth Wilson—before I went to the kitchen and got to work. W shouted the plot at me.

“Jane’s got a little friend who is definitely into her!”

“Oh no, Jane’s friend is dead!”

“Jane got older and now her eyebrow game is amazing!”

In between those shouts, she asked for regular baking updates.

“That ruins the magic,” I said. Secretly, I was worried that nothing would get baked with W looking at me. Her stare had the power to unbalance everything. It could have distracted me into scorching an entire pan of brownies.

“Is the magic happening now?” she called in a sharp, teasing voice.

I didn’t answer. I just kept stirring, my wooden spoon tireless until the melted chocolate was one glossy puddle.

“Now?” she asked.

When I finally brought out a single brownie on a plate, W smiled at me in a way that could have lit up the countryside in a blackout storm. She accepted the plate as if I’d offered her something precious. The brownie had that perfect just-slightly-underbaked ooze in the center, with a crackle on top. It smelled like the best chocolate I could afford, like tart cherries and good life choices.

These brownies smell like that, too, but they’re not the same.

The lights snap on—someone’s here. Probably Gemma.

I leave a note for the counter staff.

Push the brownies!

These aren't I'm-falling-in-love-with-you brownies. These are it's-over-and-I-don't-know-what-comes-next brownies. It helped to pour that feeling into a container that could hold it. Now I want them gone.

I go back to the kitchen, and I bake and I bake and I bake.

I bake her out of my body, I bake her out of my hands.

I bake until my heart is an empty kitchen, ready to be filled with sugar and heat. Ready to get messed up all over again.

When I finally look up from my work, Vin and Alec are both in the kitchen—a rare sight. Vin runs the front in the morning and otherwise lives in the office. Alec takes the afternoon and evening shifts and hosts the events in the community space, talking to everyone who comes through the door, making them feel seen—or safely ignored. For a moment I think my bosses are grabbing late breakfast and coffee together, being cute in a way that might hurt my stomach post-breakup but, ultimately, is good for my health. Whenever I see a queer couple doing even the simplest things, like kissing or holding hands or existing, I swear I get stronger.

But Alec and Vin aren't sharing a café breve, their fingers curled around the same cup. Vin is leaning forward against a worktable, his hearty forearms showing all the way to the elbow, tattooed poetry spilling. Alec, who is tall and trim and has a Professor of Baking look, leans back with his arms

crossed. His apron always seems like he unfolded it fresh from the laundry, and under it his slacks and dress shoes are just as sharp. He keeps pinching his nose just below his perfectly round tortoiseshell glasses. Their voices are low but undeniably clipped.

This is not impromptu-breakfast-date body language.

Marisol hits my shoulder with hers on her way across the kitchen. “Grab some eggs for me?”

“What?” I ask. “You have, like, a gross of eggs right—”

Marisol stares at me with the force of a thousand managers.

“Right.”

“I’ll get the butter,” she adds, like this is the continuation of a talk we’ve been having and not some weird improv we’re doing to get away from Vin and Alec, and starts toward the walk-in. Are we giving them space? Are we running away?

I trail behind her, my body flooding with memories of my fight with W. When I pull the latch and close the door, they all crash down. It’s bitterly cold in here. As cold as the aftermath of a bad shower.

“Marisol, I can’t hang out in a big freezer,” I say, shivering.

“Do you have a medical condition?” she asks, bracing one foot against an upturned, empty crate.

“No,” I admit.

“Then sit down and pretend you’re in Canada.”

I pull up another crate and sit with my knees spread wide. I have a good view of my legs mottling with the sudden cold. Marisol goes to work, making sure the cartons of cream are

sorted by their expiration dates, acting like that's what she actually came in here to do.

Knowing that Vin and Alec are fighting makes it impossible for me to focus on anything else. It's like seeing your parents fight, but more upsetting because they're *everybody's* parents.

Maybe if we went back out there, they'd stop. "Are we just supposed to stay here until they're done talking?" I ask. "I don't have a timer on the lemon bars, and they have to come out soon."

"Your lemon bars don't exist without Vin and Alec," Marisol says.

