



MEG DONOHUE

Includes an Excerpt from
All the Summer Girls

How to
Eat a
Cupcake

A Novel

“A sparkling, witty story about an unlikely, yet redemptive, friendship. Donohue’s voice is lovely, intelligent, and alluring. Grab one of these for your best friend and read it together.” —Katie Crouch, bestselling author of *Girls in Trucks* and *Men and Dogs*

How to Eat a Cupcake

A Novel

Meg Donohue

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WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*For my parents, whose love and support embolden my dreams.
And for Phil and our girls, who are my everything.*

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June

Chapter 1

Annie

People frequently make the assumption that I'm unreliable. I chalk this up to the fact that I'm perhaps a bit too creative and flour-flecked in my dress and I'm not a hedge fund manager, dot-com entrepreneur, or lawyer. Oh, and my hair is curly, which I guess pegs me as unpredictable. Hair, apparently, is the new window to the soul.

Of course, no one actually uses the word "unreliable" when they describe me. Instead, they throw around coquettishly hyphenated words like "free-spirited" or "independent-minded," which mean they think I'm one of those flighty, dim, devil-may-care gals who arrive forty minutes late for everything if they arrive at all. The accusation could not be further from the truth. When I tell you I'll do something, I do it, thank you very much. When I say I'll be there, I'm there on time.

Still, I'll admit that as I stood in the middle of the St. Clairs' stone courtyard for the first time in nearly a decade, I ever-so-briefly considered turning on my heel and getting the hell out of Dodge. Before me, an enormous hulking beast of a mansion—the closest thing I had to a childhood home—loomed silent, windows glinting in the early evening sun. While I stood there, hesitating, the bright, confident scent of Meyer lemon cupcakes wafted up from the box in my hands. It was hard to decide which was worse: envisioning the fallout of going back on my word to Lolly St. Clair, or being scoffed at by a dozen plucky cupcakes. I drew myself up as tall as my five-foot, three-inch frame would allow and marched across the remainder of the courtyard and up the front steps.

A long-faced maid with crisply parted black hair and swipes of blush as aggressive as war paint opened the door. I immediately pegged her as a temporary hire for the party. Visible make-up on staff members had always been near the top of Lolly St. Clair's lengthy list of pet peeves, and, foreseeing the torrent of scorn that would inevitably befall this unsuspecting woman, I felt a twinge of sympathy for her. Or was that solidarity?

"Hi," I said. "I'm Annie Quintana."

My presence seemed to baffle her. I didn't blame her for being confused; I wasn't wearing the black staff uniform, but I also wasn't dressed up enough to be a party guest. She stared at me, blinking her mascara-caked eyelashes rapidly, and finally looked down at the box in my hands.

"Oh," she said. "You're here with the cupcakes."

"That's right. I'm here with the cupcakes. They brought me as their plus one. I'm a lucky girl!" I gave a little laugh, but she didn't seem to be in the mood for camaraderie. I was beginning to suspe

Lolly had already had a few choice words with her. She turned away, mumbling something over her shoulder that I interpreted as an invitation to enter.

I took a breath, lifted my chin, and then followed the maid into the St. Clairs' soaring foyer. The frenetic, multicolored Jackson Pollock painting I remembered well—and later studied at Cal—still hung above the rich brown tufted bench I'd sat on so many times as a kid. Twin curving mahogany staircases were bathed in the sunlight that poured through a round skylight two stories above. If the foyer was any indication, nothing had changed in the St. Clair house over the last decade. I wasn't surprised. Evelyn and Thaddeus St. Clair—Lolly and Tad to their inner circle—were fixtures in the most exclusive echelons of San Francisco society and steadfast in their good taste. It was like walking into a time warp. I half expected to look up the stairs and see Julia St. Clair smiling her Cheshire-cat grin down at me, her schoolgirl uniform tailored to near-couture perfection, Jewel's twangy yodel spilling out from her Discman headphones. Thankfully, this was impossible. Julia, like me, was now twenty-eight years old and long removed from her Devon Prep plaid. Last I'd heard she was living in New York City, vice president of a venture capital firm. *Just what Julia St. Clairs' bank account needs*, I'd thought when news of her impressive-sounding job had trickled through some funnel of e-mails and landed with a twinkly little plunk in my in-box: *a few more zeros*.

As the maid led me into the kitchen, Lolly St. Clair materialized in front of me, her slender, Chanel-clad arms wrapping me in a surprisingly robust embrace. If I'd put on some weight over the previous ten years, Lolly seemed to have somehow shed the same amount from her already thin frame. She felt fragile in my arms, as bony as a bird. A tiny, squawking, bizarrely strong bird.

"Oh, thank goodness it's just you!" she rasped into my ear. "I nearly died when I heard the doorbell. I'm sure you haven't forgotten that early guests are as welcome as the plague in this home."

Before I had a chance to cough menacingly into her hair, Lolly pushed me to arm's length, her fingernails biting into my shoulders. Her pale blue eyes searched my face. I returned the steady gaze, but any changes in Lolly would have required a magnifying glass to identify. At sixty-one, she glowed with a Faye Dunaway-esque, bobble-head beauty, her hair dyed and coiffed in a perfectly appropriate white-blond, jawline-skimming do. Thanks, undoubtedly, to the efforts of a highly skilled surgeon, her skin was luminous and taut without succumbing to that trout-in-a-wind-tunnel look so many women her age seemed to be sporting.

Having completed her own inspection, Lolly pulled me close again. "Hello, my dear," she said quietly. "Lovely little Annie."

I was determined not to fall into the web of memories that her voice instantly spun through my head. Instead, I looked over her shoulder at the kitchen. But this was a mistake. Immediately, my back grew tense. I guess I'd assumed the St. Clairs would have changed something in the kitchen—nowhere else—out of respect for my mom, or out of sadness, or regret, or even just to avoid any morbid associations. But everything looked exactly the same. There were the sand-colored granite counters webbed with intricate gold veins that my fingers had traced countless times; the stacked ovens Julia and I had baked pizzas in during slumber parties with a gaggle of middle-school girlfriends; the long rectangular window framing an absurdly postcard-perfect view of the sparkling bay and majestic Golden Gate Bridge that made my heart beat a little more strongly each and every time I saw it.

Home. The word pierced my thoughts like a poison dart. Is there any more complicated word in the English language? So much packed into one simple syllable. In Spanish, there's only one word for both home and house: *casa*. But we English speakers like to complicate matters. My eyes fell for one moment on the white marble-topped kitchen island where my mother had spent so much time :

long ago. I tried very, very hard not to look down at the floor where my mother had been found.

“Well,” I said, extricating myself from Lolly’s arms a second time. “I see you’ve really let the place go to hell.”

Lolly barked out a laugh, wagging her finger at me. “And I see you’re exactly the same. I’m finding it hard not to ask if you’ve studied for your history test, young lady.”

“Go ahead,” I said, warming to her. Even with those sharp little nails, Lolly really wasn’t so bad. “The answer will be the same.”

