

Brownies & Betrayal

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Brownies & Betrayal

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Dedication

For Danyelle—thanks for the years of friendship and support. There's nothing quite as sweet as finishing a project, and having good friends to celebrate with.

Chapter 1

I pulled into a parking spot and took a deep breath. What was I doing here?

Okay, so I knew what I was doing. I was bringing moist, delicious, award-winning brownies to the wedding rehearsal of a woman I'd known for years and always disliked, in the pathetic grand ballroom of a three-star hotel. It was a long fall from the Best-in-State hotel restaurant in Chicago where I'd created cakes and pastries for the past nine years. I tried not to let that bother me.

And the whole thing made me as nervous as a preteen at her first bakeoff with much older kids—an event I remembered clearly almost twenty years later.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. “Honey,” I greeted my best friend after a glance at the Caller ID. “This is a big mistake. I can’t believe I let you talk me into it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is nothing—you’ve baked cakes that cost more than my car. This is a batch of brownies. Have you left for the hotel yet?”

“I’m here. And don’t talk down about our award-winning brownie recipe.”

Honey laughed. “See, you’ll be fine.”

“If I fail at this, I may never forgive you, so you know.” I climbed from my Mitsubishi Outlander and walked around to the back to retrieve the box of brownies.

“You’ve never failed at anything, and we need a good custom bakery in town. Not to say anything against ours at the store, but our staff is hardly cut out to do fancy wedding cakes.” She spoke of Mark’s Foodtown, her in-laws’ grocery

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store, which her husband now managed. The suggestion that I start my own bakery here in town wasn't a new refrain; Honey had been singing it for several years.

The quiet town of Silver Springs, Arizona, wasn't exactly a hotbed of socialites willing to pay thousands for custom cakes, but with everything else in my life crumbling to ashes, she'd convinced me to give it a go. I hoped having the much larger city of Prescott close by would bring in extra business to keep me running since my savings account would only stretch so far. "I ought to go," I said as I clicked the button to lock the vehicle's doors and headed for the hotel. "Have to face Bridezilla."

"She's not your first."

"And I'm sure she won't be the last," I agreed as I pushed through the double glass doors and headed toward the grand ballroom. It wasn't particularly grand, but it would fit the needs of most locals. The new reception center wasn't supposed to be up and running for a couple more months.

"Hey, at least you only had to put up with her for a week—it could have been worse."

When I looked back at the hurried cleaning and planning to renovate my grandma's old restaurant into a pastry shop, I had a hard time believing that I was still working in Chicago seven days earlier. I felt a tug of longing for what I had thrown away, but pushed it back as I entered the left half of the ballroom, which had been sectioned off for tonight's meal while the wedding party held their rehearsal on the other side. Muffled voices leaked through to me as I set the pastry box on the table and checked to make sure my short, dark-brown hair was still tight in its little ponytail at the nape of my neck. Then I pulled on a pair of food-grade gloves and began to set the rocky road brownies on the provided tray.

"Valerie, this is my wedding. Can't you let it go for one

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night?” A woman’s voice drew my attention as two women walked into the room. It was the bride, Analesa.

“It’s not like I’m trying to seduce Tad. Shawn is an adult, remember?” the woman who must have been Valerie answered. She gestured expansively, and her jeweled bracelet caught my eye. The voices went low again, and I heard a few phrases like *control yourself* and *get a grip*. The conversation was punctuated with angry eyes and finger jabs to the air.

So not everything was smooth sailing with this wedding. Since I’d done cakes for hundreds of weddings, I knew that was hardly unusual. And Analesa had never been particularly easy to please. Though we never hung out on my long summer visits to Silver Springs to see my grandma, I remembered well what a control freak she was.

I glanced at the two women, the blonde bride and her brunette maid of honor—I hadn’t met many of the members of the wedding party, but I recognized Valerie’s name from when Analesa paid for the cake.

Both women were tall, tanned and had long hair flowing down their backs, but that was where the similarities ended. Analesa was the picture of conservative upper class—the poster wife for her attorney fiancé—though she’d been raised at lower-middle class at best. Valerie was dressed like a loaded call girl, from the strappy red Jimmy Choo’s, which I admit made my knees weak with envy, to the formfitting dress that showcased her ample cleavage.

I tried to pretend I wasn’t listening while I strained to catch more of the conversation. Valerie turned toward me and approached, all but stomping in her heels, if anything so graceful could be considered stomping. “Quit being so uptight, Ana. I’m just trying to have a little fun.”

Analesa looked like she intended to continue the conversation, but her groom-to-be, Tad, entered the room and

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caught her by the elbow. I thought he looked far less handsome in person than in his engagement picture, which I'd seen around town. And more geeky, with his slicked-back, tawny hair and silver-rimmed glasses. Maybe it was the stress of dealing with warring women, I mused. I added the last brownie to the trays the kitchen staff had provided me, then shifted them all around for the perfect presentation. I added another item to the growing mental list of equipment I would need for my new shop and imagined my savings account shrinking.