She's not wrong. Vin and Alec *are* the Proud Muffin. Alec likes to say that they opened a bakery because gay marriage wasn't legal in Texas ten years ago and they needed a couples' activity—but that joke is just the shiny finish he puts on the truth. Toxically masculine and homophobic kitchens had already exhausted Alec by the time he met Vin, whose early jobs were in advocacy and activism. Plus, he really likes muffins. They put absolutely every dollar and dream they had into opening this place; now dozens of groups meet in the community space. Regular free drop-offs are made to queer-friendly homeless shelters in the area. And the bakery hosts at least one transiversary a week, cake on the house. Marisol had her first when she still worked the front counter—she made her own cake, of course. And when the Defense of Marriage Act was overturned by the Supreme Court, the very next day Vin and Alec had their wedding in the bakery. Sometimes I think

I'm the only person in South Austin who wasn't there, because I was still in Illinois. Vin told me about it the first time I came to the Proud Muffin, when he caught me running my fingers along a particularly wobbly stripe on the rainbow porch and explained that some of the wedding guests painted under the influence of too much sugar and champagne. The afterparty lasted all week, because people kept showing up to celebrate. Queer folks and trans folks and allies, neighbors and family and friends. If the Proud Muffin is an institution, so are Vin and Alec.

Outside of the walk-in, their voices heat like a suddenly jacked-up oven.

Cracking the door, I give myself a stripe to watch. Vin walks into it, scrubbing his hands over his face like he's trying to wash off a layer of frustration. "You're acting like I'm serious about this."

Alec's sigh could lift a boulder—and set it back down on Vin's big toe. "If you weren't, you would have brought it up weeks ago. Instead, you chose to *hoard* this information. Turn it from a harmless oh-a-funny-thing-happened-today into a big old secret."

"Oh, shit," I mutter.

Suddenly, Marisol is behind me, her hand on my back, her head stacked over mine. All these months of trying to act mature enough to impress her, and I've dragged her down to my level.

"When were you going to bring up the fact that you're

being *wooded*?” Alec asks, marching into view. He takes a bite of something that he’s holding in one hand, half-wrapped in a napkin.

“It didn’t seem important,” Vin growls out. “I’m not interested, and I already told you . . .”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Vin is being *wooded* by somebody? Who *isn’t* Alec? People were always trying to flirt with W, but she never really flirted back. “Just because I’m queer and open to dating all sorts of people doesn’t mean I’m going to bat my eyelashes at everyone who walks by,” she said on several occasions.

I can be more susceptible. I’ll drop my voice a full octave if someone gives me a compliment, and fairly regularly I would stare at a cute waitperson or actor or stranger walking their dog in a way that made W lace her arm through mine and say, “Oh, so you noticed Cutie McCutePants.”

“Their pants *are* cute,” I would admit.

“You can dream about getting into them, but you’re coming home to these,” she would say, and slap my hands onto her hips. Then we would laugh and kiss until the stranger was forgotten.

No one here is laughing.

But they are eating. Vin picks up something dark, fudgy brown and scarfs half of it in a single stressed-out bite. It matches the brown stripe at the top of Alec’s neatly napkin-wrapped treat.

“You okay?” Marisol asks.

“Fine,” I grate out.

“Really, Syd? Your skin is about seven different colors and your hair . . . it’s like dryer lint. Wow.” She flicks a bit of activated fuzz.

I don’t care about my hair anymore. Easing the walk-in door open a little bit, I try to confirm something.

Vin and Alec *are* sharing a late-morning treat.

They’re both eating my brownies.

When the silence has lasted long enough that Marisol lets me out of the walk-in, my lemon bars aren’t just overbaked. They’re gummy, charred, fused to the pan. They reek of rotting citrus and sugar that went to the dark side.

She squats to peer into her own ovens, to see how much damage Vin and Alec’s fight did. “How do yours look?”

“They’re not winning the Big Gay Texas Bakeout,” I mutter.

I scrape them out, but before I have time to properly mourn them, I hear a voice from behind me.

“What’s the Big Gay Texas Bakeout?”

I spin to find Harley lingering in the doorway of the staff room. I give the pin on Harley’s bag a quick check—they—and remind myself that they are, technically, staff. I’ve just never seen them over there before.