She sent the maid, who’d become remarkably less dour in Lolly’s presence, to bring in the rest of the cupcake boxes from the car I’d borrowed from my friend Becca. It was Becca, in fact, who’d convinced me to accept Lolly’s request to cater the desserts for her Save the Children benefit. *Are you insane?* Becca had sputtered when I told her I was planning on saying no. *Think of all of those rich people eating your cupcakes! You’re going to pass up that opportunity for what? To make your eighth millionth almond croissant for Valencia Street Bakery? To walk another mutt around Dolores Park scooping up baggies of crap?* It was, all in all, a convincing argument. And so there I was, back at the St. Clairs’ as hired help. Lolly’s bonbon-sized diamond ring had nothing on the chip on my shoulder that day.

The truth, I knew, was that Lolly could have had her pick of any pastry chef in San Francisco. She threw lavish events at least once a month; her address book was thick with caterers and party planners and nonprofits worthy of St. Clair fund-raising soirees. But she had continually contacted me over the years, sending precisely worded e-mails and leaving the occasional brisk voice mail, undeterred by my infrequent response. It wasn’t that I didn’t like her, but just that I had spent much of my life attempting to untangle myself from the St. Clair world. I knew Lolly well enough to know that she was the classic give-her-an-inch-and-she’ll-take-a-yard type. Still, when she somehow discovered that I was working as the head baker of a small café in the Mission—a historically Latino neighborhood I sincerely doubted Lolly had ever driven through, much less dined in—I had to respect the woman’s tenacity.

“My favorite!” she cried, opening the box of cupcakes the maid had left on the counter. “I can’t believe you remembered. Lemon. What a relief. I was a teensy bit nervous you’d bring some awful *modern* flavor. It’s bad enough I’m serving cupcakes to grown-ups—no offense, Annie darling, they’re all the rage, aren’t they? But if you’d brought some ridiculous flavor like *mojito* or *wasabi*, I just don’t know what I would have done. If I wanted to taste *lavender*, I’d spritz air freshener on my tongue.” Lolly cringed as much as her taut face would allow. “Sometimes I fear the whole world has forgotten how delicious subtlety can be. Thank goodness for the classics.” She hesitated. “Do you . . .” She paused again, studying me. “Is it your mother’s recipe?”

“As best as I can remember. I never found her recipe book.” I glanced again at the marble island in the center of the kitchen. “Actually, I thought while I’m here I might look around for it. That is, if you don’t mind a broke baker snooping through your fine silver.”

“I suppose we can make an exception this one time. We never did have anyone move into the carriage house after . . .” Lolly’s voice dropped off. She studied her pearl-colored nails, collecting herself. When she looked up, the ripple of emotion that had momentarily crossed her face had stilled. She took a deep breath through her nose, her chest swelling beneath her pewter blouse. I imagined her looking in the mirror each morning and thinking, *Impeccably arched brows? Check. Sculptured cheekbones? Oh yes. Megawatt smile? Indeed. Now, let’s go save some children.*

“Well, live-in help didn’t seem necessary,” Lolly continued, “once you girls were both off to college. It’s just me and Tad now, rattling around in this big old house.”

I tried to keep my smile in check. Lolly and Tad might not have their household employees living on the grounds anymore, but I was willing to bet my best cupcake recipe they were still surrounded by helping hands every waking moment. After all, for nearly twenty years, the helping hands had been those of my mother.

When she was sixteen years old, pregnant, and disowned by her devoutly Catholic family, my mother Lucia Quintana, fled Ecuador for a cousin's couch in South San Francisco and remained there until the day she landed a nanny job with the St. Clair family. Even though I knew those details of her story as well as I knew the recipe for classic yellow cake, I still found them hard to understand. How had my tiny, teenage mom, her stomach just beginning to stretch her shirt uncomfortably taut, summoned the courage to leave her whole life behind and ride a network of buses thousands of miles to a foreign city where she knew only one person?

Through a program offered by the city, she eventually found herself perched on the edge of a plush, opal-colored couch in the grandest living room she'd ever seen. Using the faltering English she'd picked up cleaning homes for the previous two years, she'd explained to Lolly St. Clair that she had a daughter, Anita, the very same age as Lolly's Julia. The fact that she had a child turned out to be a bonus in Lolly's eyes; complications during delivery had ensured that Julia would be the St. Clair's only child, and Lolly thought it would be nice for Julia to grow up with a playmate. Though I heard this version of the story many times over the years, I knew Lolly well enough to know that her motives hadn't been entirely self-centered. Beneath her well-tended exterior, Lolly hid a soft spot for those in need, and who was more in need than a single, unemployed immigrant with a toddler in tow? Not long after that interview, my mom and I moved into the carriage house of the St. Clairs' Pacific Heights compound. Right up until the day she died, neither of us ever lived anywhere else.

As I arranged six dozen cupcakes on the white Limoges platters Lolly had set out, I admired my handiwork. Lolly had been right to worry about my flavor tendencies. In my mind, there was nothing better than a cupcake with a funny little twist. I liked bold pairings of fresh ingredients slathered high with decadent, old-fashioned waves of icing—organic pear and chai tea cake topped with vanilla ginger buttercream was one of my current favorites. But Lolly St. Clair had more classic taste, and I'd made an array of delicately flavored Meyer lemon, vanilla, and mocha cupcakes for the benefit of the party. The cupcakes were smaller than my usual oversized creations, and I'd topped them with smooth buttercream icing on which I'd placed fetching little fondant birds and butterflies that I'd molded by hand. The cupcakes looked, in a word, lovely. But how did they taste? Two words: *freaking delicious*.

Lolly insisted I join the party, but not before she gave my clothes a silent head-to-toe appraisal. An ancient anger bubbled inside of me as she dubiously added up the pieces of my outfit: purple knee-length tunic, black leggings, chunky turquoise bracelet, gold hoop earrings, my dark, wavy, ever-untamable hair falling loose down my back. At least I'd stepped it up from my usual thrift store finds. *That's right*, I thought, sticking my chin out and meeting her gaze straight on. *I don't fit in*. Despite my defiant train of thought, all through Lolly's evaluation I was anxiously spinning that bracelet around and around my wrist.

Pride forced me to cross back through the foyer and join the party. Already, the St. Clairs' large formal living room was alive with rustling silk dresses, clinking crystal glasses of Napa-grown liquor, gold, and darting, black-suited waitstaff. Everyone looked perfect: toned and tan and dental-enhanced. Apparently, there was a dentist in Palm Springs offering a special on poolside teeth bleaching and no one had bothered to tell me. I felt a bit like I had wandered into a camp for rich

grown-ups and everyone had just transitioned from a mildly robust day of water activities to the me hall, ~~except instead of canoes there were yachts, and instead of a mess hall there was a chandelie~~ studded, velvet-draped great room with multimillion-dollar views.

Do any of these people actually eat? I wondered, lamenting the thought of trays of cupcakes with single bites removed being dumped into trash bags at the end of the night. When I was offered a glass of wine, I gratefully accepted it and made a beeline for one of the three sets of French doors that opened onto an enormous slate patio.

