

Bite-Sized Magic

a Bliss novel



KATHRYN LITTLEWOOD



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DEDICATION

*For Katherine Tegen,
who makes magic with books*

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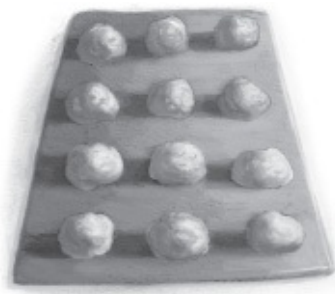
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PROLOGUE

Whatever Will Be, Will Be

Rosemary Bliss's dreams had come true.

She was the most famous baker in all the world. She was the youngest chef ever to have won France's famed Gala des Gâteaux Grands. She was the twelve-year-old girl who'd out-baked celebrity TV chef Lily Le Fay and stopped her aunt's nefarious schemes. She was the local kid who'd saved her hometown and rescued the Bliss family's magical Cookery Booke.

So why wasn't she happy?

On the thirteenth morning after returning from Paris, she got up and pulled open the curtains of her bedroom.

Snap. Flash. Click. Click.

That was why.

"Look, up there, it's Rose!" *Click. Flash. Snap.* "Rose, how do you feel about your victory?" *Click. Flash. Flash. Snap.* "Rose! How does it feel to be the best baker in the world?" *Snap. Flash. Click.* "And at only twelve years old?" *Click. Flash. Snap.*

Ugh, Rose thought. *They're still here.* Gone were the soothing sounds of morning, the wind chiming, the rope of the tire swing creaking against the branch of the old oak outside her window. Instead, the new sounds came courtesy of the group of paparazzi that had taken up permanent residence outside the Follow Your Bliss Bakery. Each morning they waited for Rose to open her curtains and then snapped hundreds of pictures, while calling out for a quote about her prodigious victory.

Rose had always harbored a secret curiosity about what fame would feel like, and now she knew. It felt like being a goldfish: hundreds of big googly eyes staring in at you, leaving you nowhere to run and nowhere to hide, except maybe a little plastic castle.

Rose snapped the curtains shut, and wondered if she'd had enough of baking. It wasn't worth it, not if it meant *this*.

"I wish I never had to bake again," Rose said to no one in particular.

A furry gray head, its ears flattened, appeared from a mound of dirty clothes at the foot of her bed. "Be careful what you wish for," Gus said. "Wishes before birthdays have a strange way of coming true."

true.” The Scottish Fold cat raised a paw and began licking carefully between each sheathed claw.

“That’s just silly,” Rose said. “My birthday isn’t until the end of summer. Anyway, I didn’t really mean it.” She scratched his head and he purred. “I’d just like to *not* have to bake for a little bit, you know?” She’d become a baker because she loved her family and her town, and baking was in her blood—but thanks to her victory at the Gala des Gâteaux Grands, everything had been turned upside down.

She knew it had only been a measly two weeks, but the past fourteen days had been the longest of her life. No peace and quiet. No time to enjoy the summer. Baking wasn’t fun anymore; it was something she was *expected* to do—like homework.

And that was no fun at all. As far as Rose was concerned, unless something changed this summer, she was done with baking for good.

Downstairs, inside the kitchen of the Bliss Family Bakery, the situation was no better. Camera flashes burst through the drawn curtains like stuttering flickers of lightning, and the barking of reporters outside the door made it sound like there were a thousand people outside instead of just a few hundred. Why wouldn’t they leave her alone?

The mail was almost worse.

Rose’s brothers, Sage and Ty, were already sitting in the bakery kitchen, tearing through yesterday’s mail, throwing the unimportant letters into a giant black trash bag and placing the ones that needed answers in a pile. Rose knew the letters were for her (“Your fans *love* us—I mean, you know, Ty liked to say) but she was tired of having to read them. She didn’t want to look at another letter now—or ever. She just wanted to get back to a normal life.

“Junk,” announced Sage, throwing a stack of balled-up paper into the trash. Rose’s pudgy-cheeked younger brother had just turned ten, but he didn’t look a day older than eight. He had curly, strawberry-blond hair, and the only thing that had grown on him over the past year was the number of freckles on his nose.

“What was in it?” asked Ty. Rose’s handsome older brother *had* grown, but not enough—lately he had confided in Rose that he was worried that his dreams of NBA superstardom were out of reach.

“The president of Spain wants a cake,” Sage said, flipping through the letters, “Warren Buffett wants an enormous pie-chart pie, with a different flavor for every section.”

“What’s a pie chart?” Ty asked.

“Who’s Warren Buffett?” Rose asked.

“Some nobody who likes pie, I guess,” Sage said, and read another letter. “The United Nations General Assembly wants us to make a cupcake for every ambassador to their next meeting—frosted with the country’s flag, and—listen to this—‘the flavor of each ambassador’s homeland in every single nibble.’”

“Ugh,” Ty replied. “When is someone *important* gonna write to us?”

Sage opened the next letter, a heavy pink envelope that wafted out a gentle breath of sweet perfume. He fell to the floor and clutched his chest like a man dying of heartache.

“Now!” he cried, handing the letter to Ty and Rose.

Rose scanned the delicate sheet of stationery:

Dear Wonderful Rose and the Rest of the Follow Your Bliss Bakery!

Please send me a cake. Please. I don’t care what kind. I have to have one of your cakes. I will die without it. I will pay you anything. You can even play in the band on my next tour. Send the cake soon.

“No!” Ty gasped. “She must have been watching the competition, seen me, and fallen in love. The *cake* is just a way to get to *me*.”