Valerie dragged my attention back to her. "Brownies? Aren't you Tempest Crawford? I heard you were supposed to be some amazing pastry chef, a woman who creates *fabulous* desserts capable of awing the most *discerning* of customers. And yet we have *brownies*." She stared down her nose at the delectable delights. "Are all your awards invented to make you sound impressive?" She snatched one from the tray. Her bracelet sparkled, almost blinding me at this proximity, the colored stones catching the light, the dangles jingling as she moved. A matching necklace with a large, gaudy pendant and cluster earrings glittered, completing the set.

I couldn't help feeling defensive, but determined to stay professional, I clenched my jaw and forced a smile. "You should wait until dinner. You're ruining the presentation. And this is what Analesa asked me to make. These brownies are award-winning."

"I'm sure they are—in tiny burls like this one. Even in Prescott they're probably considered fancy fare. I doubt you'll have any trouble fitting in here." She took a large bite, looking smug.

I held in a growl at her disregard for etiquette as the other guests entered the room. I needed to make a good impression, as this was my first opportunity to showcase my

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pastry skills since my impulsive relocation. I knew any work I found here would be a far cry from my previous employment, but I was determined to make my business succeed.

Valerie tipped her head to the side, looking at the ceiling as though considering the dessert's merits as she chewed and swallowed. "They're fine, I suppose. But I know this chef in Mesa—Roscoe Marks. He'd bake circles around you. Sorry, sweetie." With a gleam of meanness in her eyes, took another large bite before she turned and walked off.

I couldn't help myself. Roscoe? She was comparing my award-winning brownie recipe to Roscoe? He was such a poser! If she'd wanted to offend me, she could not have done better—besides comparing my work to Karen's, that is, but as my former boss wasn't a pastry chef, such a comparison was unlikely to happen. "That idiot wouldn't know a turkey roaster from a double boiler." I said this low so no one else would hear, but I must have been louder than I thought.

Valerie twisted back, amusement in her eyes. "Hit a mark, didn't I? I know why you're here—you were let go by your former employer. Surprised I heard about that, aren't you? Small towns have big mouths. In your late thirties and you're already a washed-up has-been." She turned and trotted off.

I saw red. I was only thirty-one, for heaven's sake, and I didn't get fired, I quit. I had them begging me to come back. Knowing that didn't stop a shaft of hurt from accompanying the anger, though.

A tall, blond man who did serious justice to the navy designer suit he wore—Armani, if my guess was right—followed Valerie into the hall, a look of determination on his face.

Tad approached and addressed me. "Ana's been telling me all about your fabulous desserts. The brownies look great, and I'm looking forward to seeing what you do with the cake on

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such short notice.” He extended a hand. “Hi, I suppose I ought to introduce myself. I’m Tad Richardson. I’m the anxious groom.” He stepped in front of me so I couldn’t tear off after Valerie and mar her pretty little face before the wedding. I don’t know what he was worried about. It’s not like I would do anything permanent.

I sucked in a breath and admitted to myself that I wouldn’t have hurt her. We would have crossed verbal swords again, and since she had my measure, she was more likely to come out ahead. Reining in my emotions, I focused my attention on tomorrow’s groom and forced a polite smile as I took his hand, which was cool and dry. He had a nice, firm grip—something I appreciated.

“It’s good to meet you. I know Analesa is very excited about becoming Mrs. Richardson. And I promise tomorrow’s cake won’t disappoint. You’ve had the benefit of my almost undivided attention, which didn’t hurt.” I admit, my vanity was mollified by his words. Smooth talkers—I always seemed to fall for them, which was why I’ve had two failed engagements. But now was not the time for dwelling on my relationship failures.

His grin transformed his face from a serious, but pleasant-looking, geek, to someone considerably more handsome. Even his green eyes seemed to sparkle. Ah, the man in the photos *did* exist.

A tall, platinum blonde who ought to have had some gray in her hair, but instead looked fresh and young as a forty-year-old, came over, putting a hand on Tad’s elbow. “Sweetheart, can you find out what’s keeping the food? And track down Jeff and Valerie—he took off after her and we’re ready to sit down, don’t you think?”

“Of course, Mother.”

Mother, like they were some high-fashion set. All polite

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façade and no warmth, but then I changed my mind. There was warmth in both mother's and son's eyes when they looked at each other. Yet she wasn't Mom, she was Mother. I let the thought go—there were too many odd characters in this group.

Tad turned to leave as a little girl ran over to him. She had dark hair and a sweet pixie face with huge green eyes and a smile that would light up a high-rise. "Tad, where you goin'?"

"To find your mom. You want to come along?" He held out his hand to her with a fond smile. She accepted both as her due and they wandered out together. That adorable little girl was Valerie's? Really?

I offered my hand to Tad's mother. "Hello, my name is Tempest Crawford, but you can call me Tess. I'm about to get out of your way for the evening."

