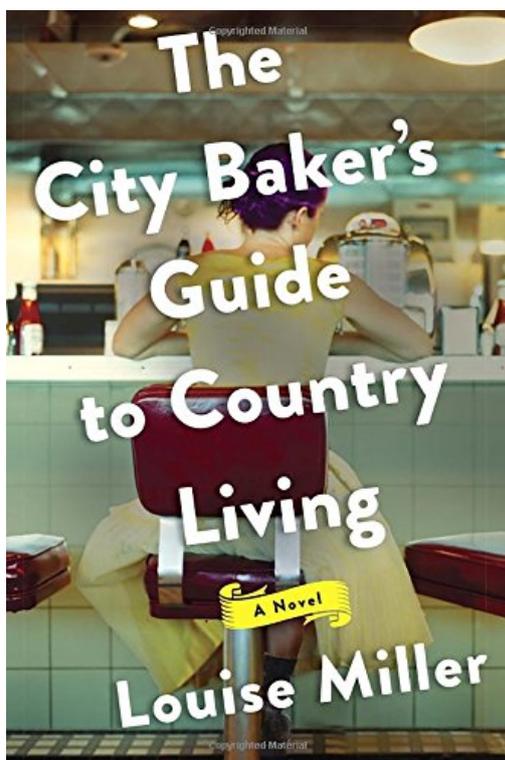


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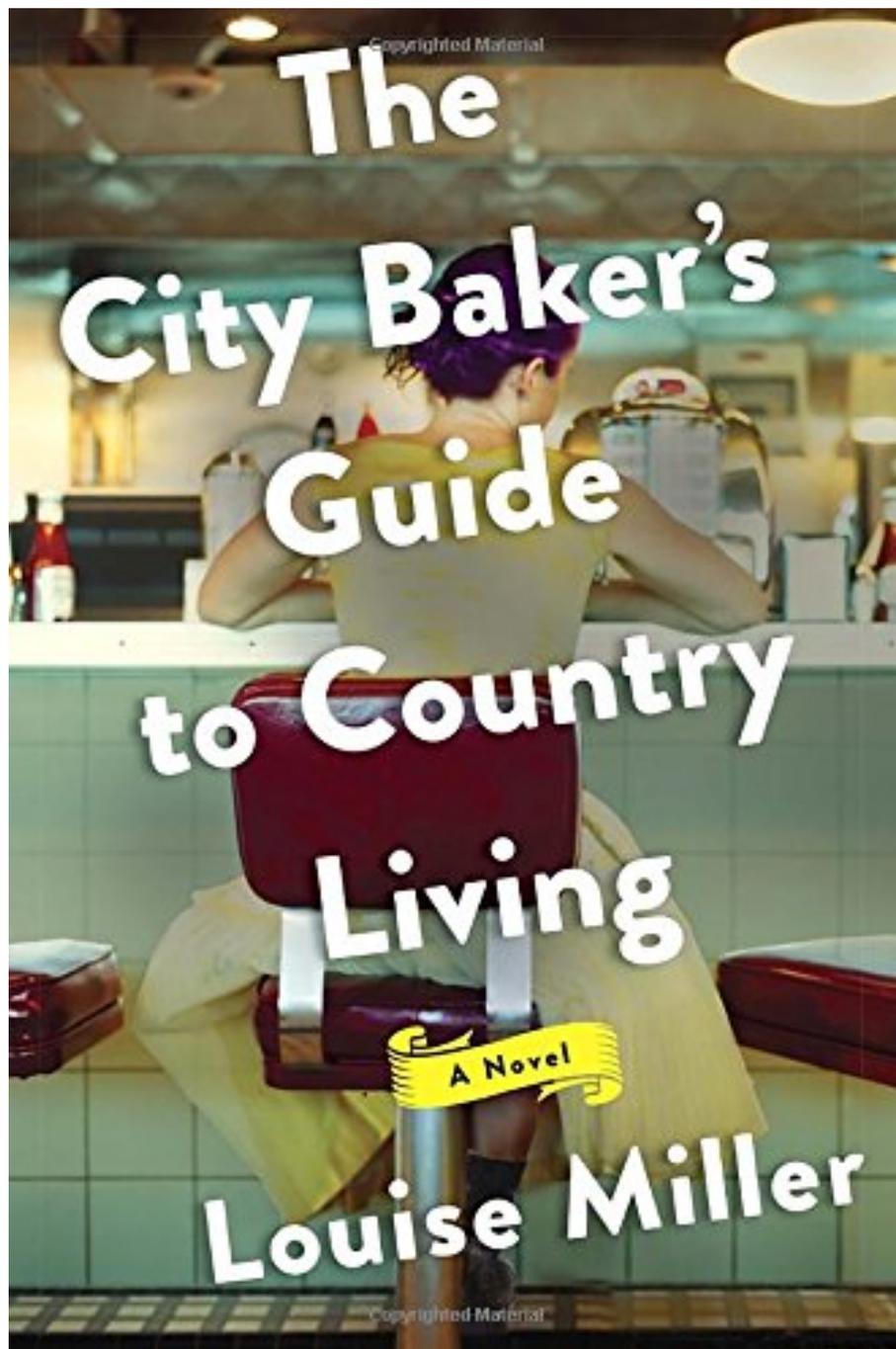
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Review