It was among the final days of June, just past the longest day of the year, and remarkably clear and warm for a San Francisco evening. The heat lamps on the patio hadn't even been ignited yet. Again that view: shimmering bay, bridge the color of red velvet cake, sun just beginning to turn the sky a startling shade of peach above the Presidio's gray-green slope of eucalyptus trees. To the south, the island prison of Alcatraz rose somberly out of the water; I wondered if the sight of it made some white-collar criminal who might be living in Pacific Heights sweat a little as he swilled his five o'clock martini. Stifling a grin, I leaned over the edge of the railing, drank in the view, and then drank down my wine.

"Annie! It *is* you, isn't it?"

That voice. I spun around. Before me stood Julia St. Clair. Tall and willowy, she had cut her shimmering curtain of blond hair so that it fell razor-straight and ended bluntly at her shoulders, making her look sophisticated and vaguely Parisian. Her face, under the stylish hairdo, was as placidly beautiful as ever.

"Julia!" I said, feeling my calves tense. It was something that happened to me when I was anxious, as though my body, of which I only required running when I was late for a bus, nevertheless managed to tap into a biological instinct for flight. *Just being near this woman*, my legs seemed to be warning me. *decreases your chance of survival!*

Julia hugged me, enveloping me in her rose-petal scent. "You look surprised. My mom didn't tell you I'd be here?"

"No," I said coolly. "She didn't."

Julia either didn't notice or chose to ignore my tone. "Funny. Well, I'm living at home now. For now, I should clarify." She smiled, glancing down at the sparkler on her left hand. "I'm engaged. Couldn't bear the thought of planning a California wedding all the way from New York City, so here I am. We're getting married up at the vineyard in the spring."

Actually, Lolly *had* mentioned that Julia was engaged. Her fiancé's name was Wesley something-or-other, a Silicon Valley whiz kid. What Lolly hadn't mentioned was that Julia was back in San Francisco. *Sneaky lady!* I thought. *Hell, downright Machiavellian.* I had to give credit where credit was due.

"Congratulations," I said, keeping my voice neutral even as my tongue went dry in my mouth. Seeing Julia brought me back to a time when rumors had buzzed around me as dark and thick as a cloud of flies. "That's great news."

"I know, thanks. God, Annie, how long has it been? Ten years? Not since, I guess . . ." Julia faltered, and I didn't jump in to save her, enjoying the rare crack in her confidence. But then she shook her head back and plowed forward. "Not since your mother's funeral."

"That's right."

We were both silent for a long moment, looking out at the bay.

"I miss her," Julia said.

I looked over sharply. There was something plaintive in her voice, a quiet desperation I couldn't

help feeling was about more than my mother's death. Julia St. Clair had always had the type of serene classic beauty that practically begged to be studied, and I tried to view my onetime friend through the eyes of a stranger. Her features were understated, less dramatic than her mother's, more pretty than glamorous; she had the look of someone who had never known less than eight hours of sleep per night who opened her eyes each morning to the smell of lilacs and lattes, who wrapped herself in a cashmere blanket when she flew first class to Rome, which was often. Her nose was patrician, long and thin, but not *too* long or *too* thin, her skin a flawless shade of cream that had never been blemished by a pimple. At twenty-eight, there were no traces of burgeoning laugh lines around her rosy lips or true-blue eyes, but I knew that I myself had made Julia laugh countless times when we were children—a loud, infectious belly laugh that broke her composed face into an unexpectedly cockeyed, cat-got-the-bird grin.

Of course, that was back when I still cared about making Julia happy, before I realized that the person releasing that peal of laughter was a manipulative, lying, cruel young woman who was trying her damndest to ruin my life.

"Anyway," Julia said, turning to face me. "It's really good to see you again." The way Julia said these words—with equal parts earnestness and surprise, as though she could hardly believe the person herself—set my teeth on edge. She hesitated, a shadow passing over her face, and seemed on the verge of saying more. But then, just as a heaping tablespoon of curiosity was being mixed into the complicated and fairly toxic concoction of feelings I had for Julia, we were interrupted by the voice of the very man who, once upon a time, had put one of the first nails in the coffin of our friendship.

"Well, look at the two of you!" I heard from behind me. "If someone had told me this shindig was going to be a reunion of the prettiest girls from Devon Prep, I would have gotten here a lot sooner."

Coming from anyone else, this line would have sounded smarmy. But coming from Jake Logan—Jake Logan of the blue-green eyes, the puckish smile revealing that ever-so-slight gap between his front teeth, and the impossibly adorable dimples—the line produced in me a feeling I could only, and not without embarrassment, describe as puppylike in its unchecked delight. I know, I know: how cliché to fawn over a grown man with dimples. But! *He called me pretty!* I might as well have wagged my tail and rolled over.

How was it that ten years after graduating from high school, I still had a crush on Jake Logan? He had been one of those kids who'd probably avoided an attention deficit disorder diagnosis by a year or two, always bouncing from one activity to the next, quick-witted and effortlessly talented at ostensibly everything and acutely, though somehow not obnoxiously, aware of his charm. Standing before me now, he didn't seem much changed from his teenage self—perhaps a bit broader through the chest and shoulders, a little more poise in his easy stance, a steadier hold to his gaze. But men nearly always age annoyingly well, don't they?

My stomach did a not-so-little flip. Why the hell had I decided to wear that *stupid* purple tunic? Julia, of course, had on a strapless navy miniskirted dress that might as well have been a field hockey uniform for all of the casual confidence she emitted. *Round two: Julia*, I thought. Jake Logan, after all, was Julia's ex-boyfriend. The whole surreal scenario called desperately for more wine. I grabbed another glass from a passing waiter and was surprised to see Julia do the same. Julia had never been much of a drinker in high school, though of course we were underage at the time. Not that that had ever stopped me.

"I can't believe my mother still has you on her invite list after that de Young Museum gala where you got so drunk you knocked over the champagne fountain!" Julia said to Jake, laughing as she touched his sleeve.

“Please,” Jake stage-whispered. “You’re blowing my cover in front of Annie! She hasn’t seen me in ten years. There’s a sliver of hope that she might think I’m all grown up and responsible now.”

“Not a chance, Jake Logan. I’ve got your number,” I said. I looked down pointedly at his feet. “Not one who wears flip-flops with a suit is grown-up and responsible. A peddler of surfboards to bankers? Perhaps. Responsible? ’Fraid not.”

Jake laughed. Now I saw that the skin around his blue-green eyes crinkled in a new way. His dimples shone through a light brown scruff he could never have grown in high school. If anything, the changes made him more attractive.

“Touché. Note to self: Lose the suit.” He clinked his wineglass lightly against mine. “So, Mr. Quintana, other than cutting overconfident men down to size, what have you been up to these last ten years?”

Wait. Was it possible that Jake Logan was actually flirting with me? Before I had a chance to answer him, Julia jumped in.

