



Cake Pop
Crush

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Aunt Carol and Grandma Sue,
two resilient women I admire and love

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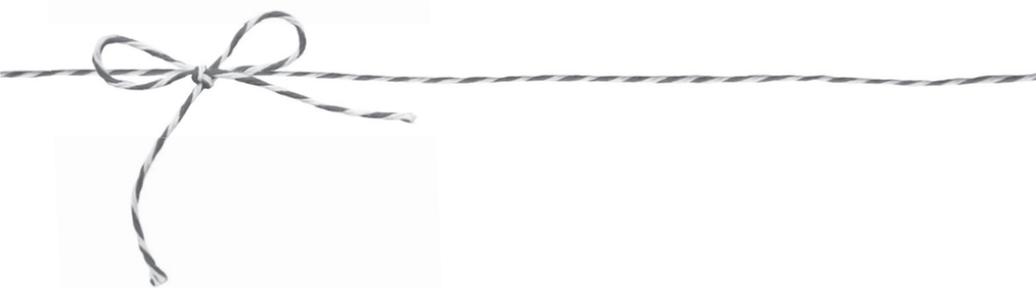
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Chapter One

I knew I shouldn't be awake. My eyes opened onto a gleaming moon and stars outside my window, and I had that topsy-turvy feeling of being out of sync with time. The clock said 4:30 A.M. I shut my eyes and tucked deeper into my covers, but it was no use. My stomach pinched uncomfortably. School was starting again after the two-week winter break, and my nerves knew it.

There was only one cure for that: baking.

In my pajamas, I tiptoed out of my bedroom and down the shadowy hallway. My dad had left half an hour ago to go to work at our family bakery, Say It With Flour. So I knew

he wouldn't be hovering over me with his running commentary: "Alicia, you're sifting the flour too quickly," or "Don't beat the eggs to death." My five-year-old brother, Roberto, was still sleeping, and I could hear Abuelita Rosa snoring happily (and loudly) away in her bedroom. So I had the kitchen all to myself.

I carefully laid out all of my measuring cups and spoons on the counter, then got my mixing bowls ready. Everything had to be in place before I could start so there'd be no missed steps or surprises. Surprise is the easiest way to ruin perfect baking. Open an oven door too soon, and the cake falls. Drop a cold egg into hot butter and it curdles. I've never liked surprises.

When I was satisfied that I had everything ready, I turned on the oven. None of my friends could ever get away with using stove tops and ovens alone, but I'd been baking with my parents since before I could walk, so my dad had given me free reign in our kitchen long ago.

My abuelita loves to tell the story of how, when I was a newborn, I had colic. Apparently that means I cried for hours at a time for no reason at all. Go figure. My mom even made this

sling for me so that she could hold me close while she baked. I still cried constantly, until the morning Mom put a small shaker of cinnamon in my hand. She was baking *capirotada*, a kind of Mexican bread pudding. She'd been trying to get the recipe right for weeks, but it wasn't working. I started shaking that cinnamon like a rattle, and pretty soon I'd sprinkled it all over the bread. Abuelita said I fell asleep in that sling clutching the cinnamon in my tiny little fist, and my mom's *capirotada* finally came out perfect, all because of me. Every day after that, my mom gave me a spice to hold while she baked, and Abuelita swears that I always knew when to add just the right dash to every treat. Maybe that was the start of it all, or maybe it was just a story Abuelita had made up. It didn't really matter. Because like other kids were born for math or art or sports, I was born to bake. To me, there is nothing better in the world than a hot oven and a spice rack full of possibilities.

I grabbed my tattered recipe book, flipped on the small TV on our kitchen counter, and scrolled through the DVR listings until I came to my favorite show, *The Baking Guru*. I pushed **PLAY**, then smiled as Renata DeLuca's exotically beautiful face flashed

onto the screen. I DVR her show every day on the Food Network, and I keep a running log of her recipes in my notebook.