"Miller elevates the story by turning it into a Pinterest fantasy of rural America. . . [Her] visions of bucolic Vermont landscapes, cinnamon-scented kitchens and small-town friendliness make this reverie of country life an appealing one." --The New York Times Book Review

"This book is super cozy—probably because it takes place in a small town in Vermont, and because the protagonist has a dog named Salty, and because she’s a baker who spends her days working at an inn. Okay, it’s *Gilmore Girls*.”—Bon Appetit, “8 Food Novels You Need to Read this Summer”

"With insight, warmth, and humor, Louise Miller describes life in a kitchen as only an experienced baker can. A magnificent debut.”—J. Ryan Stradal, author of *Kitchens of the Great Midwest*

"This book comes with a warning: do not read while hungry. Absolutely charming and perfectly delicious. Bliss.”—Natasha Solomons, author of *The Song of Hartgrove Hall*

"A soup-to-nuts treat. If only Livvy Rawlings could move her whisks and mixing bowls into your own kitchen to work the magic Louise Miller spins throughout these scrumptious pages.”—Mameve Medwed, author of *How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved my Life*

"Genuine and sweet (with a pinch of salt), *THE CITY BAKER'S GUIDE TO COUNTRY LIVING* is a feast for the senses, for the head and the heart. With great warmth and generosity, Louise Miller brings a place and its lovable inhabitants to life. I adored this book; it made me want to dance. And eat.”—Kate Racculia, author of *Bellweather Rhapsody*

"Louise Miller knows that a great story is like a prize-winning apple pie—warm, full to the brim with character, and not too sweet. Her descriptions of the Vermont countryside, the Sugar Maple Inn, and baker Livvy Rawling's desserts make you want to pack a bag and head out for a long weekend in New England.”—Erica Bauermeister, author of *The Lost Art of Mixing*

“A warm, fresh look at finding one's way and making new choices in life. It was studded with satisfying nuggets of wisdom throughout, like dabs of butter in a homemade pie, every baker's--and writer's--secret ingredient of choice.”—Ellen Airgood, author of *South of Superior*

"Louise Miller's debut is like a walk in the Vermont woods on a sunny day: crisp, bright, colorful, soul-reviving....Delicious." —Brenda Bowen, author of *Enchanted August*

“I fell in love with the community of Guthrie, VT, the soul-healing landscape, the quirky characters, and the sumptuous desserts Olivia Rawlings creates for them.” —Juliette Fay, author of *The Shortest Way Home*

“Compulsively readable and written with deep tenderness. . . in a rare book that not only whets the appetite, but makes the heart a little more whole.” --Erika Swyler, author of *The Book of Speculation*