Rose sighed. She knew she should be excited, but all these letters from famous people just made her tired. Baking wasn’t about getting notes from celebrities. It was about mixing and stirring and folding, about flour and butter and sugar and heart, and love, and—

“We’re rich!” cried Ty, holding up a letter embossed with the cartoon image of Kathy Keegan, the name of a big baked-goods conglomerate.



“Rose,” Ty said, “they’re offering seven hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollars just for doing a single thirty-second commercial endorsing their products.”

“Why all the sevens?” Sage asked.

“All you have to do is eat a Keegan Kake and say, ‘I’m Rosemary Bliss, youngest winner in history of the Gala des Gâteaux Grands,’ and, um, ‘Kathy Keegan is my inspiration!’” Ty handed her the letter and stared moonily at the ceiling. “If I were married to Katy Perry, and you signed this endorsement deal . . . none of us would ever have to work again!”

“Kathy Keegan isn’t even real,” Rose answered. “The Keegan Corporation was founded by a group of businessmen. How can I say someone is my inspiration when she isn’t even an actual person? Besides, I would never eat a Keegan Kake. You know what Mom says about cakes that come wrapped in plastic.” She stuffed the letter into her pocket and turned away. She’d had enough of letters.

That’s when she noticed that every available surface in the kitchen was covered in cookie sheets lined with parchment.

Her mother, Purdy Bliss, burst through the saloon doors from the front room of the bakery, her arms laden with grocery bags. She was a sturdy woman with a sweet face and curly black hair and bangs that flopped wildly over her forehead.

“Boys, the buttons!” she cried. “I told you to pipe the buttons and not stop until all these cookie sheets are filled!”

The boys grumbled as they each picked up a pastry bag. Purdy tousled their red hair as they started piping little blobs of chocolate dough onto the sheets in tidy rows.

“What’s going on?” Rose asked.

“Those reporters,” Purdy said, kissing Rose on the forehead. “We’ll never get on with our lives until they vamoose.”

“I’ll help,” Rose said, feeling enthusiastic for the first time in days. Maybe she could actually help

useful.

“Rose, honey,” said Purdy, unpacking the groceries, “you should probably go back upstairs. You’re the one who really sets them off.”

“Am I just supposed to stay in my tower, like Rapunzel?” Rose asked, throwing up her arms. “I don’t think so.” She seized a pastry bag filled with chocolate dough and squeezed out a few order blobs as her brothers finished the rest.

“Three hundred buttons,” Purdy said, counting. “Just enough. Children, come here.” She drew Rose and her brothers close to her, gently settling her arms on their shoulders.

The door to the walk-in fridge swung open, and Rose’s great-great-great-grandfather Balthazar emerged carrying a massive blue mason jar lined with chicken wire. From inside it came a sound like ten thousand electric toothbrushes all buzzing at the same time. “You ready?” he asked.

Purdy nodded and cried, “Release the bees!”

Balthazar set the jar down in the center of the kitchen floor, then cracked open the lid. A swarm of bees tumbled forth, filling the kitchen like a horrible fuzzy cloud of buzzing black-and-yellow smoke.

“Behold, the Dread Swarm of the Tubertine!” Balthazar cried, tugging at his beard.

“The cookies are Mind Your Own Beeswax Buttons,” explained Purdy over the sound of the buzzing. “If you eat a cookie imbued with one sting from the Dread Swarm of the Tubertine, you’ll mind your own business. They were first used on the Trappist monks; as a matter of fact, before that fateful day when the monks in the order feasted on these, you couldn’t shut them up. Gab gab gab. After devouring these buttons, the monks took the first vows of silence in the history of monkdom.” Purdy pulled a kazoo from the pocket of her apron. “Behold!”

She pursed her lips and puffed out a rhythmic tango. The swarm of bees immediately stood perfectly still in the air, then scrambled around until each bee hovered over a tiny mound of chocolate dough. The bees looked to Purdy, wide-eyed and ready. Rose could feel a steady flutter of wind from their buzzing wings.

At Purdy’s next blast on the kazoo, each of the three hundred bees plunged their stingers into the mound of dough. They seemed to sigh, and their buzzing grew quieter, and then they looked away from Purdy and one another and flew single file back into the jar.

Balthazar snapped the lid closed.

Ty and Sage crawled out from beneath the table in the breakfast nook, sighing with relief.

“Ew,” said Sage. Rose noticed that the walls and floor were smeared with yellow goop. Sage swiped his finger through a patch. “They slimed the place.”

Balthazar scratched his bald head, and his finger came away dripping with the sticky yellow stuff. He held it to the tip of his tongue. “It’s honey,” he grumbled.

Purdy and Rose shoved tray after tray of the newly stung chocolate buttons into the oven. A few minutes later, they transferred the hot cookies onto a serving tray, and soon after that, Ty and Sage were outside distributing the buttons to the teeming mass of reporters and photographers.

As each reporter bit into a cookie, his eyes flashed as gold as the scruffy neck of a bee, and he quickly hurried off the lawn. Within ten minutes, the flock had vanished from the backyard—camera boom microphones, flashbulbs, and all.

Ty and Sage reentered the kitchen with their empty serving trays. Ty’s hair, which he’d started to gel into three-inch spikes since the Gala, was wilting like a patch of broken weeds, and Sage had a bright pink welt across his forehead.

“Someone hit me with a microphone,” Sage said, fuming. “Those people are animals. *Animals*, say!”

Ty held up a sheet of orange paper and said, "Once they'd cleared out, I found this on the front door—they're taped all over the building." The edges of the orange sheet trailed bits of tape.