“Annie’s a pastry chef.” She turned to me. “A *fabulous* one. I tried one of your cupcakes already. That lemon one—it’s pure summertime. Remember when you were seven and the thing you truly wanted most in the world was a cupcake? You weren’t thinking about world peace, or the economy, or I don’t know, *life* . . . you just wanted something delicious and special and homemade. Remember?”

And there goes Julia’s third sheet, I thought as wind swept the patio.

“I’m pretty sure all *I* ever truly wanted was a snake, but maybe that’s a boy thing,” Jake said. His amused gaze lingered for a moment on Julia, making me wonder just how many of his old feelings for her remained. Then he looked at me, and for a brief moment I benefited from all the warmth that had been built in his eyes as he’d gazed at Julia. “So these cupcakes,” he asked, “are they . . . Ecuadorean?”

I couldn’t believe he remembered where my mom was from. When I tried to recall the few interactions I’d had with Jake during high school, what immediately surfaced was the memory of being stung by his look of contempt during my humiliating walk to the principal’s office near the end of that devastating final year at Devon Prep. Prior to that, I suppose he had occasionally taken a benign interest in me, but nothing strong enough to risk breaking rank with Devon’s dominant crowd. I only made a couple of friends in high school: Jody, the poet who had terrible acne and a tendency to mutter, “This is *definitely* going in my collection” whenever classmates snickered at her dorky overeager comments; and Penelope, the painfully shy pianist whose face turned a remarkable shade of ground chuck each and every time a teacher called on her. Yup, it was the artsy-fartsy girls and me getting by together as best we could all those years. After the rumors about me started, though, even Jody and Penelope couldn’t risk association, and I didn’t really blame them. That was the year the loneliness gave my sense of humor a run for its money.

“Not exactly,” I told Jake now. “There isn’t a long Ecuadorean cupcake tradition for me to draw on. I guess it’s in the genes though. My mom was a wonderful baker.”

“So it runs in the family. And now you’re a pastry chef.”

“I actually work very hard to eschew labels,” I said. “I am quite literally the most accomplished eschewer of labels you’ll ever meet. But if you called me a baker, the pretension police *might* look the other way. I make desserts and breakfast treats for the Valencia Street Bakery in the Mission. It’s a hole-in-the-wall. And I walk people’s dogs. We must not forget the dogs.”

“Never,” Jake said solemnly.

“You’re being too modest,” Julia jumped in. “Those cupcakes . . . really, they’re delicious. I’m so impressed.”

I looked at her and allowed a beat of silence to pass before saying, reluctantly, “Thanks.”

I was having trouble knowing what to make of Julia's apparent kindness. If she realized how bizarre it was for three of us to be chatting away like merrily reunited old friends, she certainly wasn't letting on. Did she really not remember what she'd done to me? How she'd turned on me in the years leading up to my mother's death? How her actions had changed the course of my life and caused irreparable damage to my relationship with my mother? What she'd said at the funeral? I shook my head, irritated to find myself rehashing the events of that year after I'd spent so much time working to put it as securely in the past, and excused myself as tactfully as a short woman with two large glasses of wine snaking through her veins was capable of doing. I had nearly reached the living room when I heard Julia's laughter, a loud, flirty, artificial sound that hung in the warm night air. I glanced back. Her hand was touching Jake's arm, their foreheads mere inches apart. *Awfully close for a happily engaged woman*, I thought as I turned and made my way out of that house, determined, yet again, that it would be the last time I allowed myself to be pulled into the duplicitous world of the St. Clair family.

The St. Clairs' squat, stucco carriage house sat flush against the city sidewalk at the front of the property and served as the final line of defense between the public and the mansion. A garage and gated porte cochere formed the lower half of the carriage house; the top floor contained the two-bedroom apartment my mother and I had lived in for so many years. Leaving the mansion and its still-crowded party behind me, feeling the courtyard's uneven cobblestones below my feet, and walking up those familiar steps to the carriage house apartment prompted a dizzying wave of *déjà vu* to wash over me. I found the key in its usual spot underneath a stone duck beside the door and slid it into the lock. Stepping inside, I flipped on the lights and sucked in my breath.

The sight of my old living room was like a punch to the gut. Here, too, as in the mansion, Lolly and Tad had not changed a thing. I picked up a framed photograph from the table beside the couch. The woman was my mother, her dark brown eyes molten with joy as she crouched down to hug an elfin version of me and a coltish version of Julia tight in each arm. I could almost smell my mother then, all warm sugar and vanilla and a hint of something citrusy and tart, like lime. I set the photograph down carefully in the same spot and tried hard to keep myself firmly planted in the present.

Now where the hell could that recipe book be? The last time I looked for it was the day of my mother's funeral, and over the years I'd come to wonder if perhaps the blinding fog of sorrow had prevented me from finding it. *Maybe*, I thought, *just maybe, I'd simply overlooked the book in my hurry to finally be out of that house for good*. Each time Lolly had contacted me over the previous decade, a part of me had hoped she was calling because she had found the book. But Lolly had never mentioned it.

My mother's book was more than just a place she stored her favorite recipes, though since she was an accomplished baker and chef, her book would have been precious to me even if that's all it were. But I knew that my mom had used the recipe book as a journal as well, a place to write down her thoughts on the day, her daughter, and the family of which she took such heartfelt care. The image of my mother bent over the book each evening, her pen marking the pages with careful, flowing script, her dark hair falling around her face like a privacy curtain, was ingrained in my memory. I suppose in some small way it had been a relief to not find the book ten years earlier—I hadn't really felt ready to read my mom's private thoughts so soon after her death. Wouldn't it have been breaking her trust to do so? But those recipes! The meringues, the *empanadas dulces*, the coconut flans of my youth! I had tried to re-create them, but without the book the resulting desserts were pale imitations of the confections my mother had made with such precision, patience, and love.

And so I had long ago given up on re-creating and started reinventing. I began baking in college ~~the years after my mother's death, and, no, I didn't need a therapist to tell me it was a coping~~ mechanism, a way to feel closer to her. Once I realized I would never be able re-create my mother's specialties exactly, at least not without her recipes, I had taken to interpreting my memory of those desserts with a modern twist. The pastries I created made me feel both closer to my mother and further away than ever. I had no family—I'd never known my father, had no siblings, and even the cousin my mom had once lived with in South San Francisco had long since moved back to Ecuador. To taste my mother's passion fruit meringue one more time would have made me feel a little less alone, if only for one or two bites' worth of time.

The shelf beside the carriage house's stove still held a few cookbooks—*The Joy of Cooking* and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*—but there was no sign of my mother's recipe book. I opened every last drawer and cupboard in the kitchen and even checked the refrigerator. I sighed, leaning against the narrow, tiled countertop before working up the nerve to walk down the hall to my mother's old room.

Her bed was made up with crisp white linens, as though at any moment she might return and need a clean place to rest her weary body after a hard day's work. The closet was empty. After the funeral, she had kept a few of my mother's clothes and told Lolly she could donate the rest to her favorite cause at the moment. The bedside tables, too, were empty. I was peering under the bed when I heard the sound of a faucet running in the kitchen.