"Add in some romance and mouth-watering food descriptions, and Louise Miller's debut novel is a giant serving of comfort food. Treat yourself." --RealSimple

“[An] endearing debut. . . Miller, a pastry chef herself, writes about food with vivid detail, but her rhythmic prose is even crisper when her interests converge [and she] also excels at characterization, revealing her protagonist's complex pasts in subtle ways.” —Publishers Weekly

"Beautifully light and rich. . . . Comforting without being cozy, this is escapist fiction for those who want a quieter—and tastier—life." --Elle.com

About the Author

Louise Miller is a pastry chef who lives and works in Boston, MA. She received a scholarship to attend GrubStreet's Novel Incubator program, a yearlong workshop for novelists. She is an art school dropout, an amateur flower gardener, an old-time banjo player, an obsessive moviegoer, and a champion of old dogs. *The City Baker's Guide to Country Living* is her debut novel.

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Chapter One

September

The night I lit the Emerson Club on fire had been perfect for making meringue. I had been worrying about the humidity all week, but that night dry, cool air drifted in through an open window. It was the 150th anniversary of the club, and Jameson Whitaker, the club's president, had requested pistachio baked Alaska for the occasion. Since he asked while he was still lying on top of me, under the Italian linen sheets of bedroom 8, I agreed to it—even though I was fairly certain that baked Alaska would not have been on the menu in 1873. But Jamie was a sucker for a spectacle, and his favorite thing on earth was pistachio ice cream, which his wife wouldn't let him eat at home.

I added sugar to the egg whites, a spoonful at a time. As they whipped up into a glossy cloud of white, I leaned a soft hip against my butcher-block worktable and surveyed the kitchen. Now, I've wielded my

rolling pin in trendy city restaurants, macrobiotic catering companies, and hotels both grand and not so grand. You would think a Boston Brahmin private club like the Emerson, with its dim lights, starched linen, and brass-studded leather chairs, would have a deluxe kitchen. But no matter what the dining room (or what we in the business call the front of the house) looks like—even if we're talking duct-taped Naugahyde benches hugging tin-rimmed Formica tables—the back of the house, the kitchen, is always the same: a sea of stainless steel. Tables, bowls, freezer all gleaming in a cold gray. Whisks and spoons hanging in orderly rows. A mixer with a hook the size of my arm bent to beat bread dough. It's comforting. No matter how many times I changed jobs, I could always count on the kitchen: the order, the predictability, everything familiar and in its place.

I was swirling the last slope of meringue across the layers of ice cream and cake when I heard the champagne corks pop in the neighboring Jefferson Room. Glen, the GM, sprinted into the kitchen.

“Almost ready, chef?”

I held out my sticky fingers. “Hand me that blowtorch.” The blue flame swept across the meringue, leaving a burned trail of sugar in its wake.

A swell of baritone voices thundered through the swinging door, pounding the Emerson Club anthem into the kitchen.

“That's our cue,” Glen said.

I ran my fingers through my freshly dyed curls. I had gone with purple this week. Manic Panic Electric Amethyst, to be exact. Not historically accurate for a chef in the nineteenth century, but it's not like I was a guest.

With my thumb across the lip of the bottle, I doused the confection with 150-proof rum and hoisted up the tray. “Light me on fire.”

Glen lit a match and carefully set the flame to the pool of rum in the hollowed-out eggshell tucked into the top. In a flash, the flame caught hold and spread across the waves of meringue. Glen raced in front of me, holding open the doors. I stepped into the room to the last notes of the anthem. The crowd burst into applause.