I've also never hung out with Harley outside of work, and I'm not sure what direction it's going to tip us now that we're back in the bakery. Do we act like friends? Do we flirt harder? Do we stay exactly the same?

Can we stay exactly the same?

"The Big Gay Texas Bakeout is a thing I made up," I say, dumping my lemon bar pan in the enormous sink. Actually, W and I invented it together, out of sheer love of Mary Berry and an epic week of binge-watching. "Like *The Great British Bake Off* crossed with a Texas cookout."

"Sounds like fun," Harley says, hooking their thumbs through their belt loops. "When is it happening?"

"Never," I say. "It's not real. When did you get here?"

"About three minutes ago," Harley shrugs. "I knocked, nobody answered."

Did they catch the tail end of Vin and Alec's fight? Did it leave them feeling just as wobbly as I do? Did they flee to the staff room, hiding out the same way Marisol and I did?

"I need to ask Syd something," Harley says, looking at Marisol like we need her permission.

The empress of the kitchen nods.

I walk over and join Harley in the staff room. It's empty besides us, though there are condoms and dental dams and lube samples strewn across the table, leftovers from the safer sex workshop in the community space last night. Harley picks up a dental dam package and starts fiddling with it mindlessly, without seeming to notice what it is.

Which is not awkward. Not at all.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Oh, you know. I just had a request from one of my delivery customers. For a special order. One of yours.”

“Really?” I ask.

This is mildly amazing. When people go off the standard cake-and-muffin menu for special orders, they always request one of Marisol’s bakes. It’s the first time someone’s asked specifically for one of mine.

Right when I’m starting to feel more confident about this conversation, I realize that there’s no reason that Harley and I are having it alone. They could have easily talked to me about this in front of Marisol. Suddenly I’m looking at the floor. And I’m aware of every inch between Harley’s shoes and mine.

I have a recipe for being in a relationship. I spent four years perfecting it. But I don’t know how to do this part—where I’m watching Harley like a pot of almost-boiling water, but I’m still thinking about *W* every five minutes.

“So . . . the request?” I ask.

“It was from the people I brought those brownies to yesterday.” So that accounts for the two that were missing this morning. At least *somebody* wanted them. “They really love your olive oil cake.” Harley says the words carefully, like they had to commit them to memory. Do they not know what olive oil cake is? How? They’ve been working here for over a year. “They were hoping you’d make it for a party they’re hosting tomorrow. I was going to fill out a special order form, but . . .”

But Vin and Alec were stomping around the kitchen, strewing their personal business everywhere.

“Do they want mascarpone frosting or fruit?” I ask.

Harley tries double finger guns, then seems to think better of it, quickly uncocking them. “Fruit.”

“Did they like the brownies?” Now I’m just fishing for compliments. Or trying to keep Harley here for another few minutes. They’re bouncing on the balls of their feet like this is already over.

I’m so sick of good things being over.

“Oh, yeah,” Harley says. “Big hit. I mean, they both said they loved them before they started—”

“Started what?” I ask, sharp as a sudden tester speared right through the center of a cake.

“Fighting?” Harley says. “Like, a couple fight? It was really awkward. I’ve never had that happen on a delivery before. Sometimes people are clearly hitting the pause button on a fight and pretending they’re okay. Lots of wincing smiles and sour body language. But Rae and Jay seemed fine when I got there, they dug into the brownies like they just couldn’t wait, and then an argument fired up, big and dramatic, and I was standing right there waiting for them to sign their receipt.” They wrap their arms around themselves, still bouncing.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Sure,” Harley says. “I should just . . . you know . . . deliveries.”

They care about their job nearly as much as I do. They’ve

told me about it while strapping a dozen cake boxes onto their bike. I should let Harley go. But I can't stop thinking about those brownies.

The ones that have landed in the hands of fighting couples. Twice.

"Come with me for a minute," I say, tugging at the shoulder of Harley's muscle tee. "And leave the dental dam."

They drop it and leap backward. "Why are those in the *break room*?"