Purdy took the paper from him and read it out loud. "By Order of the American Bureau of Business and Congressional Act HC 213, this Place of Business is CLOSED FOR BUSINESS immediately."

"Can they do that?" Sage asked. "Don't they have to talk with us first?"

"We only just hit the big-time!" Ty said, exasperated. "Katy Perry wants cake!"

Purdy furrowed her brow and read further. "The American Big Bakery Discrimination Act states that bakeries employing fewer than a thousand people must cease and desist operation. Big bakeries are suffering due to the unfair advantages of mom-and-pop bakeries throughout the United States. You are to cease and desist selling baked goods for profit henceforward. Violations will be punishable to the full extent of the law."

Rose gulped and felt something soft butt against her ankle. She looked down and found Gus the cat who looked up at her. "A wayward wish is a bitter dish," he said, then threaded himself around her legs. "Told you so!"



CHAPTER 1

The Cat's in the Bag

Exactly twenty-seven days later, Rose woke to find her bedroom toasty warm like the inside of a sock fresh from the dryer.

She had suffered through twenty-seven days of waking to morning cold throughout the house, the ovens turned off, the front windows shuttered, the bakery closed for business. Twenty-seven days of living with the guilt that she, Rosemary Bliss, had brought a chill onto her town just by making a simple little wish.

She stretched in her bed and listened to her bones creak and was thankful that it was a warm Saturday in June. There was no need to drag herself through the sad-sack halls of Calamity Falls Middle School. Like everyone else in town, her fellow students had taken a turn for the worse since the Follow Your Bliss Bakery had closed. The teachers lost their pep, the sports teams lost their matches—even the cheerleaders had lost their enthusiasm. “Rah,” they’d mumble at games, halfheartedly shaking their pom-poms.

Worst of all, Devin Stetson was affected too, his blond bangs sitting lank and greasy on his forehead. Rose wondered what she’d ever seen in him at all.

And Rose was droopier than anyone: Alone among all the people in Calamity Falls, she knew that she was the reason the bakery had closed.

“Just another week,” she muttered to herself as she lay there.

“Shhhhhh!” a little voice cried from beside her. “Sleeping!”

Rose whipped back the covers, exposing the snoring bundle of pajamas that was her younger sister Leigh, curled up like a comma in the space where the bed met the wall.

“Leigh,” Rose said, “you’ve got to stop sneaking into my bed!”

“But I get scared,” Leigh said, batting her dark eyelashes, and Rose felt guilty all over again. Her four-year-old sister’s sudden night frights were probably Rose’s fault, too.

“Another week of what?” someone else purred. Curled up in a tight comma against her sister’s chest was Gus. He opened one green eye and glared at her. The cat had been able to talk as long as Rose had known him—ever since he’d eaten some Chattering Cheddar Biscuits her great-great-grandfather had made, in fact. But she was shocked anew every time he opened his tiny whiskers.

mouth and spoke. “Cat got your tongue?” he asked.

“Until school is out for the summer,” Rose said. “I can’t take it anymore. Everyone’s so mopey. She sucked in a deep lungful of air and felt comforted by the soft scent of cinnamon and nutmeg. “Someone’s baking!” she exclaimed.

Gus stretched out his front paws and leaned forward, his tail rising straight like an exclamation point. “This *is* a bakery, you know.”

“But, but, but—we’ve been closed! By order of the government!”

Leigh blinked and scratched Gus’s ruffled gray ears. Since being freed from Lily’s awful speech that caused her to praise her aunt incessantly, Leigh had taken on a Buddha-like serenity, and rarely opened her mouth except to speak the simple truth.

“Closed,” the little girl said calmly, touching the wrinkle in Rose’s forehead, “is just an opportunity to be open in a different way.”

Rose scrunched up her face. “Well, open or closed, if we’re baking, we’re breaking the law,” she said. “We’d better get downstairs.”

Dressed in a red T-shirt and tan shorts, Rose arrived in the kitchen with Leigh and Gus just as Chip entered from the bakery—Chip was an ex-marine who usually helped customers in the store. Rose didn’t know *what* they’d do without him.

“I don’t understand why I’m here,” he said. “The sign on the front still says CLOSED. The blinds are still drawn. The lights are still off.”

“Good, Chip,” Purdy said. “Now take a seat so I can explain to everyone what’s going on.”

He sat on a stool at the head of the table in the breakfast nook, where Rose’s parents, brothers, and Balthazar were huddled around the table, with its overflowing pile of fan mail. Rose’s father, Albert, held the official letter that had come from the United States government, reading it over and over, as if he expected to find some tiny footnote that negated the whole thing. “This law makes no sense—no sense at all!” he muttered under his breath. Leigh crawled under the breakfast table and reemerged in her mother’s lap. Rose slid in beside her brothers.

“I agree: It makes no sense,” Rose’s mother announced. “That’s why, beginning today, the Follower Your Bliss Bakery is back in business.”

“But, Purdy!” Albert protested. “That would be breaking the law!”

“Honey, the government says we *can’t* operate,” said Balthazar, wiping the top of his bald head with a handkerchief. “This document is perfectly clear: Unless we employ more than a thousand people, we are shut down. That fancy lawyer, Bob Solomon, hasn’t been able to find a single loophole. And our congresswoman, Big Nell Katey—well, she hasn’t made a bit of headway with those other politicians down in Washington. They’ve got good hearts, the both of them, but we’re up against something sneaky here.”

Gus arched his back and hissed. He began to scratch at the wooden base of the breakfast table like it was a cage full of mice.

“Gus,” Purdy said gently. “No scratching, please.”

