

CHAPTER ONE

There are probably better ways to spend the first night of summer than breaking into a bakery. Like going to a bonfire or setting off on a vacation or heading to the party my best friend, Rose, keeps texting me from. But instead I'm creeping through a dark alley hoping no one spots me.

Okay, so the bakery *is* owned by my family and I *do* have the keys, so it's not exactly breaking in, but it is well after business hours and my parents technically aren't aware that I'm here—for all they know, I'm still at home in bed. My dad can probably tell that I use the kitchen when he's not around, but he's never said anything about it. Maybe he thinks I'm in here perfecting my Cuban baking skills, cooking pastelitos de guayaba until they taste just like his. I'm the heir to his kingdom, after all.

I wonder what he'd do if he knew I was making my own creations, deviating from the family-approved recipes. He'd probably be more upset with *that* than my sneaking out.

Good thing he isn't here.

Once inside, I flip on the lights and begin setting up my station. My phone buzzes in my back pocket, likely another text from Rose with another reason to join her at Devin's party tonight. But I'm on a strict schedule this summer, and I need all the time I can get to perfect my recipes. I pull on my apron, embroidered with my name by my abuela, and wash my hands. Last night I worked on my new croissant recipe, and when I ran out of time, I opted to do the second proof in the fridge.

But when I open the fridge tonight, the croissants aren't in the same spot I had left them. I look around the shelves, growing a little frantic until I see the plastic container shoved into the back of the top shelf. Someone must have crammed the three gallons of whole milk on the shelf so hard that it knocked the lid off the container.

"No, no, no," I say, pulling out the milks so I can reach my croissants. "No!" I cry out again as I pull aside the lid and hope they're still usable. But the damage has been done. The croissants have dried out entirely, turning my beautiful, layered dough into a crusty mess. There is no saving them. And to add insult to injury, I buy all my own ingredients for my experiments, so this means thirty-six dollars of my hard-earned cash has been wasted.

"Stupid milks," I mutter, dropping down to the floor with the desiccated croissants in my hands. They look so shriveled and sad. Is there a market for croissant raisins?

Normally a setback like this wouldn't bother me so much—trial and error are a normal part of recipe testing, after all—but the stakes feel so much higher these days. So far, the summer before senior year hasn't felt as carefree as the ones before. My

future looms just on the other side of August, and both of my parents have already made it very clear what their expectations are. Unfortunately, they have very different visions in mind. Even more unfortunate is neither of their visions align with mine.

I pull out my phone, ignoring the red bubble of my unread texts and navigating instead to *La Mesa's* website. The banner on their homepage is familiar to me now: TENTH ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP COMPETITION. I click on the link for the millionth time and read the description again.

For Latin American students interested in furthering their food-related education, our scholarship awards \$10,000 and a special feature in our September issue to one talented applicant. Two runners-up are awarded \$5,000 each in addition to having their recipes published in La Mesa's magazine. To apply, please submit an original recipe, a process video no longer than a minute showing how to make your recipe from start to finish to be posted on social media, an essay telling the story behind your recipe, and a completed application. Applications are due July 18. Eight finalists will be chosen by our judging committee and announced August 8. On August 22 the La Mesa chefs will be announcing the winners on an hour-long live stream, where they will cook all eight recipes.

Winning this competition is the key to my future. That money would get me one step closer to my dream of going to culinary school in Paris. After that is probably years of grueling away in kitchens around the world until I finally become a head pastry chef with my own kitchen, serving up my take on Cuban American desserts. But first, I need a winning recipe.

I have just under four weeks to develop the perfect recipe, and I'm off to a terrible start. I put down my phone and stare at my crusty croissants. If I don't figure out an award-winning recipe soon, I'll spend the rest of my days wasting away at the family bakery, baking the same things we've baked since 1987.

My phone buzzes again. And again. Rose is sending me a flurry of texts.

Groaning, I drop the container and open Rose's messages.

I'm bored.