We weave around the worktables in the kitchen, ignoring the cake boxes for now. A few more shirt tugs and we make it to the front counter. The barista, D.C., looks up from some kind of elaborate iced mocha.

"Hey, Syd!" D.C. gives me a glowing smile. He's a white guy, about thirty, with overeager slices of silver in his shoulder-length black hair. A few years ago, he left the military and came home to some realizations about himself, starting with pansexuality and ending with great big drag-queen tendencies. He might be a dozen years older than me, but he's the cutest kind of baby queer. And he treats me like a wise and ancient bisexual, which, to be honest, I love.

"Where are the brownies?" I ask, pinpointing the place where they used to be with a stare.

"Oh, we really pushed them," D.C. says with an extra helping of helpfulness. "Like you asked."

He points to the spot right near the counter, where a single brownie sits on a small plate. All of my feelings about W's abrupt ending have been condensed down to this one square.

I pick it up, inspecting it like it might cough up secrets.

It stays fudgy and silent and unhelpful.

“What are you doing?” Harley whispers, so close to my ear that the feeling flicks down my spine.

“Nothing,” I say with a low laugh. I’m tired. I barely slept last night. There’s nothing to see here.

My brownies are definitely not breaking people up.

I turn to head back to the kitchen, to fill Harley’s arms with cake boxes, to scrub away the memories of Vin and Alec arguing all over the kitchen.

“Um, Syd,” Harley says. “I see more of your brownies.”

They spin me gently and point to the window.

Two teenagers a little younger than I am are sitting at a table in the garden, their hands flying. In front of them, a shared plate of brownies is busted down to crumbs. I recognize these two from the morning coffee rush—they’re students from the Texas School for the Deaf. They love iced green tea and making out while they wait for the counter staff to pour them enormous cups of it. Right now, they’re nowhere close to making out. Judging by their clipped hand motions, they are not very happy with each other.

“Do you know those two?” I whisper to D.C. “From the endless drink orders?”

“Sure,” he whispers back, playing along though he’s not entirely sure why. “Kit is the short one and Aadi is the . . . not short one.”

He’s right, I notice, as Aadi stands up and unfolds to gawkish baby giraffe height. They continue to argue.

“What’s going on?” I ask D.C. I don’t know if this is part of his military background, but he knows about ten languages, one of which is ASL.

D.C. watches, waits. “I don’t think it’s right for me to translate some of the more personal teenage relationship details they’re flinging around right now, but let’s just say they might be done with the public mouth aerobics.”

Kit stands up so abruptly that the little table shudders and two iced green teas erupt. Ice chips fly as Aadi stalks away, frustrated, and Kit is left behind to crouch awkwardly and try to sop up the mess with several napkins.

“Hey,” Harley says, touching my shoulder with one fingertip. “What just happened?”

When I look over, the light that floods the bakery seems to melt the chocolate in their brown eyes. I’m stirring up the courage to say it. Harley might laugh, or slowly back away. I’m not sure I would blame them. But I have to let the words out, the ones that have been trapped on the end of my tongue since the moment I saw Vin scarfing down a bite of my bitter-sweet catharsis.

“I think my brownies are breaking people up.”

Sunday night, as the sky burns orange and the bats fly down the Colorado River, Harley and I step out of my beat-up car.

We’re not on a date.

We’re on the weirdest not-date I can imagine.

Harley is still in the same clothes they wore to bike all over Austin: stretchy shorts, an extra-long Proud Muffin muscle tee, short yellow vest, and those fingerless bike gloves that leave their knuckles exposed. I'm covered in muffin batter. I couldn't wait. Not after what I saw at the bakery this morning.

Harley gave me directions to this place, which seems to be a pocket-size theater. It's tucked between two houses on a side street off South Congress. I've probably been within a block of this building a hundred times and never even imagined it could be here. That's one of Austin's glories. It feels organic and surprising in a way that other cities don't. According to Tess, who watches a lot of History Channel and cares about weird things like city planning, it's due to a complete lack of zoning laws. I told her not to take the mystery out of it, and she told me that I'm a terminal romantic. "In case you're wondering, that's four steps past hopeless romantic," she added.