"I'm Caroline Richardson. Tad's mother, of course. Well, your brownies look delicious. I've heard such great things about your desserts. I look forward to sampling one." Her smile was genuine, but I doubted the woman had eaten a brownie in the past ten years. She looked slightly better fed than an Ethiopian during a drought.

I appreciated the kind words, however, so I thanked her and made a final adjustment to cover the hole Valerie's theft had made. I collected my things and headed for the exit. As I reached it, I nearly bumped into the man who'd been chasing Valerie. He was coming through the doorway from the other direction. I moved to the side and ran into a table nearby, which held a huge Chinese vase of pale pink roses.

I reached out and grabbed the vase in time to stop the whole thing from toppling, though the empty pastry box I'd been carrying ended up on the floor. My heart rate kicked up for a moment when I realized how close I'd come to knocking

the vase over, but my temporary lack of personal coordination wasn't going to cost me this time.

"Sorry," the blond said, picking up what I'd dropped. "I should watch where I'm going."

"No problem. It was my mistake," I answered. I took another glance at his suit, now that I was up close. Yes, definitely Armani. "I'm Tess, the pastry chef."

"I'm Jeff, the best man." He grinned and passed over my things. "Are your brownies a work of art too?"

"Of course. They may not look it, but wait until you've tasted them."

"I look forward to it." He backed out of the way and let me pass.

Rocky Road Brownies

2 cups sugar

4 eggs

1 cup plus 3 Tbsp butter

1 tsp vanilla

2 cups melted unsweetened chocolate chips

1/2 cup plus 1 Tbsp cocoa

Mix, then add: 2 1/2 cup flour

1/4 tsp baking soda

1 tsp salt

1 cup pecan bits

1 cup semi-sweet chips

4 cups miniature marshmallows

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Mix the sugar, eggs, butter, vanilla and cocoa until smooth. Melt the chocolate chips in the microwave, stirring every twenty seconds until smooth. Cool and mix in the rest of it.

Add the baking soda and salt, then the flour, mixing between cup fulls. Add the nuts and chocolate chips into the batter, mixing well, and pour into greased and floured 9x13 pan. I usually use a spray oil like Pam or Vegalene, then flour the pan to keep it from sticking. Bake at 350 degrees for 30-35 minutes, adding mini-marshmallows to the top of the pan for the final five minutes or until the marshmallows on the edge just start to turn golden. The marshmallows will cut better if you let the brownies cool most of the way first.

Chapter 2

The cake was a masterpiece. I carried the final layers into the room where the meal would be held in two hours. Though many pastry chefs liked to assemble the cake at the bakery and have someone else deliver it completed to the site, I'd always preferred to do deliveries and assemble final details on site myself—especially since you never knew what could happen in transit.

I can't count the number of disasters I'd had to fix over the years. If a piece could crush, fall off, slump, or wilt, it had happened, and being on hand to fix and assemble was the best option in my mind. As I set the last pastry box on the table, I realized I was spoiled doing cakes at the hotel in Chicago, since I baked, assembled and displayed most of them at the same location. I would have to consider the issue before I finalized my policies for the pastry shop.

Wait staff scurried around me as I checked each bakery box and was relieved when I saw there had been no disasters en route to the hotel. I put in my ear buds and turned on my tunes. After flipping to my collection of songs from the nineties, I mouthed some of the words with Paula Abdul, though I was too conscious of everyone around me to sing any of it out loud—I saved that for the quiet of my kitchen at home.

Straightening the tablecloth on the table I'd used the

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night before, I set the cake base in the middle, checked my box of supplies to be certain everything was there, and began with the lower layers.

The mother of the groom entered and said something to me. I turned off my iPod, pretending like she wasn't interrupting, and that I wouldn't have minded if she had. It was a carefully honed talent of mine. "Sorry, what was that?"

She repeated the question. "Have you seen Valerie? She should have been up in the bride's suite hours ago for her hair and makeup. Could the woman *be* any more irresponsible?"

I blinked and watched her glance around the room as if she expected to find the missing maid of honor there with me. "No, I haven't seen her. If I do, I'll send her along."

Diamonds glittered at Caroline's ears, sequins adorned her long, cream-colored sheath and her hair was perfectly coifed. I thought she'd make a lovely bride herself. She pursed her lips. "I'd appreciate it. I told Analesa not to choose that woman for maid of honor. Millie would have been a much better choice. Valerie's daughter's running wild here with no one to watch her, and it's distracting having her in the dressing room. Why isn't Valerie keeping her under control?"

"The little girl I saw last night, with the big eyes and dark hair? Why would Valerie leave her running wild?" It seemed odd that the woman hadn't arranged for someone to watch the girl.

Caroline seemed to realize she had overstepped the bounds of propriety into the murky fields of gossip. "Valerie took her to a neighbor's house last night. The neighbor brought her back here this morning for the wedding, though why Tad insisted that she be here, I certainly don't know." She checked the slim gold watch on her wrist. "I guess Millie will have to fill in as maid of honor."

The woman swept out of the room again.

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