Come save me

Catherine has been bragging to me nonstop about her PSAT score

Lor is here come be my wingwoman I need you

My croissant failure hasn't exactly put me in a partying mood, but I don't have nearly enough ingredients left over to try making them again tonight, either. I open the calendar in my phone and look over my timeline.

If I go to the grocery store for ingredients tomorrow and pull an all-nighter next week I can get back on track. I'll have to pick up more shifts at the shop to account for the lost ingredients, but since my mom is the scheduler, I don't think I'll have a problem.

My phone begins to vibrate again, a phone call this time.

"Amy!!!" Rose cries into the phone. "Ammyyyyyyy!"

"Yes, you've reached Amy, what is it?" I ask, deadpan.

"Get your cute little butt on that bike of yours and COME HERE. I'm dying without you. I put on One Direction, and Devin snatched the speaker from me and insisted that they were not 'the vibe of the night' or whatever."

“I don’t know, Rose. My croissants are a total bust and now I’ve lost all this time . . . I’m not exactly fun to be around right now,” I tell her as I walk out to the back dumpster and throw my dead croissants in. “I’m just going to go back home and sleep.”

“You know, I saw Sofía talking to Peacoat Kid,” she tells me. That catches my attention.

“Class Dealer Peacoat Kid?” I confirm. My sister *loves* rebellion. Anything that our family does not approve of, she does with gusto. And because she is the beloved youngest child, she never gets in trouble for it. It also helps that I make sure she never gets too deep into whatever rebellious urges she has.

“Yep, Port Murphy High’s number-one source for pills. You should come here and save her!”

Even if Rose is lying to get me to go to the party, I won’t take that chance. Sofía should be nowhere near Peacoat Kid.

“I’ll be there in fifteen.”

Rose squeals in delight, and I’m almost positive now that she’s lying about Peacoat Kid.

I rush and clean the dirty container and set the kitchen back up the way my dad left it. While I lock up Rose sends me three more texts that I don’t look at. I hop on my bike and head off down Main Street toward Devin’s house.

At this time of night, most of the businesses are closed except for the bar at the far end, where only a handful of locals can be found. The main drag is quiet and deserted, but even in the dark it holds on to its small-town charm: lampposts decorated with bright perennials and building facades from the 1800s that carry the vestiges of the past. The local co-op still has the original sign for the Port Murphy General Store, and the antique store on the

corner still has the name Richmond Mills painted in white on the brick exterior.

As I make my way down Main Street, my eye catches on the community board in front of the town square. With the school year recently ending and summer in full swing, the board is full of flyers.

The tires of my bike squeal as I come to an abrupt stop in front of the square. A little detour won't take up too much time, I tell myself as I walk my bike up to the board.

There's a poster advertising the city's fireworks show, which is always lackluster and has historically low attendance. Someone is starting up a yoga in the park series and someone else is advertising their work as a dog walker. But they're not what I'm looking for.

I zero in on the poster promoting Morales Bakery's Fourth of July special and tear it down.

Morales Bakery is the *other* Cuban spot in our small town, and the biggest competition for Café y Más, our family shop. You'd think after three decades of existing across the street from each other the two bakeries would have come to some kind of truce, but the animosity runs deep. The Morales family isn't just the family that runs the rival bakery across the street. They're the family that undermined my abuelo at every turn when he worked for them before ultimately betraying him.

The way my abuelo told it, at first the Ybarras, my family, and the Moraleses were the best of friends back in Cuba. After Castro's revolution, the Moraleses fled to Miami in the sixties and lived there for a few years before relocating to Seattle, so Blanca Morales could attend nursing school. Andres Morales

and his wife ended up settling down in Port Murphy, where they started a family and opened a bakery.

My abuelos, Felipe and Josefina, and their children (including my dad) fled Cuba in the late seventies and settled in Miami, like many exiles before them. They had no money and no close relatives to help them out in the States, and according to the brief stories I've gotten from my dad, those years were difficult. Things were only made worse when my abuela was diagnosed with breast cancer a few years later. Battling her cancer drained them of most of their savings, and the Ybarras were struggling. And so they reached out to old friends from Cuba.