Gus sank to the ground and twisted miserably until he was lying on his back. “I’m sorry. It’s how Scottish Folds cope with sneakiness.”

“The law says that we can’t operate *for profit*,” Purdy explained with a strange glint in her eye. “It says nothing about operating as a charitable organization. We have to stop *selling* baked goods, but we don’t have to stop *baking*!”

Ty’s jaw dropped. “You can’t be suggesting that we—”

“—give our baked goods away *for free!*” Sage finished.

Ty put his head in his hands, careful not to mess up his hair. “I can’t believe what I’m hearing. We’ll *never* get rich this way!”

“Giving our goods away is exactly what I’m suggesting,” Purdy said. “Our work is bigger than simple profits. Calamity Falls needs us.”

Sage groaned theatrically.

Beside her, Albert smiled and folded up the letter. “We won’t be able to give away our Bliss baked goods forever—we can’t afford to do that. But we can at least do so until we find some way around this backward law.”

“I just know this is Lily’s fault.” Balthazar rose from the breakfast table and began to pace around the room, scratching his beard. “May none of you forget: Lily never returned Albatross’s Apocrypha. I’ll bet you a loaf of Betray-Yourself Banana Bread that Lily is using the sinister recipes in that little booklet to wreak havoc on the government. I should have destroyed it when I had the chance back in 1972.”

Rose’s great-great-great-grandfather was fond of warning the family about the dangers of Albatross’s Apocrypha, a pamphlet of particularly meddlesome and nasty recipes written by a long ago black sheep in the Bliss family. Usually, the Apocrypha was tucked into a pocket at the back of the Bliss Cookery Booke, but when Lily had returned the Booke after she lost the Gala des Gâteaux Grands in Paris, the Apocrypha was missing.

“We don’t actually know that, Balthazar,” Albert protested, though Rose thought he looked more like he was trying to convince himself than Balthazar. Rose’s great-great-great-grandfather just harrumphed.

“Never mind any of that!” Ty shouted. “The solution to our problems is so obvious! All Rose has to do is one commercial for Kathy Keegan Snack Kakes, and we can all retire to Tahiti. None of us will have to approach an oven again. *They’ll* be baking for *us!*” He and Sage gave each other a high five.

“It’s not about the money, Thyme,” Purdy said, flicking her oldest son on the side of his head. “It’s about the people of this town. They need us. And we need them. Baking is our grand purpose.”

“Besides,” said her father, “we can afford it—for now. We’ve always scrimped and saved in case of an emergency. And this? This is as much an emergency as Calamity Falls has ever faced.”

Somewhere deep within her, Rose felt a tiny flame kindle, a fire of hope and a desire to do something good the only way she knew how. “What are we going to do?” she asked her mom.

Purdy smiled, and Rose felt the dreariness of the past twenty-seven days burn away like a cloud at sunrise. “We are now the Bliss Bakery Underground,” Purdy announced. “We will bake all day and all night, and beginning tomorrow morning, we will personally deliver the cakes and pies and muffins to everyone in town. The people of Calamity Falls stuck with us through our hard times, when we didn’t have the Booke. Now we’re going to stick by them.”

Albert tore the official government letter dramatically down the center. “I think that’s the best idea I’ve ever heard.”

Purdy moved Leigh to her father’s lap. She stood up and began pacing the cramped bakery kitchen. “Chip will make a major grocery store run,” Purdy said, looking at her burly assistant. “Albert—will you inventory our magical ingredients?” Standing tall, she added, “We shall not cease.”

“I’ll help,” Rose said, happy for the opportunity to reverse her careless wish and, for the first time in nearly a month, to cut loose and bake—no cameras, no reporters, just three generations of Blisses doing what they had always done best.

Making kitchen magic.

It was three in the morning.

The heat in the kitchen was as thick as grape jelly. Rose cracked the red egg of a masked lovebird into a bowl of zucchini muffin batter to make a batch of Love Muffins for Mr. and Mrs. Bastable and Thistle, who, without the magical intervention of the Bliss Bakery, became shy strangers to each other.

“Mom, look,” Rose said as she mixed in the egg, watching the batter thicken and hiss as tiny hearths of flour exploded into the air.

But Purdy couldn’t hear Rose—not over the Malaysian Toucan of Fortune, whose confident squawk she released into a bowlful of pastry cream, then stuffed the cream into a batch of Chorus Cream Puffs for the Calamity Falls Community Chorus, whose voices were meek and thin without them. “What was that, honey?” Purdy asked.

“Never mind,” Rose said, continuing with the muffin batter as Balthazar unleashed the gaze of his medieval Third Eye onto a batch of Father-Daughter Fudge for Mr. Borzini and his daughter, Lindsey—after eating the fudge, each could more easily glimpse where the other was coming from. “You never want to look a Third Eye directly in its, erm, eye,” Balthazar told Rose. “It could blind you.”

Mental note, Rose thought. Don’t go blind.

The family had been at it for sixteen hours, and Purdy’s master list of baked goods was still only half complete.

The kitchen itself was strewn with blue mason jars filled with various sniffs and snorts and fairies and gnomes and ancient lizards and talking mushrooms and googly eyes and woogly flies and jittering, glowing bobbles of every sort. Hints of cinnamon and nutmeg and vanilla swirled in the air, and all the various sounds coming from the kitchen made Rose hope the neighbors wouldn’t think the Blisses were running a zoo.

Albert had ferried jar after jar of magical ingredients from the secret cellar beneath the walk-in fridge—“Watch your heads, Blisses!”—until the dingy wooden shelves were practically empty.