The tray must have weighed forty pounds. Silver is heavy, and they don't call it pound cake for nothing, never mind the ten gallons of pistachio ice cream. But I stretched my mouth wide into a smile and walked about the room, squeezing between the closely set tables and standing with the members as they snapped pictures. The flames were dying down but not quite out. Jamie stood at the back of the room, by the floor-length windows, his arm wrapped tightly around his wife's waist. Their children were by their side, miniatures of their parents, one in a dark suit, the other in a crinoline dress. A light sweat broke out across my brow. How strange that the flames were getting smaller but I was growing hotter by the second. The room was crowded. Members were packed in small groups on every inch of carpet. Somewhere, I knew Glen was counting heads and mumbling to himself about maximum capacity. I elbowed my way through, my biceps straining as I carried the tray above my head, trying to avoid catching anyone's gown on fire. The club treasurer put his arm around my waist, his palm resting lower on my hip than was respectable. “One for the newsletter,” he said. My smile widened. I tightened my grip on the tray. Jamie looked over at me then, his eyes vacant, skimming over and then past me. He whispered in his wife's ear. She laughed, glancing in my direction. It was the last thing I saw before the tray slipped from my fingers and hit the floor.

After the abrupt end of my shift, I stopped by my apartment just long enough to stuff some clothes into a

canvas bag and pickup Salty, my chunky Irish wolfhound mix. I drove north for three hours, fueled by the desire to be called “hon,” blasting the heater to dry my sprinkler-soaked hair, which was sticking to the back of my neck like seaweed. Salty, who just barely fit in the backseat, pressed his cold nose to my ear and sniffed. The scent of burned velvet clung to my skin. A slow-motion video of those last moments in the Jefferson Room played over and over in my head. A tablecloth had caught fire first. It might not have been so bad if it hadn’t been the tablecloth under the four-foot ice sculpture of a squirrel sitting upright with an acorn in its outstretched paw. The flames caused the squirrel to melt rapidly. When its arm snapped off, the sculpture tipped over, taking the table with it. A wave of oysters, clams, and shrimp flew into the panicked crowd before hitting the floor. The flames caught the edge of one of the antique velvet curtains, which ignited like flambéed cherries. And that’s when the sprinkler system kicked in.

At the sign for exit 17, I pulled off the highway and into the glowing parking lot of the F& G truck stop. Inside, I lingered by the hostess stand, watching dozens of pies rotate in their glass display case: sweet potato, maple walnut, banana cream. A waitress in a pastel uniform seated me in a corner booth away from a table of rowdy truckers, but even from across the room their gruff laughter felt comforting. My dad would bring me to the F&G for lunch whenever he let me tag along on his delivery route from Boston to the Canadian border—mostly just on school vacations, or if I needed a mental-health day. The last time I had been there with him was to celebrate having passed my driver’s exam. I leaned my head back against the booth, staring at the tractor-trailer wallpaper, yellow with grease, age, and smoke.

Half an hour later, I forked the last piece of pie into my mouth, chocolate pudding thick on my tongue. The waitress refilled my coffee mug and grabbed my debit card and check. I dug around in my purse, pulled out my cell phone, and, sliding down low in the booth, dialed my best friend Hannah’s number.

“Hrmp?” Hannah groaned into the phone. “Hann, it’s Livvy. I’m at the F& G.” I scanned the dining room. No truckers were giving me the “get off your cell phone” glare.

“What flavor did you get?” Hannah paused. “Livvy, what time is it?”

“Black bottom.”

The waitress’s lace-trimmed apron filled my view. I looked up to see her mouth set in a rigid line.

“Just a sec,” I mouthed.

“Declined,” she said, waving my card in the air before slapping it on the table.

“Livvy, are you still there?”

“Sorry, Hann.” I pawed through my messenger bag and pulled a couple of crumpled dollar bills out of the bottom. “Listen, can I come over? In about an hour? For a few days?”

Hannah made a clucking sound. “Bring me a piece of key lime.”

My black Wayfarers could block out the beams of sunlight that stabbed at my eyes like little paring knives but they couldn’t block out the smells. Earth, onions and herbs, and the pungent aroma of goats and ground coffee challenged my ability to keep last night’s piece of black-bottom pie in its place. I wasn’t hungover, exactly. That fine line between still drunk and sobering up was more accurate. Hannah had woken me at seven, despite the fact that I had arrived at her house at one thirty in the morning. She met me at the door

bleary-eyed, traded the bottle of Jack Daniels that she kept solely for my visits for the key lime, and went wordlessly back to bed. I opted to watch Vermont Public Access—a repeat of a sheep-shearing contest—while polishing off a tumbler or two. But today was Saturday, farmer’s market day, and Hannah insisted on arriving before it opened.