"Hello?" I called, making my way back down the hall.

There, filling a glass with water from the sink, stood Curtis, the St. Clairs' longtime driver and handyman, jack-of-all-trades—whatever anyone needed, big, dependable Curtis was your strong and silent man. He looked so much older than when I had seen him last. Now in his fifties, his ruddy forehead was lined with age, his eyes darker and more sunken than I remembered, his brown hair nearly overtaken by coarse gray. *Mom, too, would surely have had a few gray hairs if she'd lived past the ripe old age of thirty-four.* Before I knew what I was doing, I had thrown my arms around Curtis and buried my face in his broad chest.

"Annie." He sighed, patting my back awkwardly. "I thought I spotted someone walking up here, but then I figured I was just seeing things. You scared the bejesus out of me."

I pulled away. "It's just little old me, Curtis," I said, swiping at my eyes. "Not the Ghost of Empanadas Past."

Curtis shrugged sheepishly. "What are you doing back at the St. Clairs'? It's been a long time."

"Oh, you know, getting Lolly and the crew hopped up on sugar for old time's sake. I thought I'd try to find my mom's recipe book while I'm here. You haven't seen it, have you? Black, leather-bound and remarkably skilled in the art of camouflage?"

Curtis shook his head. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I'll live." Even as I said the words, I realized how disappointed I was. I hadn't understood until that very moment just how much my decision to cater the St. Clairs' party had been tied to the hope, the expectation, even, of finding that book.

Curtis walked me out to Becca's car. It cheered me somewhat to pass through the St. Clairs' garage with him by my side. I felt buffered for a moment from the pounding emotions of the previous few hours. Out of all of the people I'd seen that night from my old life, I was happiest to see him. After all, he was one of us—or maybe it's more accurate to say that I always thought of myself as one of *them*—the help. There were the St. Clairs—Lolly and Tad and Julia. There was the help—my mom and Curtis and a small army of other household employees. And then there was me, stuck somewhere in the

middle, attending fancy private schools with Julia and living out in the carriage house with my mother. ~~When it came down to choosing a side, I decided pretty early on that I would always have more in common with the Lucias and Curtises of the world than the St. Clairs.~~

At the car, when we hugged good-bye, I thought I spotted the glimmer of a tear in Curtis's usual stoic eye. *Jesus, I thought. What's with everyone and the waterworks today?*

"See you around, Annie," he called hoarsely, lifting his hand as I rolled down the car window and turned on the headlights.

Not if I can help it, I thought. But I patted his big hand and smiled before pulling out into the street and heading toward my tiny apartment in the Mission. I think I realized even then, in the cold darkness of the car, sealed off from the swelling orchestra of the city around me as it segued from the quiet mansions of Pacific Heights to the brutish housing projects in Western Addition to the still-bustling bars and restaurants of the Mission, that I would be back. That the St. Clairs' grip wouldn't be so easy to slip out of a second time.

Chapter 2

Julia

It was only in the weeks precipitating my move back to San Francisco from New York that I found myself, for the first time in my adult life, needing to rely on an alarm clock to rouse me from bed. Previously, I'd always considered it a point of pride that I didn't require the jarring buzz of an alarm or even the gentle notes of classical music, to alert me that the day had begun. My body simply knew. No matter where I was in the world, my eyes would flip open at 6:45 a.m. local time, my mind already racing through the list of things I planned to accomplish that day, my stomach rumbling for my usual breakfast of freshly cut fruit, Greek yogurt, a chocolate croissant, and green tea. In the weeks leading up to my return to my parents' home, I was ashamed to find my eyes opening leadenly later and later each morning, until finally, rebuked, I began setting the alarm on my phone. Even with its tinny melody in my ear, I lay in bed a few extra minutes each day, my body no longer one I took much pride in.

Lying there in my childhood bed, it required an enormous amount of effort to keep myself from sinking into the dark thoughts that seemed to be the only ones I was capable of thinking those days. *So this is depression*, I thought, my lips curling sourly at the word. As if in response, my body turned and curled, too, until my knees touched my chest and my hip pressed into the firm mattress. I'd always secretly, while expressing much sympathy for friends who had bouts with depression and sleeping disorders and migraines, felt sure that such conditions were a choice. Either you decided you were happy, or you decided you were not. And to decide you were not? Wasn't that just laziness? I mean for my group of friends, of course, women who were thin and pretty and well educated and whose parents still took the whole lot of us out to dinners at posh restaurants whenever they visited the city. What right did any of us have to feel depressed? *You are*, as my favorite economics professor at Stanford liked to intone, *responsible for your own experience*.

But this feeling—this sense that I could not possibly get out of bed and face another long, tedious day of pretending to be okay when I most decidedly was not—was *not* something I had chosen. Irritated, I swatted this thought away. *Just be still and clear your mind*, I ordered myself, uncurling my body until I lay flat on my back. I didn't really believe such peace was possible, but despite everything that had happened, my faith in discipline had not yet waned. I watched the ceiling fan turn again and again and again. All week, the fan's loud, monotonous whir had given me dreams of breathing under water, swimming down into murky depths for a shimmering something just out of reach.

As I lay there, working to clear my mind—an oxymoronic statement if ever there was one—something remarkable happened. It wasn't that I actually managed to wipe away all thoughts of the horrible morning I'd spent in the hospital weeks earlier—those thoughts were never really gone for long. But for the first time since that day, my efforts to clear my mind were punctuated not only with dark thoughts, but also with light, fluffy, lemony thoughts. Thoughts, to be precise, of Annie Quintana's cupcakes.

The moment I'd bitten into that Meyer lemon cupcake at the benefit the night before, I'd been transported through time. Suddenly, I was seven years old and back in the kitchen with Lucia and Annie, standing on a stepstool at the counter and using an ice cream scoop to carefully transport batter from a large bowl to a cupcake tin, my mouth already watering for the finished product.

"Okay, Julia. It's Annie's turn," Lucia said gently in my ear, her Spanish accent blurring the edges of her words.

I nodded at Lucia, ever eager to please her, but glared at Annie as I handed over the scoop. *Why do I have to share? My scoops were perfect, just like Lucia's!* My anger with Annie could never hold long, though. We were inseparable then, spending our afternoons hanging from the monkey bars at the playground, performing elaborate skits of make-believe, and digging in the garden. At night, we would sneak back and forth between the main house and the carriage house, devising whispered plans for the next day until Lucia or my mother would finally threaten to enforce our curfew. I suppose you could say we had a yin-yang friendship, each of us perfectly balancing out the other—at least until high school, when our careful, if naïve, equilibrium failed us miserably.