The Moraleses were happy to help my family back then. Blanca Morales was now a nurse at a hospital in Seattle and was able to get my abuela a good doctor, and Andres had a job for my abuelo at his bakery. Together my abuelo and Andres built up Morales Bakery, adding new things to the menu and drawing in loads of new customers. The bakery became a local favorite despite folks not having known anything about Cuban food or culture before the bakery popped up in their town.

My abuela's treatment went well, and the American dream was finally coming true for my family. Until the Moraleses betrayed us. Their shop had been doing okay before my family showed up, but as soon as Morales Bakery started using my abuelo's recipes their shop blew up. And when my abuelo asked to be fairly compensated for the work he had done for Morales Bakery, Andres said no. So my abuelo took what meager savings he had and opened up his own shop, where he had complete ownership over *his* recipes.

That all went down almost twenty years before I was born,

but I was raised with the memory of that betrayal in me—it is practically part of the Ybarra DNA at this point. Which is why I crumple up the Morales poster in my hands and glance over my shoulder to check for witnesses before shoving it in my backpack to be disposed of later.

With that detour out of the way, I hop back on my bike and head down to Bayview Road. This is where all the rich kids from school live. The houses are all waterfront with docks and boats in the back, pristine manicured gardens, and at least one luxury car in the driveway. Most are owned by people made wealthy by one of the many tech giants in Seattle.

Devin's father mostly works as a consultant, I think, and her parents travel a lot, mostly without their kids. Devin takes advantage of their frequent absences, large liquor collection, and general negligence to throw ragers every summer. She also guilts them into one lavish Europe trip every year. I couldn't come up with anyone with a life more opposite to mine, but Devin is nice enough.

As I roll down the long driveway through pine trees and blooming rhododendrons, I can already hear the party. Some of it has spilled out to the front lawn and porch, where my peers have perched themselves on the railings as they pass around a joint.

I drop my bike down on the damp grass next to the driveway and stroll up to the house.

"Amy!" I hear someone say in surprise before coughing on the hit he just took. James Locicero—nephew of the owner of Locicero's, the only decent sit-down restaurant in town—is gaping at me in surprise. "I never see you at these things!"

It's true that I usually skip Devin's parties, but not always because I *want* to. Most summers I'm balancing two jobs and am too tired to do anything other than flop down on my bed at the end of the night.

Unloading all that on James seems like a bad move, though. I'm saved from having to formulate a response when I hear someone else cry out, "Amy!"

Rose barrels out of the front door, Smirnoff Ice in hand, and shrieks with glee when she sees me.

"Amy!"

"Yes, yes, you got what you wanted," I tell her as she tries to tackle me with a hug. I'm nearly half a foot taller than she is and heavier, so she doesn't even come close to making me lose my footing. I hug her back regardless.

"I lied about Peacoat Kid," she mumbles into my chest, her ice-cold drink burning my lower back where my shirt has ridden up.

"I figured," I say, and I can't say I'm mad at her. After the croissant failure, I might as well hang out with Rose and hold her hair later when she pukes in some bushes.

"You need a drink," she continues, speaking directly into my cleavage.

"And you need some water," I tell her, peeling her from me and grabbing her hand.

Devin has pulled out all the stops for this party. Christmas lights have been strung up all around the house, providing just the right amount of ambient illumination to make it look like something out of an indie teen film. A seriously powerful sound system blasts dance music, and there is even a giant fold-up table full of cheese as soon as you walk into the house.

Goat cheese, Camembert, triple creme brie, apple cheddar, twenty-four-month aged Manchego (according to the carefully written label), and more, but Rose drags me away before I can inspect it further. At least half of Port Murphy High is at this party, in addition to kids from other nearby towns. The dining room has been turned into a flip-cup arena, where people are chanting names and shouting.

The kitchen is by far the most cramped room. Everyone has chosen to stay close to their source of alcohol, whether that be the tub of ice filled with handles of vodka and Smirnoff Ices or the keg.