The Guthrie Farmer’s Market was held every Saturday from eight in the morning till one p.m. in the high-school parking lot. Four aisles of white tents stretched across the pavement. By the entrance, between tents, an elderly man dressed in hunting gear scratched out dance tunes on a fiddle.

Hannah was on a mission. She headed straight for a display of sunflowers, walking as fast as a person can without breaking into a run. I took a slow meander through the tents in search of coffee, Salty in tow. Ceramicists hefted thickly glazed mugs. A pair of knitters, needles clicking, turned the heels of socks. A woodcarver stood whittling away at a scene of a black bear and her cubs in the pine trees. Hannah, clutching a bouquet of sunflowers to her chest like she had just won the Mrs. Coventry County pageant, found me in an herbalist’s tent, rubbing lavender-scented lotion into my palms. I leaned over to her. “They should name this Eau de Grandmother.”

She looked over my shoulder at the herbalist to make sure he hadn’t heard me. We strolled from tent to tent, Hannah filling up her wicker basket with vegetables. “Are you okay?” she asked. “You look pale.”

I sighed. Arriving at work before dawn and finishing after the sun went down did give me a vampirish hue. Hannah, however, still had a healthy summer glow. I was pretty sure the Clinique counter had something to do with it. I slipped the tips of my fingers underneath my sunglasses and rubbed my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Honey, spill it. Why are you here?” I leaned my head on her shoulder. “Because you’re my oldest, dearest friend in the world and I missed you?”

Hannah was the one person I could always count on. She was the kind of friend who showed up when you were too depressed to get off the couch and would proceed to clean your apartment and return your overdue library books before sautéing you a pile of vegetables for dinner.

“And you drove all the way up here in the middle of the night? In your work uniform? You were here five weeks ago.”

“How about I was desperate for a piece of pie and ended up at the F&G, and it seemed like a shame not to visit when I was so close to Guthrie?”

Hannah looked at me with practiced patience. “I’ve known you long enough to know that after your shift you crave beer and French fries, not pie.”

I glanced down at my hands. They were veiny, like my grandmother’s.

“I may have caused a small fire at work.” “Oh my goodness. Was anyone hurt?”

I thought of Jamie’s wife. She had on an exact replica of the dress Ginger Rogers wore in Top Hat, the white one with all the feathers. “No, no. Not hurt. Just wet.”

“Jesus, Liv. Do you think you’ll be fired? Could the guy you’re seeing help?”

Hannah knew I was seeing someone from the Emerson, but when she pressed for details I just told her it wasn’t serious. She wouldn’t have approved of the fact that, at sixty-four, Jamie was exactly twice my age. Plus the fact that he was married. “No one ever really gets fired from the Emerson,” I said as I nervously

ripped the husks and silk off random ears of corn. “More like encouraged to ‘take a break.’”

She scanned the parking lot. After a few moments she linked her arm in mine. “Let’s go see if there are any sticky buns left. They’re award-winning.”

The deeper we elbowed our way into the mass of hungry townsfolk, the harder my head began to pound. My stomach did a little shift as the smell of manure-caked work boots reached my nostrils. I really should never drink whiskey.

“Uh, Hann? I’m going to have to sit this one out. Get me something greasy.”

Hannah wrinkled her nose. “How can you eat grease with a hangover?”

“It’s healing,” I said as I headed out of the fray.

The fresh air was delicious. I found a quiet spot under a tree on the edge of the parking lot and plopped myself down, leaning my back against the rough bark. Salty sniffed at the grass, turned around three times, then finally lay down beside me, stretching his legs out in front of him.