I scoffed and didn't let her pinch a spoonful of the dough I was working on—lavender and lemon shortbread—a true punishment for Tess, who believes that all baked goods are best before they're actually baked.

Harley strolls up the walkway, hands in their back pockets, like this is just a normal day. Like we do this kind of thing all the time. But this is only our second time hanging out in a nonbakery setting.

And it's definitely our first time trying to break up a couple with my baked goods.

The theater is called the Comeback, according to a sign above the door. The windows are papered with signs for

shows, mostly local comics and experimental theater groups. Harley waits by the door, but I feel a little stuck. “I still can’t believe you’re willing to believe me.”

“Three couples sounds like more than a coincidence,” Harley says. “And Syd . . . you’re a force.”

I try not to worry too much about whether that’s a compliment, focusing instead on the fact that Harley is telling me they really think I might have infused my feelings into my baked goods, which then stirred up the same emotions in other people. W always teased me about the whole magical baking thing, treating it like a cute little play I was putting on for her.

It was never that.

“Do you have the last brownie?” I ask, nodding at Harley’s messenger bag. They pull it out and hand it over to me, careful not to disturb the layers of napkin I wrapped it in.

“Time to put your theory into practice,” Harley says. “But first we need to find our test subject.”

“Wait,” I say. “We’re going to *feed* it to someone?”

Harley cocks their head, curls flopping slightly. “What did you think I meant when I said we should test it?”

“Eat it ourselves, maybe? Or study it on the molecular level?”

“Neither of us is dating anyone at the moment,” Harley says, and I can’t help but notice how they folded their single status into that moment before ducking their head shyly. “We need a relationship here, right?”

“But we’d have to break someone up *on purpose*,” I say, as horrified as if Harley told me they love white chocolate—which is not chocolate. It’s an abomination of sugar and manufacturing leftovers. Fight me.

Harley is almost at the end of the short walkway to the theater before they twist back and say, “Oh, I’ve got a couple to nominate.”

I rush to catch up, following Harley into this tiny dim theater where they apparently know a relationship in need of crumbling. I hold the brownie loosely in my grip—I don’t want to squash it, but I don’t want to drop it on this grubby lobby carpet, either. I wince at the sour atmosphere, the ghost of crappy beers past. A black velvet curtain with a few bald spots and a weird stain separates us from the theater—classy—and Harley approaches it, peeling it back to watch whatever’s happening on the other side.

I take the other end of the curtain, pulling it aside with my non-brownie hand. There’s no audience out there, but the stage is occupied by a group of college-ish people wearing jeans and dark T-shirts who are pretending to be drunk dinosaurs.

“We’re going to break up an improv troupe?” I ask.

“As much as I’d like that to be our objective, no.” Harley nods at the very back of the theater, where a person is folded up in one of the seats, legs dangling out of the sandwiched halves.

“I’m going to need more information,” I say. Harley

wouldn't bring me here to break someone they like out of a relationship—right? They wouldn't use my breakup brownies for their own personal gain, would they?

Harley doesn't seem like that kind of person.

Of course, now is the exact moment when I realize that as much as Harley knows about my love life, I know next to nothing about theirs.

"Eve hasn't taken a night off from practice since they started dating two months ago," Harley says. "Her *boyfriend* insists he needs her here for moral support. He says that it's a relationship builder."

"Sounds like a top-notch significant other," I say, sticky with sarcasm. "Which one is he?"

"The velociraptor in the middle," Harley says, pointing out a screeching white man-boy whose hands are curled into claws. "Eve is really great. She helped me get my bearings when we first met."

"What kind of bearings?" I ask, realizing belatedly that these people are all much too old to be high school students. "Wait, are you in *college*?"

Harley quirks one red-brown eyebrow, letting me wait in a dramatic silence that feels distinctly high school. "Yes and no. I've been taking college courses since sophomore year. Anyway, when I started, Eve was dating Robbie, who's amazing, but he transferred. Then Eve went out with Nia, and Nia is also incredible, but that didn't work out. And then Eve got lonely right around finals and hooked up with *him*."

I've never really faced the idea of dating so many people. Thanks to W, I've been locked in all through high school. Now I'm single for the first time in my entire dateable existence. I honestly can't seem to untwine that strange feeling from the dumping itself.