Renata's claim to fame is a chocolate buttermilk cake with ginger icing topped with almond shavings. It has a secret ingredient, too, and it's the only recipe she won't share on her show. Legend has it that she made the cake for the president once, and afterward he placed enough orders for that cake to last his entire lifetime. Did I believe it? Yes, I did. Because every single Renata DeLuca recipe I'd ever made was amazing.

"Welcome, fellow bakers!" she said now. "I hope you're all enjoying a bright, sunshiny day!"

"Not yet." I glanced out the window at the still-dark sky.

"Well, even if it's not sunny where you are, it will be after we make our Lemon Sunrise cake pops!"

She ticked off all the ingredients, and I started collecting them from the fridge and pantry.

She flipped her long waves of curls over her shoulder and once again I wished that I could get my thick, stick-straight mane of chocolaty hair to curl as perfectly as hers. My mom had curly hair, too, and in some strange way, watching Renata always

makes me feel a little closer to my mom again. She died when I was nine, and the memories I had of her used to be so sharp that sometimes, for a split second, I would forget she was gone. But lately, some of those memories have gotten cloudier, harder to call up when I want them. But I do remember her hair always smelled like chocolate, with just the tiniest hint of roses.

As I laid out my ingredients, I thought about school. Sure, I was excited to see my friends again. But I hated the idea of the unknown assignments and tests lying in wait for me. Once I had them all plotted out on my calendar, I could make a plan for studying. Right now, though, all those unknowns were ballooning in my mind.

But as I listened to Renata's cheery voice, I forgot about the unknowns. I forgot about everything except the steady weight of the measuring cups in my hands. The second my hands dipped into the bag of pillowy flour, my stomach untied itself, and by the time Roberto stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen asking what smelled so good, I was ready to face my first day back at Oak Canyon Middle School.

When I stepped onto the outdoor quad with my box of two dozen Lemon Sunrise cake pops, most of the kids were still standing around in the sunshine, catching up with friends and gossip. No one seemed to want to move toward the lockers or classrooms yet. I spotted my best friends, Gwen and Tansy, near the open-air amphitheater, waving me over with grins.

“Ali!” Tansy grabbed me in a hug. “I missed you!” Tansy is always quick with hugs, and she smiles so much that sometimes *my* mouth actually hurts. Even the tight black curls that frame her face bounce along happily when she moves.

I laughed. “Tansy, you just saw me at the movies three days ago.”

Tansy shrugged, giving a little giggle. “I know, but not at *school*.”

Meanwhile, Gwen honed in on the box I was holding. “Is that what I think it is?” she asked, twirling her slender side braid. The rest of Gwen’s hair is honey-colored, but she’d used lemon juice and good ol’ California sunshine to lighten the braid to a golden blond. Then — in classic Gwen fashion — she’d woven tiny fuchsia feathers into the strand.

I nodded, smiling. Over our years of friendship, Tansy and Gwen have developed uncanny cake-pop radar. “A welcome-back present.”

“Just what I needed,” Gwen said with a grin. “Reinforcements. First day back is such a killer.”

“You know what I always say . . .” Before I could finish the sentence, Gwen and Tansy did it for me.

“There is no crisis a cake pop can’t solve,” they said in unison, then broke into giggles.

“We’ve only heard it a million times,” Gwen said. She tried to grab the box from me.

“Watch it, chica,” I teased. “I don’t *have* to share.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Gwen said, raising her hands in surrender. “You know I’m a slave to your baking. You just have to keep your cheesiness in check sometimes.”

“It’s not cheesy,” I said, smiling. “It’s one of life’s great truths.”

I opened the box, revealing the pops I had stuck neatly into foam in the center. Two dozen pale yellow suns topped with dainty marshmallow daisies.

“Isn’t it kind of early to be eating cake?” Tansy asked hesitantly.

“Hey, cake pops are part of a balanced, nutritious breakfast,” Gwen said. “Didn’t you get the memo?”

Tansy picked one up and spun it between her fingers. “Oh, Ali, I can’t,” she said. “It’s too pretty to eat.”