It seemed like the whole town was at the market that day, and half of it was in the sticky-bun line. Hannah had explained that the market was the only time the farmers ever saw one another during the harvest. Between customers they traded seeds and service, exchanged news of crops and births, and gossiped. Apparently, the rest of the townspeople were there to do the same. I watched a tall, slight man unloading wooden crates of apples, plaid shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow. Sharp-nosed and thin-lipped, with dark eyes framed by black plastic eyeglasses, haircut and shave long overdue. He felt familiar. Then I realized I was remembering a man in a Walker Evans photograph taken during the Dust Bowl.

I scanned the crowd for Hannah and found her speaking to an older woman with her hands on her hips whose sky blue cardigan hugged her narrow shoulders. She frowned. Hannah patted her arm and pointed to me, her expression cheerful. The woman looked over and studied me, her lips pursed.

My cell phone, which I had jammed in my back pocket out of habit, vibrated. Here in the mountains my cell service was spotty at best—six missed calls. I felt like I had swallowed a biscuit whole.

“Livvy,” Jamie shout-whispered on my voice mail, “Where are you? I’m worried. Call me.”

“Olivia, it’s Glen. Just making sure you’re okay. The club is going to be closed for a couple days at least while they assess the damage. The fire marshal has a few questions. Call me on my cell.”

“We’re having trouble lighting the grill, chef.” It was one of the prep cooks. “We thought you could help us start the fire.” Howls of laughter in the background before the message clicked off.

Hannah’s perfectly French-manicured toes appeared in my line of vision. I pressed the off button and threw the phone into my bag. When I looked up, a cinnamon roll the size of a hubcap had replaced Hannah’s face. Creamy white glaze glistened on the curls of pastry.

“Here you go,” Hannah said, handing me the sticky bun. I tore off a hunk and popped it into my mouth, chewing gratefully. Hannah took a dainty bite. “HmMMM, I haven’t had this much sugar in months.” She slipped the pastry into a waxed bag, then licked her fingers. Hannah will tell you that she counts carbs, but I know the depth of her sweet tooth. She reached into her purse, pulled out a cloth napkin and wiped her

fingers, then drew her skirt around her legs and sat down next to me. “So, how long were you planning on staying?”

I eyed her sideways. “Not sure. Are you worried I’ll still be here when Jonathan comes back from the conference?” Hannah’s husband and I have agreed to disagree on just about everything. It upsets her sense of equilibrium to have us both in the same room.

“No, no. You can stay as long as you like, you know that. Besides, he isn’t due back for a few more days. No, I was just wondering if you could stay until at least Monday night.”

“Well, sure. Believe me, I’m in no hurry to get back to Boston.”

“Good. I just need to see when she’s available.” Hannah reached into her purse and pulled out the wax pastry bag. She twisted off a large chunk of roll and shoved it in her mouth.

“See when who is available?”

“The woman I was talking to in the sticky-bun line, Margaret Hurley. She’s the owner of this fantastic inn. She told me that she had to let her baker go, and I mentioned you, about your experience and the awards you’ve won, and she seemed really interested.”

“Hannah,” I said, trying to come up with the most polite way to say, There’s no way in hell. “I can’t really see myself—”

“Listen, I know it sounds like a big step, but I think you would love the place. It’s called the Sugar Maple.” I looked out over the rows of tents. Vermont. Full time. “Don’t get me wrong, you know I like visiting you and all, but . . . I’m not sure exactly what I would do here.”

“You’d do exactly what you do in Boston—bake. Only when you get off work it will be pretty, peaceful Vermont instead of loud, ugly Boston.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. Sure, I complained about living in the city all the time, but it felt like she was making fun of my little brother.

“What I mean is, what do you really have in Boston? No house, no family, no boyfriend—not really, I mean...”

“Jeez, Hann, don’t hold anything back.” I lifted my hands in surrender. At the mention of Jamie, my mind had flashed to the night before, the way he’d looked through me before I started the fire, like I was just another one of the help. “Besides—where would I live? God knows I can’t live under the same roof as your husband.”