Harley and I walk up to Eve, who unscrunches herself from the seat. She's tall and Asian and scowlingly pretty—at least until she sees Harley and lights up. Then she's glowingly pretty. "Hey," she says, with the wilted voice of someone who hasn't seen the sun in months. She really has been holed up in here.

"Eve," Harley says. "This is Syd."

"We both work at the Proud Muffin," I add quickly. Which saves Harley from having to say if we're coworkers, or friends, or some mysterious third thing.

"That place is so great," she says. "My boyfriend won't eat baked goods. He says the stage lights add ten pounds. And then he laughs like it's a joke, but I know he means it because I made him pancakes once and he just side-eyed them like they were attacking him with calories and then took a single bite to 'make me happy.'" She rolls her eyes.

"Ew," I say under my breath.

A lot of people look shocked when I tell them I work at a bakery and insist that they *could never*, because they would eat everything and get *so fat*. As if, because I'm solidly built, I'm supposed to share their fatphobic fear.

This is horrible, and I tell people so.

Onstage, the velociraptor screeches.

Harley shudders and whispers to me, “Do you think he makes that sound when they . . . you know . . . ?”

“We brought some Proud Muffin straight to you,” I say, holding out the brownie like it might save Eve’s life. This whole plan started out feeling more than a little morally questionable, but at this point I’m happy to lend her a piece of my heartbreak.

Her dark brown eyes crackle with interest. Her fingers reach out, wiggling.

Eve tucks into the brownie right in front of us, in the breathless way that I’ve noticed only small kids and college students eat, like they’ve forgotten food exists until it’s right in front of them again. “Uhhhh. Mmmmmm. Oh my fucking god.” Eve is having an intense, private moment with this brownie. She stares at it like she’s falling in love. She makes sounds that under any other circumstance would make me blush.

“Wow,” she says, as she finishes with a sigh.

Harley and I are both staring now, waiting for the aftermath. For the moment when the brownie unleashes its power and her relationship with this terror of a pretty boy ends.

“How are you feeling?” Harley asks, leaning forward slightly.

“Are you starting a rival troupe back there?” improv boy asks in a pushy stage whisper, and several of his teammates give a stale laugh.

“Just visiting a friend,” Harley shouts.

"Bikes!" he shouts back, and it takes me a second to realize that this is a nickname for Harley. "Do you want to come up here? Show us what you've got? What about your friend?"

"Let's absolutely leave," I say.

"I'm sorry about him," Eve says, with a sudden hand on my wrist. "He can be such a dick."

"What did you say, baby?" her boyfriend asks, squinting against the stage lights.

"Dick!" she says. Then she blows him a kiss.

I think about people who get stuck in relationships that should be over, who let things burn long after they should be tossed in the bin. Did W think I was doing the same thing? Was it obvious to the people around us, to everybody but me?

Suddenly I'm not thinking about our fight but the date before that. And the ten dates before that one. The late-night gingerbread pancakes at Kerbey Lane, the sunrise runs by the lake before we had to split up for days at our respective schools. Those dates look fine from a distance, but up close they were strangely quiet. Our skin would brush and W would look at me like she'd forgotten I was there.

Suddenly I feel a very special kind of dumb, and I'm pushing my way out of the theater, dashing the curtain aside. Harley pounds along behind me. "Wait. We need to see if it works, right?"

"It doesn't matter." Thinking that baking might be some form of magic is as stupid and childish as thinking that W and I would last through high school, that her feelings would never go stale.

“Syd,” Harley says, dragging me back to the curtain. “Look.”

Eve is standing up in a smooth, determined way that makes it look almost like she’s levitating. There’s a gleam in her eyes that even the dim house lights can’t hide. She starts throwing things at the stage. Everything she can get a hold of. Pens and paperbacks and the napkin from the Proud Muffin, which flutters and falls short.

“What are you doing?”

“Interrupting your precious rehearsal!” she shouts.

“What? Why?”

“Because I’m funnier in my *sleep* than you are onstage!” Eve shouts. “The only thing funny about you is when you try to . . .” and then she lists a few activities that he’s apparently hilarious at.