“Nope,” I said. “You two are my official taste testers. You can’t get out of it.” I leaned toward her. “Go on, try it. Bite that daisy’s head right off. You know you want to.”

“No problem here,” Gwen said, biting the whole top off the pop at once. She grinned around chipmunk cheeks. “Mmmm. Absolute ambrosia. Really.”

Tansy looked uncertainly at the cake pop, then took a gentle bite. She closed her eyes. “Yummers,” she said. “What is it?”

“Lemon poppy seed with cream cheese icing.” Even if I made a tofu and pâté pop, Tansy would probably say it was delish. She was just that eager to please. But Gwen was my truth teller. And that she was already reaching for seconds . . . well, that said something.

“How did you come up with that brill’ combo?” Gwen asked between bites.

“I didn’t,” I said somewhat sheepishly. “Renata DeLuca made them on her show.”

“Ah, Renata, goddess of baking, we salute you.” Gwen bent in an exaggerated curtsy toward an imaginary Renata, and nearly knocked into Harris Clark.

“Whoa, Gwen.” Harris laughed, showing off his bright smile. “I know I can kick a mean winning goal, but you don’t have to bow, really.”

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t for your benefit,” Gwen said, playing it cool, but her cheeks blushed raspberry.

Harris turned his adorable brown eyes in my direction. “Hey, Ali. I came over to see if you had any of your awesome cake pops to spare. The guys could use some extra energy for practice later.”

Now it was my turn to blush. “Um, sure,” I said, fumbling with the box lid. “Help yourself.”

As Harris grabbed a handful of cake pops, I glanced at Tansy and Gwen, who were both wide-eyed, their mouths two little donut holes. Harris was the star of the Oak Canyon soccer team,

and one of the most popular boys in our grade. But he was also the kind of kid who ignored the rules of the school social ladder. He was friendly with everybody, and because of that, everybody liked him, too. Of course, most of the time when he came our direction, it was in search of food. But I didn't mind. Any time Harris bothered to talk to the three of us, it took hours for our pulses to return to normal.

"Thanks, Ali," he said, then bit into a pop. "Wow. That's really good. I can't believe you just give these away. You should sell them!"

I smiled, my heart thrumming happily. "Thanks. I'm working on it."

"Well, see you guys later." He waved at Tansy and tugged on Gwen's side braid.

"Hey!" Gwen snatched back her braid protectively, but she was smiling. "Don't mess with the Gwenliness."

Harris laughed as he walked off to rejoin his soccer buddies. They all made mad grabs for the cake pops, then waved their thanks in my direction while I beamed.

"He's such a nice guy," Tansy whispered.

“He’s such a cutie,” I added.

“He is such a sucker for anything edible,” Gwen quipped. “Boys . . . they’re human garbage disposals.” But she smiled as she rolled her eyes.

I was about to rally the girls to head for our lockers when I caught sight of a sleek black limo easing to a stop in the school parking lot.

“Hey,” I said, nudging them, “what is *that* all about?”

“Hmmm,” Gwen said, her eyes narrowing. “Maybe Sarah forgot her backpack at the royal palace and Daddy brought it for her.”

Sarah Chan was the mayor’s only daughter and the only girl in the school who had a house so big it was called “Chan Manor.” No joke. Last year, Sarah had single-handedly driven half of the seventh-grade girls into an all-white wardrobe trend that had lasted months. Then, when she’d gotten tired of the lack of color, she had started wearing crimson orchids tucked behind her ears. And guess what? Days later, when Sarah walked through the school hallways, a Red Sea of orchid-wearing mimics parted before her.

“I don’t think so,” Tansy whispered, nodding toward where Sarah was sitting with her friends. Their table was under the only tree in the entire quad — the coolest, shadiest spot here. Even in January, Southern California could hit the mid-70s, so shade was always a plus. And on the blistering hot days of early fall and late spring, Sarah’s was the table everyone wanted but couldn’t have. “Look,” Tansy added. “She’s staring, too.”

