

EXCERPT - THE MAGIC INGREDIENT (BAR HARBOR HOLIDAY SERIES, #1)
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Part of eating a cupcake was the experience, and in Eve's opinion, a little extra frosting on your face made it all the more gratifying. Her mouth filled with the taste of vanilla, chocolate, and marshmallow, all of the flavors intermingling just as she'd planned. Still, something seemed off. It wasn't enough to toss the batch out, but in Eve's opinion, the recipe hadn't quite reached *perfection*.

Eve swallowed, wiping away the frosting from her nose. "It's not perfect."

"It's incredible," Jeff countered before he shoved the rest of the cupcake into his mouth.

He had a dollop of frosting on his nose, which made Eve smile despite her frustration at the recipe. "I don't know if I believe your verdict, but at least you didn't call it glitzy."

Jeff mumbled something that sounded like *idtellinguidperfek* around the mouthful of pastry.

"Something is missing. Something small, a flavor that isn't quite there. It's not major, but enough that I notice." Eve wiped her hands on a dishcloth and leaned against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest in frustration. "I don't know why I can't get it right. Maybe I'm not as great a baker as I think I am. It shouldn't take so many tries to get a recipe correct. Not if you know what you're doing."

Jeff wiped his face and leveled his gaze at Eve as he stepped closer. "I don't think that's true at all. You're a fantastic baker. You're a fantastic lot of things."

He was so close now Eve could smell his scent—musky and warm, with notes of pine and sandalwood. An inviting smell. Eve wondered how she'd never noticed it before. Then again, the more she felt drawn to Jeff the more she'd tried to keep her distance, kind of like reaching her goal—one step forward, two back.

"Really?" she asked, hoping she sounded interested and not incredulous. She didn't want to offend someone offering her a compliment, even if she didn't believe it. "I try so hard and I feel like I come up short."

"Doing everything on your own isn't easy, and I can see how you might think that you're failing, but you're looking at the situation the wrong way."

Eve shook her head and kept her eyes downcast, even when Jeff's hand found her shoulder, sliding down to cup her upper arm. His touch sent a tingle down her flesh and she resisted the urge to look up.

"Is there another way?"

"Instead of focusing on what you're not doing well, think of all the things you are amazing at. Try to see yourself as ..."

He paused.

Eve wondered if he'd changed his mind about whatever it was he was going to say.

Jeff cleared his throat and started over. "Try to see yourself the way I see you. Like Candy does, and Doris and Annie. And Bapo, for what it's worth."

Eve snickered, despite herself. "You're never going to get tired of ribbing him, are you?"

"Never." Jeff's hand slid further down her arm to rest on her elbow. "My point remains."

The place where Jeff's hand rested on her arm pulsed. "How do you all see me?"

"We see someone who works hard every single day, around the clock, never taking any time for herself. Who gives her all to everything she does, even when it seems impossible, and who makes everyone feel needed and wanted when she's around simply by being there." Jeff stepped in closer. His heat brushed up against her chest. "It isn't about finding the perfect recipe for a new confection or keeping the family business around for another generation, Eve. It's about you. You make Mount Desserts worth saving. And I believe in you. We all do, even if you don't believe in yourself."

When Eve finally looked up, she found herself staring into Jeff's eyes. They were warmer and sweeter than any chocolate ganache she'd ever made.

His free hand found its way to her other elbow and she allowed herself to be drawn from the counter. Jeff pulled her into his embrace, his hands releasing her elbows to slide around the small of her back, holding her close.

There was no denying the butterflies now.