Taking that scoop from me, Annie hopped up on the stool with both feet at once and began spooning out the cupcake batter quickly, with joyful abandon, in a way that made me laugh hysterically, but also made me a little nervous. Lucia caught my eye and gave me a little wink, a gesture that never failed to make my heart sing. She'd been my nanny for as long as I could remember, and it was into her arms I ran when I was upset, tired, or hungry. Even at that young age, I sensed that my mother, who was very beautiful and very busy with her steady rotation of benefits and galas and dinner parties, was always a bit befuddled by my myriad needs—it seemed, somehow, that a space remained between us even when we hugged. With Lucia, that gap was closed; her soft arms enveloped me fully, filling my nostrils with her vanilla scent (which I much preferred to my mother's Givenchy perfume), and she was never the first to let go.

No one is perfect, of course, but Lucia managed to come exceedingly close. She seemed to know an endless catalog of songs—both English and Ecuadorean—that she sang in her soft, accented, slightly wavering voice. She always remembered to slice grilled cheese sandwiches straight across for me and diagonally for Annie. She had a way of listening that made me feel like I was the most important person in the world—she didn't own a sparkly watch at which to cast covert glances while I recited my times tables, and no telephones ever rang for her in my presence.

It was only as I got older that I realized, with a small swallow of shame, that those women who always called and interrupted my time with my mother were the very ones who would ensure I received invitations to all of the desirable parties, and that walking down the street with my elegant mother at my side made me swell with pride in a way walking with Lucia decidedly did not.

While my mother preferred to start her day with a glass of ice-cold water and a power walk by the bay, my father—from whom I'd inherited not only a stellar internal clock, but also a head for business, a near obsession with current events, and a serious sweet tooth—had joined me for breakfast

every day that week. We'd taken to spending our mornings poring over the day's newspapers, reading to each other from the occasional article, and slowly working our way through an oversized croissant and a double slice of coffee cake, respectively. On the morning after the Save the Children benefit, by the time I finally compelled myself to get out of bed, pull on black pencil jeans and blousy cotton top, and make my way downstairs, my father was well on his way through a third mug of coffee.

Sonja, my parents' chef, strode out of the kitchen with my green tea as I entered the dining room. My father looked over his paper at me and gave a low whistle.

"I know, I know," I said, forcing myself to sound lighthearted. "One week after leaving my job and I'm already getting lazy. What's happening in the world? What do I miss when I oversleep by five minutes?"

"Oh, the world just kept on spinning. No harm done," Dad said, shaking the paper until a page turned freely. Tall, broad, and boisterous, my father was like the sixty-five-year-old human version of an eight-year-old golden retriever, big, love-filled brown eyes, bellowing voice, insatiable appetite, and all. At home, this personality manifested itself as a sort of boozy, blustery devotion to my mother and me, but I'd heard enough of his work-related calls to know that in business, Thaddeus St. Clair was a larger-than-life force with which to be reckoned.

"Shoot," I said. "It's always so disappointing to realize the world goes on without me." I poured myself a cup of tea, nibbled on a croissant, and stared at the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* without reading.

"That was a big sigh," my father said after minutes of silence had passed.

"What?"

"You just sighed, my dear. Loudly. If I hadn't already read that paper, I'd be worried about an economic catastrophe."

Had I sighed? I couldn't remember. But the look of concern on my father's face was enough to make me avert my eyes for fear of the sudden torrent of tears that I seemed barely capable of holding at bay these days. And I'd never been a crier before! I mentally added that to the list of ways my body seemed to be telling me it was no longer functioning under my control. Each time over the previous few weeks that I had found myself blinking back tears I'd felt equally devastated and annoyed. Since *Clairs*, I admonished myself, *don't dwell. We don't dwell and we don't cry.* My mother and father were each, in their own way, comprised of stoic stock that could be traced back to the industrious gold-prospecting outfitters found on the uppermost branches of our family tree. My parents, I knew well, rarely let their emotions get the best of them. For all their faults, I admired them greatly. Each was remarkably successful: my father had parlayed inherited millions into more millions through savvy new technology investments; my mother had raised millions, *literally* millions, for various charities and social programs in the Bay Area. The path to such success seemed clear: strategize, focus, and don't take no for an answer. Needless to say, we'd never been the sort of household in which A minus were greeted with a smile and a sticker.

"Julia?" my dad prompted, eyeing me.

I straightened in my seat and waved vaguely at the air. "Oh, I'm fine. The wedding, you know. Silly stuff."

Dad nodded sagely and cleared his throat. "A three-hundred-person event is nothing to sneeze at. But if anyone can handle it, you can." He paused. "And if it turns out you can't, I'm sure your mother would be more than happy to take the reins."

I forced a laugh, and my father cocked an eyebrow at me. *Shit*, I thought. *When exactly did I become so terrible at hiding my emotions?* I placed a heaping spoonful of berries in my mouth and tried

chew with gusto.

“Unless, of course, it’s Wesley you’re concerned about?” he asked, a hint of fatherly protectiveness edging into his voice. “Did something happen?”

“No! No, Dad. Everything with Wes is fine. Wes is great.”

I had met Wesley Trehorn a year and a half earlier at a holiday party in Manhattan thrown by a friend of mine from business school. Wes was thirty-five and handsome like a man, not a boy, with the broad-shoulders-square-jaw-and-black-glasses look I loved—*your Clark Kent fetish*, Jason, my Columbia friend, had joked. But it was not love at first sight, though I was as charmed as anyone by the combination of his sweet, Southern boy manners and sharp intelligence. It was more like love-at-third-date, which was when Wes revealed more about the company he was in the process of founding—a company that would build small, inexpensive, nearly indestructible computers he believed would be powerful educational tools for children in third world countries. I’d heard hope and passion in his voice and saw ambition in his eyes as he spoke, and felt a slow turning sensation in my chest as though my heart were settling into a new, more tenuous position.

Some of Wesley’s attributes were ones I recognized in myself as well—I, too, was ambitious, some might say to a fault. After I’d graduated from Columbia with my MBA, I’d joined Lane Thomas Ventures, a top VC firm in New York City, and had quickly proven that I’d inherited my father’s uncanny ability to identify early on which high-tech start-ups would be successful. But it was the small differences between Wes and me, more than the similarities, that made me fall in love with him. He was like Julia St. Clair 2.0—ambitious to a fault, yes, but his ambition was to *do good*. Still, I wasn’t some bleeding heart liberal. I could not have tied my life to someone who didn’t believe in the importance of daily showers and a good suit, no matter how sweetly he drawled. No, even as Wes was envisioning the way his company could change children’s lives, he was also envisioning the way his company would change his own. He had big plans for the fabulous life he would build for himself, and it didn’t take long for his plans to become ours.

After breakfast with my father, I took a wedding magazine out to the patio and flipped through it idly. Photograph after photograph after photograph of perfect, smiling brides. Even in the photographs of real weddings, the ones that showed *actual* brides posing on their *actual* wedding days, the brides looked almost absurdly joyful. *Smug*, I thought, dropping the magazine down to the ground beside my lounge chair. Where were the brides who, yes, loved their new husbands, but who also dared to show a sliver of the uncertainty they surely must be feeling? Was it possible that all of these women knew exactly what their futures held? Or was it that they didn’t know, but didn’t mind the not knowing? Surely I wasn’t the only control freak to face the end of a wedding aisle?