The rest of the troupe applauds Eve.

“This isn’t a scene, assholes!” he shrieks, back to his velociraptor voice, *not* on purpose.

Harley and I turn to each other. I’m waiting for them to say that it’s not real, to come up with some explanation. Instead, Harley bum-rushes me, and even though they’re only a tiny bit taller, they’re strong enough to heave me off the floor and spin me once, twice, to pick up speed and make me dizzy.

“You did that,” they whisper. “That was *you*.”

“It really was.”

“There are so many jokes about magic brownies I’m not making right now,” Harley says into my shoulder.

I start laughing, but the sound dissolves when I think about Vin and Alec. And Kit and Aadi. And the strangers

Harley delivered my brownies to. Maybe W and I deserve to be over, but I'm not going to spread that misery to anyone else. I refuse to be the cause of more heartbreak.

"I'm going to get them back together," I say, right as Harley sets me down.

"Them?" Harley asks, pointing at the stage, where Eve and her now-ex-boyfriend are standing on chairs, shouting each other's inadequacies.

"Okay, not them. But everyone else who ate my brownies. I'm going to find them and fix it."

Harley's practicality snaps in place so fast that I don't see it coming.

"How?"

RECIPE

Very Sorry Cake

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE CAKE

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 ½ cups sugar

1 ½ tsp big grain salt (Kosher salt, sea salt, etc.)

½ tsp baking soda

½ tsp baking powder

1 ⅓ cups extra virgin olive oil

1 ¼ cups milk (Not skim! Skim is blue water! Don't apologize to people with runny blue water cake!)

3 eggs

1 ½ tbsp orange zest (That is a lot of zest, but you're very sorry, so it's worth it.)

½ cup fresh juice from actual oranges (Not a carton. Get in there and start crushing pulp and chasing down seeds. Every time you think about cutting a corner, don't. That's not how apologies work. Do the thing, and do it right.)

FOR THE FRUIT SAUCE

2 cups berries (I used blueberries, but this would be just as good a fuck-up sauce if you used strawberries or raspberries or blackberries.)