“What’s your poison?” Rose asks, dumping out the remainder of her drink in the sink and dropping the bottle in the recycling bin. Next to it is the compost bin, where the drunken teenagers have mindfully been throwing away their uneaten strange cheese and used napkins. Even drunk, the Earth comes first.

“Two waters,” I tell her.

“Boo!” she responds immediately, bending down to pick up two Smirnoffs.

“Absolutely not,” I tell her. “Those are disgusting.”

Rose groans and picks up the vodka.

“Just have one drink with me, okay?” she pleads. “This is our last chance to let loose and do whatever we want! After this summer it will be college applications and SATs and then job applications and *bills* and *taxes!*”

“Okay, fine, fine,” I say with a laugh. “I’ll make some vodka cranberries.”

Rose claps with joy and watches as I put together our drinks.

“What has Sofía been up to anyway?” I ask as I get some ice.

“Nothing terrible,” Rose assures me, her voice serious. “She’s been hanging out with her gaggle of friends in the backyard. Someone got the fire pit going, and she’s just been roasting marshmallows, very tame stuff.”

“Good,” I say, reassured. Rose is an only child, but we’ve been best friends since the second grade. Sofía is basically her little sister, too. “Taste it,” I instruct her, handing over one of the cups. It’s more juice than vodka, but I doubt Rose will notice. I added a squeeze of lime juice from a lime that might have been more decoration than practical, but it served to give our drinks that pinch of zing it needed.

Rose takes a big slurp of the drink and smacks her lips in satisfaction.

“Perfect. ¡Salud!” She crashes her Solo cup against mine before putting it back to her lips and taking a deep swallow. “Now, we dance!”

Rose goes out the back door to the deck, where she seems to have commandeered her own speaker and has One Direction playing at full blast. We dance alone on the deck, screaming the lyrics as the vodka begins to make my head spin.

“One more drink?” Rose begs, and it doesn’t take much convincing to go back into the kitchen and make us more. Rose stays out on the deck, where one of our classmates, Liz, has joined us in our dance party.

“Well if it isn’t my big bad sister.” I look up and see Sofía leaning against the doorway to the dining room, a sly grin on her face. Her wavy dark hair is loose around her head and in desperate need of a brush. She wears a pair of baggy jeans and black crop top that has a melting smiley face embroidered across

the front. She manages to make the rolled-out-of-bed look very cool and unapproachable.

“I heard you’ve been by the fire all night, you little pyro,” I tell her, pouring vodka into my cup.

“You know me, like a moth to flame.” She sidles up next to me and watches as I pour cranberry juice into the cups.

“Don’t stay out too long tonight, we have the Barry wedding tomorrow morning,” I remind her.

“We just need to load the van, it’s no big deal,” she says, brushing off my warning.

“Whatever,” I say, slightly annoyed. “I have to go bring this to Rose. Text me when you leave.”

“Yup,” she says before blowing a kiss in my direction and filling her empty cup with water from the sink. Maybe she listened to what I said after all.

When I go back out to the deck, Rose is nowhere to be found and Liz is dancing by herself.

“Where’s Rose?” I ask over the music as Liz grapevines and shouts along to the song. “Liz!” I shout, waving my Solo cup in her face. She looks up at me but continues her, what appears to be choreographed, dance routine. “Where did Rose go?”

Liz shrugs and resumes her performance. The only place I can imagine Rose going to at this point is the bathroom, so I go back into the house through the open french doors that lead to the family room.

Here the vibe is very different. Some song made popular on social media is blasting from the speakers, but no one is dancing. Groups of people are hanging out in pockets around the room, Smirnoff Ices and red Solo cups in hand. I may have only been

to a party here once before, but I remember where the bathroom is.

Some people catch my eye and nod hello, and I apologize to others as I have to squeeze in behind them to get through doorways. I'm in the formal living room, my attention caught by the spread of various forms of cocktail weenies, from pigs in a blanket to weenies swimming in barbecue sauce. Rose can wait a little longer for her drink. I set it down to grab a pig in a blanket, and just as I pop it in my mouth, a familiar voice—one I thought I'd never hear again—rumbles behind me.

“Ana Maria?”