Hannah snorted. “I’m pretty sure the position comes with housing—the last baker lived at the inn.” She glanced at me hopefully. “I’d be right down the road. We could hang out all the time. It would be like college all over again.” Hannah was referring to the one semester I had gone to state school, before dropping out to go on tour with the Dead Darlings.

I thought about my rejected debit card at the F&G. If the Emerson did indeed decide to have me “take a break,” I would be out of a job and, with all the back rent I already owed my landlord, a place to live. Salty wouldn’t be too happy about living in the station wagon. “I might consider it.”

“I’ll call her when we get back. Just go look at the place.” She beamed at me, looking satisfied, as though she

had done her good deed for the day. Off the hook. “You’re gonna love it.”

Following Hannah’s directions, I arrived at the Sugar Maple Inn shortly before ten a.m. on Monday. It was a beautiful drive from Hannah’s house in town, up a long winding dirt road. The landscape changed from tidy painted ladies to sprawling farmhouses to abandoned trailers covered so thickly with bittersweet vine that only the rusted cars in the front yard would tell you someone once lived there. Then, as the houses dropped away altogether, leaving only the dirt road canopied with oaks and maples, I thought I must be lost. Who would want to stay at an inn so far from town? But as I reached the crest of the mountain road, the trees opened up and, as if I were passing from night into day, the world became all green grass against the bluest sky. To my left was the Sugar Maple itself, a bright yellow farmhouse with attached barn, surrounded by huge clumps of zinnias in pinks and reds, faces turned toward the sun. Morning glories, now dozing for the day, climbed up the side of the barn. Rocking chairs were lined up on the porch. The front yard was scattered with garden benches and sleeping cats. To my right was a wooden rail fence, and beyond it a ridge of mountains with the steeple-dotted valley below.

I walked up the flagstone path and hesitated at the front door, nervously picking Salty’s dog hair off my chef’s coat. Hannah had offered to lend me something, but since I am a size twelve to her six, I had politely declined. I reached for the brass maple leaf on the green door and gave a knock. Margaret swung the door open, eyed me, and then looked at her watch.

“You’re five minutes late,” she said, blocking my view.

“Are you sure?” I had checked my cell phone before I left the car. Margaret made a little huffing sound. “Well, you might as well come in.” She stepped aside slightly as I entered the foyer. I followed her slender frame, trim in a navy jacket, down the hallway. I tried to glance at the pictures that lined the walls, but she moved too quickly. Despite her pace, her silver bun stayed perfectly in place. We entered a sitting room, couches and chairs in mismatched florals arranged casually for easy conversation. Margaret led me to a small table by a window and gestured for me to sit down.

“So, Mrs. Doyle tells me you’re a baker.” Her papery hands sat neatly folded in her lap.

“Yes. My name is Olivia Rawlings. I’m the pastry chef at the Emerson Club...”

“Yes, I can read that on your coat.” I looked down at my left breast. Stupid coat.

Margaret cleared her throat. “Now, how long have you been baking?”

“For fifteen years. Since I graduated from the CIA.”

“You learned to bake from the government?” She scowled.

“No, no, it’s a culinary school in New York.”

Margaret looked out the window. “Yes, well then. Tell me, what’s your specialty?”

“My specialty?”

“What do you make best?” She said this louder and more slowly, as if she thought I was hard of hearing or from a foreign country. I thought for a moment.

“Well, Chocolate Gourmand magazine requested my recipe for a blood orange and sour cherry napoleon last year. And I was nominated for a James Beard Award for—”

“We’re a simple place, Miss Rawlings. Nothing too fancy here.” She leaned forward, hands on the table. “Can you bake a good pie?”

“Pie?” I lifted my eyebrows.

“Yes, you know, a flaky crust with filling inside.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. “Well, of course I can bake a pie. An excellent one.” I leaned back in my chair.

“How’s your apple?” She leaned back as well. The hands went back into her lap.

“I’ve received many compliments on my apple pie.” I felt like we were playing high-stakes poker.

“Would you be willing to bake one now?” she asked calmly.