The morning air was still cool but the sun was bright so I closed my eyes as I reclined in the chair. The sun painted flickering red patterns against my eyelids and I felt my mind begin to wander. Within moments, I was back in that hospital bed, awakening groggily to a middle-aged nurse standing over me. Someone was sobbing, a low and primitive sound. *The expression of sorrow*, I thought, *has been the same since the beginning of time*. A vast, hollow ache filled my stomach as I realized the cries were my own. I rolled over onto my side, my eyes swollen with tears, my heart splintering with grief.

“Is there someone I can find for you in the waiting room? Let them know you’re awake?” the nurse asked, patting my hand. She was a blur of floral-patterned scrubs and long dark hair, her eyes drooping and sad.

I shook my head, unable to speak. What the nurse really wanted to know was if there was someone

else who could comfort me, but the person in the waiting room was just a paid caregiver, a large woman named Yvette or Yvonne or maybe Ivana, who I had hired to drive me to and from the hospital.

The nurse's brow furrowed with concern as I pressed my trembling lips together. She had stopped patting my hand and now just gripped it, squeezing it tightly every so often. "Do you want to sleep a bit more?" she whispered, bending near my ear. I closed my eyes and in her Spanish accent, heard Lucia's. "I can give you something to help."

I nodded, grateful for her kindness, the sympathy in her voice. Hot tears snaked down my neck and into my gown and there was nothing I could possibly do but let them fall.

On the patio, my eyes fluttered open. I looked at the clock on my phone. Nine a.m. I sank back against the chaise and sighed, pressing my palms into my eyes. *Is this what the next year is going to be like? Lying around crying on the patio at all hours of the day?* Anyway, could it really take that long to plan a wedding with Lolly St. Clair, Master Party Planner, at the helm? What the hell had I been thinking, quitting my absolutely perfect job? Well, I knew exactly what I'd been thinking about when I'd given notice three weeks earlier, and it had only been in part about the wedding. *Anyway,* I thought, admonishing myself, *I need to stop obsessing over why I did it.* All that mattered was that I had done it; I'd packed up and left New York and was here now. Living in my parents' Pacific Heights house. Crying on the patio.

I tried to look on the bright side. I had plenty of time to take the long runs I loved through the Presidio and down by Marina Green and Crissy Field and up in the Marin Headlands. And there was always yoga (but, to be honest, I hated yoga—all that *oming* and *light within* gobbledygook). *Okay.* So then there were the parties. Already since my return, the party invitations had been piling up on the desk in my bedroom—cleverly designed invitations from people I had known a lifetime ago, or who I knew my parents, or hardly knew any of our circle at all, but desperately wanted to. My life was full of these sorts of *circles*, but, I wondered, since Annie Quintana, had I really had a true best friend? *Wes.* He was a true friend. My best friend. But now he was halfway around the world, overseeing the opening of a manufacturing plant in China.

Wes. I had to tell him what had happened. He'd been away the entire month surrounding my hospital stay and had barely been in town two consecutive nights ever since. On the few occasions I had seen him, the timing just hadn't seemed right. But he was going to be my husband, for God's sake. *Well,* I thought, indulging in a rare moment of procrastination, *I will tell him. Of course I will. I have to.* *Later.* But right now? Right now, it was clear that I was in desperate need of another cupcake.

It takes a person with a serious sweet tooth to hide desserts in secret stashes. Mine is that serious. The previous night, after trying one of Annie's cupcakes, I'd immediately walked into the kitchen, taken a mocha-flavored cupcake from a tray awaiting circulation, and hidden it behind a jar of wild grain rice on a lower shelf in the pantry. Now, I walked to the kitchen, shut the pantry door behind me, retrieved the cupcake from its hiding place, and, feeling only the slightest twinge of mortification from my little covert cupcake operation, took a large bite.

I had, I'll admit, effected a certain style—a method, if you will—of cupcake eating. To begin, you remove the cupcake liner carefully so as not to unnecessarily crumble the cake, and set it aside. You then turn the cupcake slowly in your hand, taking bites along the line where cake meets icing, your mouth filling with a perfect combination of both components. Once you've come full circle, you gently twist off the bottom half inch of cake, a move that takes considerable finesse and leaves a delicate sliver of cake—the ideal size for lying flat on your tongue and allowing it to slowly dissolve, building anticipation for that final bite. To finish, you are left with the center cylinder of cake and

icing, the cupcake's very heart, sometimes filled with a surprising burst of custard or jam or mouss sometimes not, but always, *always*, the most moist, flavorful bite of the entire cupcake. Take a bre before diving into that final, perfect bite; it is to be savored for as long as possible. Finally, of course you scavenge the crumbs from the cupcake liner you set aside during step one, then ball the liner in your fist and overhand it into the nearest receptacle. Make the shot? You get another cupcake.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. Back to that very first bite of hidden cupcake in the pantry: a soft cap of vanilla buttercream giving way to light, creamy mocha cake. I kept eating, turning the cupcake slowly in my hand. This was not rich, one-bite-and-you-couldn't-possibly-have-more chocolate. This was refined, complex chocolate cut with a hint of coffee and what else . . . *Currant? Salt? A grown-up* masterful cupcake. It was perfect. I leaned back against the shelves in the cool, dark pantry and finally myself relax.

Annie could make a fortune on these things.

I straightened, licked each of my fingers clean, and snuck one last nibble out of the bottom of the delicate white cupcake wrapper before balling it in my fist and shooting it into the pantry trash can. *Swish.* There I was, out of cupcakes—but with a very good idea in their place.

Of course! I kicked myself for not thinking of this the moment I tasted my first bite of lemon cupcake the night before. Wasn't I known for spotting a sure bet from a mile away? And here I was taking more than twelve hours to realize the business opportunity that was staring me right in the face. Talk about going soft. One week off the job and already I was losing my edge.

I practically ran to my mother's study to find Annie's phone number. *This is exactly what I need,* I thought, pressing the number into my cell phone. *Something to distract me, something to pour myself into while I get through this . . . this year.* I walked out on the patio again and pulled the door shut behind me, listening as the phone rang in my ear.

"Hello?"

"Annie, hi! It's Julia."

Silence.

I cleared my throat, then clarified, "Julia St. Clair."

"Yes, I know. Hi."

The chill in Annie's voice was impossible to miss. *Was she really still stuck on a series of events that took place a hundred years ago?* I wondered. Of course, this had been fairly apparent the night before when she'd stared at me coldly all through our conversation and then left abruptly when Jamal Logan appeared. I decided to ignore her rudeness and press on.

"Do you have a minute to talk?" I asked.

"Well, I just left the bakery and now I'm headed to the park with a few dogs, so . . ."

"This will just take a minute. Really. I have an idea I'd love to run by you."

More silence. But I was nothing if not persistent.

"It was great to see you last night, Annie," I said sweetly, trying a new tack.