Sure enough, Sarah’s perfect crescent eyebrows were arched in surprise, and she had her hand cupped over her mouth, whispering to Lissie and Jane. The three of them made up the great triumvirate at Oak Canyon. I didn’t totally dislike Sarah. Actually, embarrassing as it was to admit, I was a little in awe of her. Still, it was fun to see her caught off guard by the limo, too.

We all watched as Principal Dalton came striding out of the school, followed closely by Vice Principal Wilton and Mrs. Hughes, the school secretary.

“Wow,” Gwen muttered. “A red-carpet welcome by Oak Canyon standards. I can practically see Dalton sweating from here.”

“Maybe it’s a celebrity!” Tansy said in a hushed squeal. Tansy always dreamed big. She was the optimist of our group. “We could have a movie star attending our school.”

“Um, Tansy, we live in Oak Canyon, not Beverly Hills.” Gwen gave Tansy a good-natured eye roll. “We’re too far off the 405 for celebs.”

The limo door opened, and a middle-aged man in a suit stepped into the sunshine with a cell phone pressed to his ear. The man shook hands with the school staff, but he did it quickly and absently, all the while chatting into his phone. He glanced back at the open car door a few times, and then, frowning, snapped his phone shut and stuck his head back into the car. A full minute went by before he finally straightened and stepped out of the way to let a boy our age climb out. The boy’s cargo pants and faded blue T-shirt looked out of place next to the man’s suit. There was a scowl on his lips, and his face was half hidden by blond waves of thick hair.

“Not a celeb,” Gwen confirmed.

“But cute enough to be one,” Tansy whispered with a grin.

It was true. Even from across the quad, I could see the boy was tall, with creamy olive skin. Definitely cute. *Very*.

Principal Dalton extended his hand to the boy, but the boy simply grabbed the class schedule that Mrs. Hughes was holding out to him. Then he brushed past the welcoming committee, heading toward the lockers.

“Cute with a serious attitude,” I said. I watched him until he disappeared around the corner of the gymnasium. The man in the suit was already getting back into the limo, cell phone stuck to his ear again. “And if that’s his dad, then the problem must be genetic.” Still, though, I thought I’d seen a hint of something else on the boy’s face besides anger. Had it been the tiniest bit of sadness?

“Maybe he’s just having a bad day,” Tansy tried. “It happens.”

“How anyone who rides to school in a limo could have a bad day is beyond me,” Gwen said.

The bell rang, and the mass of kids in the quad gave an audible groan. But soon enough everyone broke into chaos, shouldering backpacks and drifting down the outdoor hallways. Gwen, Tansy, and I hurried to our lockers, and then to our classes.

I was sure my case of nerves from this morning was under control, but that was until I walked into my first-period science class.

Because sitting at the desk next to mine, the desk that had been empty all year until today, was the blond-haired mystery boy. With his arms folded tightly across his chest and his chin tucked into the collar of his shirt, he looked completely miserable.

I dropped into my seat as Mr. Jenkins called the class to order.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “We have a new student this semester.” He nodded toward my neighbor. “This is Dane McGuire. He just moved here from New Orleans. I know you’ll help give him a warm welcome to our school.”

A few guys muttered noncommittal “Hey’s” or raised hands in greeting, while most of the girls offered much less subtle doe-eyes and smiles.

“Hi,” Dane mumbled. He gave one nod of acknowledgement, then resumed staring at his desk with great intensity.

“All right,” Mr. Jenkins continued. “Today we’ll be starting a

new unit on marine biology. Next week is our whale-watching field trip to Long Beach, and we have a lot of material to cover beforehand.”

Mr. Jenkins droned on, and as I scribbled meticulous notes for color coding later (my fail-safe study technique), Dane pulled his chin deeper into his collar. Scowling was the only contribution he made to class for the rest of the period. And when class ended, he left, taking his frown with him.