“Right now?” I did not succeed in hiding my irritation.

“Yes. Why not? Don’t need a recipe, do you?”

“You want me to bake an apple pie right now.” Being asked to test-bake in a kitchen was a normal part of the hiring process for a chef’s position, but not on the day of the interview.

“Well, not this very second.” Margaret stood. “I have to make a few calls first. I’ll have one of the girls bring you a cup of coffee.” She walked away at her fast clip, calling out, “Sarah...”

“Don’t you want to see my résumé?” I called after her, waving the sheet of paper. She had already turned the corner and was gone.

A young woman with straight blond hair appeared with a tray. She placed in front of me a dainty teacup and saucer, filled to the brim with steaming black coffee.

“Thanks.” I glanced up at her. “Hey, is she always like this?”

Sarah looked over her shoulder. “Pretty much. But she’s decent to work for.” She shrugged. “I’ve been here for over two years. The tips are good. And the rest of the staff is more laid back.” She gave me a quick smile and walked back toward the kitchen.

This was surely the strangest interview I had ever been on. I was used to being courted, not trying to convince someone I could do the simplest of tasks. It looked like Hannah was wrong about Margaret’s interest. A wave of relief washed over me. It would be easier not to get the job than it would have been to explain to Hannah why I couldn’t move this far away from . . . everything, without hurting her feelings.

I waited for what felt like hours, making a mental list of chefs who might hire me, before abandoning my teacup and wandering around the inn in search of Mrs. Hurley. I found Sarah toward the back of the house, folding napkins in the dining room. The room was small, dressed in cream tablecloths and tarnished silver candlesticks, elegant in a Miss Havisham kind of way.

“I think I may have been abandoned,” I said lightly.

“Sorry. There was a problem with one of the guest rooms. She should be back soon.”

“Mind if I look around the kitchen?”

“Not at all. It’s through that door.”

I pushed through a swinging door at the far side of the dining room. It opened onto a room that broke all the rules of kitchendom. It looked just like a farmhouse kitchen, with a yellow tin ceiling and wide maple plank floors, but it appeared to have been stretched and pulled like taffy to accommodate the eight-burner stove top and the walk-in refrigerator.

I set my bag down on an enamel-topped wooden table. It was a regular kitchen table, sitting on stacks of Nancy Drew mysteries to make it a respectable height for chopping. I wondered how this place ever passed inspection. The table sat in the middle of the room, close to the cast-iron range. I crept about, grabbing tools that I would need for pie baking as I went. Even they seemed odd, like something you would find at a church sale, not in a restaurant supply catalog. The rolling pin was the heavy kind with ball bearings—the type I pictured cartoon housewives using on the heads of their husbands. The measuring cups were glass with painted pictures of roosters on them. I found a beautiful old pair of copper scissors and a set of tin measuring spoons so worn the fractions were unreadable. The pantry still served as a pantry, although the shelves were dwarfed by industrial-sized cans of baking powder and cling peaches. In there I found an old stand mixer, complete with its original bowl of iridescent glass, which I hauled out and placed on the table. The one thing I couldn’t find was flour. I kept searching, opening drawers and bins.

Next to the pantry there was a small door. I pushed it open, hoping it was another storage area, and was greeted by darkness. I waved my hand in the air, searching for a cord. My fingers touched something silky and soft as I walked deeper into the stuffy room. A tickle of fabric brushed against my skin like feathers. When my hand found the light cord, I pulled on it and blinked. From the ceiling hung ribbons. Hundreds of them, all blue, their pointed tips swaying gently. They extended the entire length of the ceiling, each one emblazoned in gold with the same words: Coventry County Fair—First Place. In a large wooden display case hung larger ribbons, the heads fat with extra loops of fabric like the petals of a sunflower. These ribbons were all blue as well, with the exception of the last three. Those ribbons were red. From somewhere in the inn I heard Margaret’s voice, followed by another, this one more cheerful. I clicked off the light and slipped out of the room, easing the door closed behind me.

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