Ty and Sage had long since gone to bed. At one point, they’d come downstairs for a snack, but they took one look at the magical mayhem, at the chomping teeth and flying rabbits and the explosions of color coming from dozens of metal mixing bowls, then scurried back upstairs.

There were Cookies of Truth for the infamous fibber Mrs. Havegood, Calm-Down-Crepes for the angry, overwrought Scottish babysitter Mrs. Carlson, and Adventurous-Apple-Turnovers for the reserved League of Lady Librarians.

There were Seeing-Eye Shortbread for Florence the Florist, who was nearly blind, Framboise Cake for the French restaurateur Pierre Guillaume, who had a notorious shopping problem, and even something for Devin Stetson, the blond boy whom Rose had thought about at least twice a day for approximately one year, five months, and eleven days. She had made him Breathe-Easy Stick Buns to help with his frequent sinus infections, which, as far as Rose was concerned, were the only things wrong with Devin Stetson.

By four a.m., Rose felt that the heat from the ovens was slapping her upside the head. She told Purdy she needed to lie down just for a minute, and she nuzzled onto the bench at the breakfast table and promptly fell asleep.

Rose woke to bright buttery sunshine and the swatting and drooling of Gus the Scottish Fold cat. “Deliveries, Rose!” he said, batting her on the shoulder with his thick paw. “The list is complete!”

Rose bolted upright and found her mother, father, and Balthazar snoring on the floor. Every surface

of the kitchen was covered in white bakery boxes tied with red-and-white-striped twine.

Ty and Sage had already started loading boxes into the back of the Bliss family van. Leigh helped by sitting beside the boxes and patting them with her frosting-covered hands. “Pat-a-cake,” she said over and over again.

Sage strapped her into her car seat and climbed in beside her.

“I’m driving,” Ty said proudly. He was fond of reminding everyone that at sixteen he was old enough to drive, and now he reached into the back pocket of his dark jeans and pulled out his license. The picture on the front captured the full height of his red spiky hair, though it cut off everything below his top lip. “Phew,” he said. “Just making sure I had my license. My *driver’s* license.”

Rose rolled her eyes.

“Let’s go, *hermana*,” he said. “I’ll drive.”

“Actually, I think I’m going to make a few personal deliveries on my bike, if that’s okay,” Rose said.

Ty looked at her sideways, then shrugged. “Whatever *hermana* wants, *hermana* gets.” Ever since Ty had taken Spanish in school, he added foreign words to what he said in an effort to sound foreign and sophisticated.

Sage called out through the van’s window. “You do know there’s no air-conditioning on a bike, right?”

“I know,” said Rose. While her brothers waited, she rifled through the back of the van and grabbed a few choice boxes. She loaded them in the front basket of her bike and carefully put one special box into her backpack. Just as she was about to set off, Gus hopped inside the basket, too.

“Onward!” he cried.

“Do stop at the Reginald Calamity Fountain, sweet Rose, so that I can catch myself some breakfast.”

The fuzzy gray blob of Gus’s head peeked out from Rose’s basket as she pedaled through the streets.

“Gus, there are no fish in the fountain,” Rose answered, “only nickels and dimes that people throw in there for good luck. It’s a tradition.”

“Well, then, I shall collect those nickels and dimes and buy myself some delectable smoked fish.”

Without stopping at the fountain, Rose parked her bike in front of the ivy-covered bungalow owned by Mr. and Mrs. Bastable-Thistle.

“No talking, Gus,” she said, opening her backpack.

Gus leaped inside, wiggled around until he was comfortable, then poked his head out. “Oh, I know.” He sighed. “If only the sight of a talking cat didn’t cause such violent fainting among humans.”

Rose pulled aside a tapestry of ivy and pressed her finger into the doorbell, which was shaped like a frog.

After a moment, Mr. Bastable, wearing a frog-printed T-shirt that read KISS ME, answered the door. “Hello, Rose,” he said. He seemed a bit droopy, though his stringy white hair was as wild as ever. “What brings you here?”

Rose stared at the welcome mat, which said FROGS AND CERTAIN HUMANS WELCOME. “As you know, the Bliss Bakery has been closed,” she said. “But we wanted to say thank you for supporting us while we were away at the Gala, so we brought you some of your favorite Love—I mean, *zucchini* muffins.”

“My my,” he said quietly. Rose could tell by the soft twinkle in his eye that he was touched, but Mr. Bastable had always been shy, hence the need for Love Muffins.

Mr. Bastable noticed Gus's folded ears peeking out from Rose's backpack. "Hey, is that a cat? What's wrong with its ears?"

Rose felt Gus's body tense inside her backpack.

"Oh, nothing! He's a breed called a Scottish Fold. They just have folded ears."

"Huh," Bastable mused, biting absentmindedly into one of the Love Muffins. "Somewhat like the ear of a frog, all folded up on its face."

Gus dug his claws into Rose's back. "Ow!" She jumped.

"What?" Bastable said.

"Nothing," said Rose.

Ignoring her, Bastable took another crumbly bite and swallowed loudly. Suddenly, his eyes flashed a bright green, his back straightened, and he cleared his throat. "Felidia!" he shouted. "I must woo my beloved Felidia once more, for she is a supreme woman, and supreme women must be wooed daily. I'm coming, Felidia!"

Then Mr. Bastable turned away, the box of muffins tucked under his arm. He slammed the door behind him, leaving Rose's face.

"I guess it worked," Rose said, though she didn't want to think about what was about to transpire inside the Bastable-Thistle bungalow.

"Ears like a *frog*," said Gus. "Of all the ridiculous nonsense."