By the time lunch rolled around, I'd found my routine again. I was filling my calendar with assignment due dates and scheduled exams. The unknowns that had loomed over me this morning were shrinking, and I was able to enjoy my turkey sandwich beside Gwen and Tansy in the sunshiny quad.

But the new boy, Dane, didn't look like he was enjoying anything. He had chosen an isolated spot in the corner of the quad near one of the trash cans for his eating post.

“Hey.” I elbowed Gwen, watching. “Sarah's about to make a move.”

Sarah Chan loped toward Dane, fluttering her lashes. She motioned for him to join her in her shady spot, but he shook his head, his expression never changing. Sarah shrugged good-naturedly as she walked away, but her smile looked a smidge forced now.

“Check out Mr. Attitude,” I said.

Gwen nodded. “Too good to eat with the commoners *or* the royals.”

“Maybe not too good,” Tansy said. “Maybe just not ready.” Her face lit up. “Hey, Ali, why don’t you give him one of your cake pops? I bet that would make his day.”

I shook my head, glancing down at the box of pops I’d brought to lunch. “I can’t just go up to him and give him one. Totally awkward.” My cheeks cooked at the thought.

The lunch bell rang, and I sighed, thinking I’d gotten off the hook. I was wrong. As we were walking toward our lockers, Gwen spotted Dane at his. He was launching books into it, making sure every one made a loud bang.

“Here’s the plan,” Gwen whispered. “Leave him one anonymously. Stick it in his locker with a note.”

“No.” I shook my head violently, but then Dane slammed his locker shut and walked away. Gwen and Tansy instantly had me by the arms, one pulling me, one pushing me toward his locker. Before I knew what was happening, Gwen grabbed a cake pop out of my pastry box and stuck it firmly into one of the locker vents. Much to my horror, it lodged there, safe and secure. I was about to yank it out, but something stopped me. Maybe Tansy was right. Maybe Dane needed a sign of friendship, something that said his new school wasn’t so bad, after all. So, before I could stop myself, I quickly scribbled *Welcome to Oak Canyon!* on a slip of paper and wedged it into the vent next to the cake pop.

Giggling, my friends and I ran to our lockers. We grabbed our books quickly, and Tansy hurried off to math while Gwen and I walked toward the language arts building. Gwen had Spanish this period and I had English lit.

“So,” Gwen asked as we reached the door to Mrs. Brach’s English class, “are you going to show the Lemon Sunrise pops to your dad?”

I shrugged. “What’s the point? He won’t let me use them. He never does.”

“It’s worth a try,” Gwen said. “I’ll come with you to talk to him if you want, after school.”

I laughed. “Gwennie, you *always* come with me after school.” Gwen’s parents both work in downtown LA, and they usually don’t make it home until after dark. Gwen is pretty much a permanent fixture in my family. But my dad says sometimes children need extra family like they need extra toothbrushes, whatever that means. So Gwen hangs out with us almost every afternoon, which is more than fine by me.

She grinned impishly. “Hey, I’m trying to come up with a legit reason. Other than leeching snacks off your dad. Play along, please.”

I latched on to her arm, giving her an exaggerated hug. “Yes, oh please come with me. I desperately need your help. *Please.*”

She nodded, giving a victorious smile. “Thanks. It’s always nice to be appreciated.”

I laughed. “I’ll meet you at your locker after seventh.”

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of new projects and assignments, and then, finally, the first day of the new semester was over. I beat Gwen to the lockers, and while I was slipping

my homework into my book bag, I glanced up to see Dane plucking my cake pop from his locker. I blushed, suddenly feeling completely ridiculous for putting it there in the first place. He held up the cake pop, inspecting it, then read the note.

I waited for a smile to break across his face. But it never came. He spun on his heel, walked right past me, and tossed the cake pop into the hall trash can. He hadn't even taken a single bite.

My face went from bake to broil, and suddenly I knew it was going to be impossible for me to become friends with Dane McGuire. Because sometimes, no matter how hard you try, all the sugar in the world can't sweeten up something gone sour.