1 to 2 tbsp sugar, depending on how sweet your fruit is

A squeeze or two of fresh lemon

~~~~~ DIRECTIONS ~~~~~

Ready to fix whatever you've done horribly wrong?

Let's go.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

In a medium bowl, mix the flour, sugar, salt, baking soda, and baking powder. In a large bowl, whisk the olive oil, milk, eggs, orange zest, and juice.

See how easy that was? Shouldn't we all say we're sorry with cake?

Fold the dry ingredients into the wet ones, until just barely mixed. Pour the batter into your greased pans—I use two 9-inch round cake pans and sauce them separately, OR you can get truly penitent and stack them for a double layer cake, adding whipped mascarpone in the middle (quick and dirty recipe: one 8-oz tub mascarpone, 2 to 3 squeezes of lemon, 2 tbsp of your favorite fine sugar; dump in a bowl and whip together).

Bake according to your pans—start checking at 30 minutes for rounds. The trick here is to wait until you've got a consistently golden-brown top. And of course, your toothpick should come out clean. If it doesn't, you're still working through your shit and you're not actually ready to center anyone else's feelings.

When the cake is truly golden, shining with sincerity—and oil—you're ready to take it out of the oven to cool and make the fruit sauce. On the stovetop, in a small saucepan, cook down 1 cup of fruit. When it reaches half of its original volume, add the second cup of fruit and a little sugar. Right at the end, when it's getting thick and almost TOO sweet, hit it with the lemon, to taste. Test with a spoon: it should leave a thin coating of sauce behind, and the flavor should burst in your mouth, like the words that are ready to come out.

Say them with me as you spoon the fruit over the cake: *I'm very very very very very very very very sorry.*

4

I **stay up late** destroying the kitchen and then get up early to deal with the batter-crusteds bowls and beaters. I considered making these cakes at the Proud Muffin yesterday, but only one is for the couple who put in the special order. The extra, equally important cake is for the rest of the relationships I pushed off the edge of a cliff. The ones I'm now dedicated to putting back together, one bite at a time.

Besides, Harley never actually got around to filling out that order slip. We were too busy watching Kit and Aadi's explosive green tea battle.

So I'm off the clock. A rogue baker.

My parents come downstairs in their matching PJs. They order a set for everyone in the family for Christmas each year.

They are very straight, but this might be the straightest thing about them. Neither of them seems surprised by the clamor of dishes and violently tossed kitchen towels. They're used to my middle-of-the-night bakestorms, but this one was different. This time I was intentionally trying to expel feelings from my chest, funnel them down through my fingertips: how much I wish I could take back the sadness I spread to other people, like giving them an emotional flu. The special tang of guilt that comes with subtracting so much queer love from the world.

I have two perfect expanses of golden-brown crumb in front of me, but I can't sauce them. Not yet. I carefully enclose them in my carrying cases—two plastic domes named Sally and Gillian—and scoop the bright-smelling blueberry sauce from its pan into a little container.

Mom and Dad sit down on the couch together, basically on top of each other, an overlap of arms and legs and sleepy smiles. They sip each other's coffees. They talk about Tess, who checked in from college to say she's coming home for spring break at the end of the week. They fake argue and then laugh at themselves. They kiss. A lot. They're like this: adorable when anyone else would settle for mildly cute.

I'm holding a cake in each hand, trying to slide past them unnoticed. It isn't until I catch Mom and Dad staring at me in parental horror that I realize I'm crying. Not barely-there tears I can wave off. Big, hearty drops glaze my face. When I go to wipe them, I make a sticky-throated sound.

Mom leaps over the arm of the couch.

“What’s wrong, Kid?” Dad asks. He called me Syd the Kid when I was little. It usually feels like a throwback, but right now I can feel years sliding off me with each gasp of well-salted snot.

Mom slings her arm around me, supporting my weight even though she’s tiny. My head almost settles on top of hers at this point. “You okay, sweetie? Things have seemed off the last few days, but I didn’t want to push.” Of course she noticed. Of course she didn’t push. I might seem like the loud, opinionated, stomping type, but the people who know me know that I can be quiet about my feelings, box them up and save them for later. Like cake you put away until it goes so stale that you don’t even bother tasting it.

“Come on, Syd. If you don’t tell us what’s wrong, we have to start guessing,” Dad says.

“That *is* the rule,” Mom warns.

“Last time you guessed I was secretly pregnant with W’s baby,” I say with a laugh that turns on me and almost becomes a sob.

Dad finishes Mom’s coffee—she always dusts hers with cinnamon—and shrugs. “Science can do wonders.”

“Is this a cake problem?” Mom asks.

“Syd gets tragic when her cakes don’t come out right,” Dad confirms.

Something in me rears its ugly, perfectionist head. “There’s nothing wrong with the cake. The cake is blameless.”

Glee sneaks onto Mom’s face. “Does that mean we can taste it?”

“Well played.” She didn’t want to ask for any if I was upset about it. Now it’s fair game.

A little taste test can’t hurt—right? Even if these cakes serve a practical purpose, I want to know they’re delicious before I thrust them at complete strangers. If anything, these people deserve an *extra* delicious cake for what I put them through. Besides, my parents aren’t fighting. For them, maybe the cake will just be cake. I snap Sally back open and cut into one of the amber moons, then add a small spoonful of sauce to each piece. I’m stingier than usual—I need most of this cake for the lovelorn. My parents don’t seem to care about the portion size. Dad has his head down, his face almost touching his little sliver. Mom is intent on individually spearing every blueberry.

“What do you think?” I ask, unable to keep hope from staining my voice like the blueberry sauce now stains Mom’s lips.

“I have to apologize to all of your other cakes, but this might be my new favorite,” Mom says conclusively.

Without looking up from his cake, Dad sighs. “I’m sorry to ask again, but you know I have to. It’s my job.”

“Your job is designing websites,” I remind him.

“What’s up?” he asks, undeterred. “You’re not sleeping, Syd. You haven’t taken a single bite of this absurdly good cake. Something is wrong.”

I can’t tell them about the brownies. Having one person who believes me—one person who understands—seems like