Florence the Florist thought that Rose was a burglar until she took a bite out of a piece of Seeing-Eyes Shortbread. "Ah! Rose Bliss!" she cried out, and sighed with relief that the Blissesses hadn't forgotten about her.

Rose caught Pierre Guillaume on his day off. "*Sacré bleu!*" he cried as he took a bite of Frug Framboise Cake, which promptly dissuaded him from buying a yacht on eBay. "That mother of yours, Purdy, she eez always looking out for me," he said.

Box by box, Rose went around town, narrowly averting small disasters, until just one box remained: the one in her backpack, the one she'd really wanted to deliver, for which all the others had been only an excuse.

She pedaled up the impossible incline of Sparrow Hill and parked her bike in front of Stetson Donuts and Automotive Repair.

Rose wondered whether Devin had seen her new haircut. She had gotten what the hairdresser called "side bangs," which meant that her black bangs now sloped down from one end of her forehead to the other, instead of the usual straight line that she gave herself in the bathroom mirror. Rose hadn't said a word to Devin in school, but she thought that maybe he'd seen her bangs in the paper, or in a TV news report. She hated to admit how much the side bangs made her feel like a sophisticated woman, but she couldn't help it. They just did.

Walking in a sophisticated manner, Rose wandered into the store carrying the box of Breathe-Easy Sticky Buns. They were gooey pillows of sweet dough covered in sticky cinnamon frosting. In the very center of each was a dollop of crème infused with Arctic Wind—the buns instantaneously cleared the lungs and sinuses of any unwanted goop. Purdy used to make them for Rose when she was home sick from school with a stuffy nose, and they were far more fun to eat than chicken soup.

Rose spotted Devin behind the checkout counter. He sported side bangs of his own, only his were rich, sandy blond. To her they looked like spun gold. His nostrils were bright red and his eyes were clouded and dull. He blew his nose into a tissue.

"He looks like a sickly version of that Justin Boo Boo character," Gus whispered from his perch.

the backpack.

“Shush!” she hissed, gliding over to the checkout counter.

She gathered herself and took a deep breath. “Hi, Devin.”

Devin quickly wiped his nose, then smoothed his bangs. “Hi, Rose,” he replied gloomily.

“Are you okay?” Rose asked. “Sick again?”

“Yeah, you *doh* me,” he said, sniffing. He nervously drummed his fingers on the glass countertop.

“You’re, like, this celebrity *dow*. It’s weird.”

Rose’s heart sank. “Bad weird, or good weird?”

Devin stumbled over his words. “Good weird. Oh, definitely good weird. I . . . uh . . .” He trailed off. His eyes darted between her face and an empty corner of the ceiling.

Is he nervous? Rose thought. *I’m usually the nervous one.* Aloud, she said, “I came because even though the bakery is closed, I wanted to bring you your favorite—Sticky Buns! So you’re not forlorn without them.”

Rose nearly kicked herself as the words left her mouth. *Forlorn?* Why did she say that? She sounded like a ninety-year-old granny. Devin probably thought she was a word-obsessed moron.

Devin opened the box and sank his teeth into one of the thick, pillowy buns. “Mmmmmmmmm” he exclaimed. “My oh my, that is one gnarly bun.” The *m*’s and *n*’s came out crystal clear. “Weird! I can breathe again!” He smiled, and his eyes lost their sleepy look.

“Good weird or bad weird?” Rose teased.

“Good weird,” he replied, smiling.

Back outside, Gus whispered, “He’s not even that cute,” as Rose skipped toward her bike, her feet so light that she felt like she might be receiving assistance from unseen fairies.

“Says you.” Rose squealed, already replaying the moment in her mind like a beloved DVD.

“The basket of your bike is decidedly uncomfortable for travel,” Gus observed, squinting up at the empty wire basket. “And cold. The wind, you know.”

“Would you like to ride in my backpack?” Rose said.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

She knelt down and opened the flap, and Gus leaped inside. From the dark, she could hear him moving around and saying, “Much warmer! This is more like it!”

She reshouldered the pack and had very nearly reached her bike when a voice called out to her from the lookout fence at the top of the hill.

“Are you Rose Bliss?”

Rose turned and saw a hulking figure silhouetted against the afternoon sky. The only person she ever seen with such enormous shoulders was Chip—but this man sure didn’t sound like Chip. She moved closer.

“You’re Rose Bliss, aren’t you?” he repeated in a deep, gravelly voice.

The man had a nice-looking face—at least for someone almost as old as her dad—rugged, with a huge head, a square jaw, and narrow, beady eyes. He had thick black hair and wore a track suit made of fuzzy maroon velour. His fingers and the front of his track suit seemed to be covered with a light dusting of flour.

“I don’t like this,” Gus whispered. “What’s that on his fingers? What sort of grown man wears maroon velour track suit?”

Rose’s parents had always told her not to talk to strangers, but ever since she’d won the Gala de Gâteaux Grands, everyone knew who she was. There was no real point in denying it. “Yes, I’m Rose

Bliss.”

“I thought so.” The man gestured over the tranquil pastures of Calamity Falls. “You know what’s a travesty, Rose? The new bakery law.”

Rose softened a bit. “Yeah, it makes no sense.”

“Those people out there,” the man went on, sounding passionate, “they need cake and pie and cookies and donuts. Just a little sweet thing once in a while reminds a person of how sweet life is.” He rested his hand on his chest, like someone about to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Rose nodded. She thought of the lives she had brightened this morning. The people she and her family had helped. But how long would they be able to keep it up? The Blisses had provided enough magic that morning to last the town a couple of days, but they couldn’t really go on baking and delivering everything to people’s homes without being paid. They weren’t broke, not yet, but they couldn’t support the whole town.