I heard her sigh. "Is this urgent, Julia? Talking on the phone while walking three dogs with bulging bladders down an incredibly steep street toward a park is like trying to race the Iditarod with one hand tied behind your back. It would be much easier if we had this little chat another time."

I had the distinct sense that if I agreed to this, the next time I phoned Annie, my call would go straight to voice mail. It was time, I realized, for my business voice.

"Then I'll make it quick," I said, and immediately began pacing the patio. "Your cupcakes are the best I've ever tasted, and I've eaten more cupcakes than I care to admit. That's a compliment, but more importantly, it's a fact. I'm confident that with your skill and my operations experience

together we could open a cupcakery that would have a line out the door from the time we open in the morning until the moment we close at night. I can provide the capital to get us started. This is what I do, Annie, and I do it well: I invest in businesses and I drive them to be successful. I'll be in San Francisco for nearly a year—plenty of time to get you off the ground and seeing returns, at which point I'll bow out and you can take full ownership of the shop.”

When she didn't answer right away, I continued hurriedly. “I know what you're thinking: cupcakery? Does the world need another? The post-9/11 comfort-food era and Carrie and Miranda's little trip to Magnolia Bakery for cupcakes on *Sex and the City* definitely sparked a surge of interest—but let me tell you, I've tasted Magnolia's cupcakes and the cake is dry and the icing is practically grainy with sugar. Those cupcakes couldn't hold a candle to yours! Besides,” I stammered, feeling the hollow rush of her silence in my ear, “anyone who knows anything knows to order the banana pudding at Magnolia, not the cupcakes.” I was rambling, something I never did, or at least never used to do. Why was I trying to impress her? *It's just Annie*, I told myself. *Calm down.*

“My point is, people clearly want cupcakes—that desire won't wane anytime soon, I promise—and yours are the best. So let me do this for you.” I paused, readying the final line of the pitch that I realized I'd already crafted in my head: “Your talent is utterly wasted working for anyone but yourself.”

I swallowed. There was a beat of silence. And then:

“Well, gee, Julia, thanks so much for swooping into town and picking up the pieces of my wasted life. Whatever would I have done without you?”

“What? No, that's not at all what—” I sputtered.

“I'm going to decline your generous proposal. And I really have to go. Good-bye.”

I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at it, shocked. *What just happened?* Leaning against the patio railing, I searched the still-green hills of the Marin Headlands across the bay to the north, trying to make sense of the conversation I'd just had.

Annie's voice had been so hard, so remote, and so angry. If it hadn't quite contained the cold ring of hatred, it bared at least the chilly tone of strong dislike. I was sure that she had never sounded like that when we were growing up. I remembered her as brave and independent, clever and warm in a way I always envied. Now she sounded hardened, more sarcastic than funny; her words were clipped and designed to sting.

Of course, I had some idea of what Annie was so pissed off about. Our senior year at Devon Prep had been especially hard for her, and I knew I hadn't made it any easier. As I thought about that time, I felt myself descending swiftly through a series of emotions—defensiveness, regret, and finally, with a heavy, sandbag thud: sadness. I crossed the patio and sank back down onto the lounge chair. *Sadness!* All my life I'd been proactive in my pursuit of happiness, and now suddenly I felt doggedly cloaked even, by sadness. I couldn't seem to shake it. The whole point of the cupcakery venture was to get my mind *off* of the past—distant and recent—and move forward. Put one foot in front of the other and just keep walking until I was out of this funk. And here I was, being dragged back into the thick of it by Annie Quintana.

It was selfish of her, really. And ungrateful. I hated feeling like I needed her, but there I was, practically *begging* her to take my money and my expertise so that she could finally embark on her dream career—or at least, I assumed it was her dream career. And she'd said no all because of some silly misunderstanding that had taken place a decade ago! I quickly flipped through the series of events that had corroded our friendship. By the time we'd each left for college, I remembered, we were barely speaking. And then Lucia had died; after that, complete silence.

Oh! I thought with a start. *Is Annie's anger somehow related to her mother's death?* In the fall, after I had left for Stanford and Annie for Cal—or, no, I suppose that wasn't right, Annie's acceptance to Cal was still suspended at that point and she was living in the carriage house, waitressing, and taking classes at City College—my mother had walked into the kitchen one morning and found Lucia collapsed on the floor. She'd called an ambulance straightaway, ridden with her to the hospital, tracked down the very best doctors, and later paid for all of her medical bills. Still, despite my mother's best efforts, Lucia slipped into a coma before either Annie or I reached the hospital. She died several days later without ever waking. Her death had gutted me—I'd taken weeks off school and then sloggled through finals in a stunned haze. Really, Annie should have counted herself lucky she wasn't at Cal yet and could deal with her grief at home, in private.

At the funeral, Annie and I had mostly kept our distance from one another but I do remember sharing a tearful hug at some point during the service. And then, nothing. A few weeks later, she left for Cal and basically fell off the face of the planet. *Does she blame our family for Lucia's death?* My mother in particular was hurt by Annie's chilly behavior over the last ten years. After all, Annie had lived with our family for most of her life—she was like a second daughter to my mother. A niece, at the very least.

My phone rang in my lap, startling me out of these thoughts, and I picked it up without checking the caller ID, hoping against odds that it was Annie calling with a change of heart.

"Hello?"

"Crap. I must have dialed the wrong number. You're no saint."

It was Jake Logan, with an old joke. In spite of my mood, I laughed. "That's Ms. Julia, to you," he said airily. "What on earth do you want?" Jake and I hadn't spoken much on the phone since our mutual breakup during our freshman year in college, but we'd seen each other at various parties thrown by the Devon Prep crowd over the years and had maintained an easy, drama-free friendship.

"Ah, yes. It is you, isn't it?" he said. I could practically hear his mischievous smile through the phone. "Good! I just woke up and was afraid I dialed the wrong number."

"You just woke up? It's ten o'clock!"

"Please, no judgment. I'm calling with a very attractive offer. It appears the sun is out, which as you know is simply inappropriate for a June day in San Francisco."

"True," I said, matching his mock-businesslike tone. "Do go on."

"To spite this defiant sun, in defense of our poor burned-up fog, and in celebration of the return of San Francisco's prodigal daughter—that's you, Saintie!—I propose we sit inside all day and drink at Balboa Café, for old time's sake. You in?"

I squinted out at the bay, considering. A drink at ten in the morning with an ex-boyfriend was not exactly my style. And yet. Wes was halfway around the world. Annie clearly wasn't speaking to me. When I spent time alone I thought only of hospital beds and a suddenly, heartbreakingly unknowable future. So where, exactly, had "my style" gotten me after all these years? And, really, what harm could there be in having one drink with Jake? I was supposed to meet my mother at the florist's in an hour, but she could handle that appointment in her sleep, couldn't she?

"I'll be there in thirty," I said, feeling the flutter of—what, exactly? Relief? Trepidation?—well, something other than sadness in my chest.

I walked down the long, steep slope from our house in Pacific Heights toward the flat stretch of the Marina neighborhood that housed the Balboa Café and many of the other bars that I had frequented

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