“A life without the occasional slice of cake is . . . it’s an empty life,” he continued, inching closer. “Look out there,” he said, gesturing again at Calamity Falls. “Emptiness. That’s what’s going to become of all those lives.”

Gus reached a paw out of the backpack and swatted Rose’s ear. “I don’t like this!” he whispered.

The strange behemoth of a man bent over so they were eye to eye. “Would you . . . I mean, do you want to help those people?”

“Of course!” Rose said. She thought of the wish she’d made. She didn’t really believe what the creature had told her (did she?). A wish couldn’t change the world (could it?). But even so, she would take it back if she could. “It’s what I want most in the world.”

“Oh good!” said the man. “In that case . . .”

He snapped his fingers.

Before Rose could take a deep breath to scream, darkness closed over her and Gus as they were enveloped in a giant empty flour sack.



CHAPTER 2

Making the Mostess of a Bad Situation

The two hours that Rose spent trapped in the burlap sack with Gus were by far the worst of her life. First of all, no one likes to be kidnapped by strangers and tossed into a bag. Questions such as *Where are they taking me?* and *Will I ever return?* naturally arise. Second, being trapped in a burlap sack inside a moving vehicle in summer feels essentially like being kept in an itchy oven. A bouncing, jouncing, *moving* oven. Third, the residual flour that dusted the walls of the bag mingled with her sweat to form a disgusting paste. She scrabbled at the neck of the sack with her nails, but it was firmly tied shut.

Then there was the matter of Gus. “I have claws,” he kept whispering to her. “Just remember that, Rose. They are weapons of mass destruction, these claws.”

Luckily, the man who had stuffed her in the sack seemed not to be able to hear the whispers of the Scottish Fold cat over the hum of the van and the honking of traffic. All Rose could do was keep her wits about her and, every so often, yell, “Where are we going? Let me out of here!”

But there was never any answer.

When the van finally came to a stop, a pair of sturdy arms lifted the sack containing Rose and Gus out of the van. She heard the opening of doors and felt a sudden rush of air-conditioning.

Then the arms set her down in a chair, and the burlap sack was pulled away.

Rose was instantly blinded by fluorescent lights.

She found herself sitting on a rusted metal chair in the center of a room made of gray concrete. Feeble light peeked through tiny windows near the ceiling. At one end of the room was a gray metal desk covered in manila file folders. The wall behind the desk was lined with filing cabinets of rusted gray metal. The rows of rectangular fluorescent lights that hung from the ceiling sputtered and hummed in the awful way that fluorescent lights do, as if they were actually prisons for thousands of radioactive fireflies.

The room smelled like metal and disinfectant, and Rose suddenly felt a wave of longing for the scents of home: butter and chocolate and cakes just pulled from the oven.

“I don’t like this place,” Gus whispered, digging flour out of the spaces beneath his crumpled ears.

with his paws. "It looks like an office from a movie about . . . how terrible offices are."

She petted the cat on the head. "It's okay. You've got those claws, remember?"

"Indeed," the cat purred.

Rose shook out her hair. She dusted flour off her red T-shirt and her eyelids and from behind her ears and even flicked some out of her armpits.

"Where am I?" she yelled.

When no one answered, Rose spun around and saw two men standing by a grimy, empty water cooler in the opposite corner of the room. One of them was the hulking, squinty gentleman in the maroon velour track suit who had approached her on top of Sparrow Hill, and the other was a tall, bespectacled man. He had a tiny face and a bulbous white head that was entirely hairless. He looked like an illustration of an alien wearing a suit.

"Hello?" she hollered again. "Where am I?"

Neither of the men so much as turned to acknowledge her—they kept chatting at the water cooler sipping from little paper cones.

"What is this?" said the bald man, gesturing at Rose, so that water splashed from his little paper cone onto the floor. "You were supposed to get the BOOK."

"It was a no-go on the book, boss," the man wearing the track suit answered. "The bakery is closed. I couldn't get in there. So I brought the *cook* instead."

Rose gasped. These two had been after the Bliss Family Cookery Booke—but what could they possibly want with it? It was bad enough when Aunt Lily had gotten her hands on the Booke, but when she'd given it back, Rose had thought that she—and her family—were safe.

The wiry bald man refilled his cone of water. "No, not the *cook*, the *book*. What we need is the book."

The bulky man let out a long huff. "But, sir, the *cook* is the next best thing to the *book*. She won that French baking contest. She can do it."

The bald man goggled his eyes at Rose. "But she's so young!" he said in a sharp, quiet voice. "She's scrawny! And she has a cat in her backpack, with broken ears!"

"I can hear you, you know," Rose fumed. "I'm right here. And if you don't tell me where I am, I will sic my cat on you."

Gus jumped out of the backpack and sat back on his hind legs, hissing and swiping, with his front legs extended and his claws bared. He looked like a praying mantis.

"And his ears are *not* malformed," Rose added. "They are a distinctive feature of the breed."

"Don't worry, little lady," said the thin man. "We'll explain everything, just calm that old cat down."

Rose gave Gus a stern look. He shrugged and retracted his claws. "Good kitty," she said, pulling Gus into her lap and petting him until he was purring. "There," Rose said. "Now, I repeat: Where am I?"

The two men inched along the perimeter of the room toward the desk, keeping as far away from Gus as they could.

The bald man sat in the chair behind the desk, while the man in the velour track suit settled behind him, leaning against the row of rusted metal filing cabinets.

"Where you aaaaaare," said the thin man, "is the finest bakery in the universe: the Mostess Snack Cake Corporation." He tapped his long index fingers together and stared at Rose through his spectacles. He had no lips to speak of—it was as if the skin beneath his nose and above his chin just decided, at a certain point, to stop. "I am Mr. Butter, and my muscular associate, whom you've

already had the pleasure of meeting, is Mr. Kerr.”

“Mostess, huh,” Rose said. She had heard of Mostess Snack Cakes, of course. Everyone had. They were the ones with the little white cow in the corner of the package.

At school, Rose’s friends sometimes pulled out packages of Mostess Snack Cakes at the lunch table—little chocolate cakes stuffed with marshmallow, black cupcakes covered in white dots, vanilla cakes stuffed with chocolate cream—each with different names that bore no resemblance to the cake itself, like Dinky Cakes, Moony Pyes, and King Things. Rose never thought to try a bite of her friend’s Dinky Cakes or King Things, because her mother always packed her a delicious homemade treat, and anyway, the snack cakes were gobbled and gone in two bites.

“Misters Butter and Kerr, of the Mostess Snack Cake Company,” Rose repeated. “Got it. Now I can tell the police who kidnapped me.”

Mr. Butter opened his non-lips and let out a crisp *ha-ha*. “Kidnapped! Do you hear that, Mr. Kerr? The poor thing thinks that we *kidnapped* her!”

Mr. Kerr stared nervously at Rose. “Ha,” he replied.

“You carried me here in a flour sack,” Rose said. “Against my will.”

“Oh, you’ve misinterpreted the day’s events, Miss Bliss,” Mr. Butter went on smoothly. “We haven’t *kidnapped* you, we’ve brought you here to offer you a *job!*”

Rose furrowed her brow. “A job? What kind of job?”

“We need help with our recipes,” Mr. Kerr said bluntly, rubbing his hands over the smooth velvet of his track suit.

Mr. Butter glared at Mr. Kerr a moment, then turned back to Rose, all smiles. “Yes, that’s the gist of it,” he said, tapping his fingers on the desk. “You see, Rose, we here at the Mostess Snack Cake Corporation were just as horrified as you were by the passage of the Big Bakery Discrimination Act. Of course, the law does happen to benefit our bakery, as we employ well over a thousand people. So we wanted to help a newly unemployed small-town baker like yourself by putting *you* to work for *us*.”

Gus fidgeted on her lap. It suddenly dawned on Rose that neither of them had seen a bathroom for hours.

“Think of it as an exchange program,” Mr. Kerr added matter-of-factly. His voice was so deep that it sounded like his throat was trying to swallow the words before they escaped. “Like you kids do at school.”

“*Exactly,*” said Mr. Butter. “You see, Rose, we have something wonderful to offer each other.”

“We do?” Rose said.

“Mostess has the finest baking facilities in the world, thousands of square feet of floor space, the most cutting-edge machinery, and a staff of thousands of qualified baking professionals.” Mr. Butter paused a moment to savor the thought of it. “That is what you lack. *You*, Rosemary Bliss, are a baker without a bakery.”

Rose hung her head. Mr. Butter was wrong. The Bliss family had a bakery; they just weren’t legal. They weren’t allowed to *operate* it. She thought of last night, how cramped and hot the tiny kitchen had been, and how little they could really afford to support the town’s baked-goods needs. How exhausted she and her parents were. They couldn’t go on like that.

“What we lack is the kind of attention that you small-town bakers can afford to lavish on each loaf of bread, each crumpet, each swirl of cupcake frosting, each—”

“I understand,” Rose interrupted.

Mr. Butter bristled. “You know as well as I do that a perfect dessert sweetens life like nothing else. People in every town, students at every school, from every walk of life, they all depend upon that little

bit of goodness that they can find within, say, a Bliss tart. Or slice of cake.”

“Or a muffin,” Mr. Kerr continued. “Or a croissant. Or clafouti. Or—”

“I get it,” Rose snapped.

Mr. Butter cleared his throat and ran his fingers along the bald arches where his eyebrows should have been. “At the Mostess Snack Cake Corporation, we believe our snack cakes are nearly perfect but our recent sales record has not reflected this. Our snack cakes can’t compete with the love and the . . . how do I call it . . . the *magic* that you small bakeries provide.”

Rose eyed Mr. Butter suspiciously and felt something flutter nervously in her stomach. *Magic?* she thought. *He couldn’t possibly know about the magic.*

“And shouldn’t every town have what Calamity Falls has? Readily available, forever fresh and fabulous, delicious gourmet treats?” Mr. Butter went on. “Before your fortuitous arrival, we had—”

“You *kidnapped* me,” Rose said again. On her lap, Gus growled.

“—we had the assistance of a master baker who had very nearly perfected our recipes. Sadly, she competed in a baking contest in Paris, and after events there never returned.” Rose immediately knew there was only one person he could be talking about—her devious aunt Lily. “And that’s why we need *you*,” Mr. Butter said. “To perfect the recipes. To make our snack cakes the best in the world. To finish what the previous director started but failed to finish.”

Rose looked down at Gus, who stared back at her with wide eyes, as if to say, *Don’t you dare*. The point of his tail flicked.

“Why me?” Rose asked. “Why not any of the other bakers at any of the millions of bakeries around the country that were just put out of business by that crazy new law?”

Mr. Butter tapped his finger on the tip of his broad nose. “You come highly recommended.”

“By whom?”

“Well . . . Jean-Pierre Jeanpierre, of the Gala des Gâteaux Grands, of course. He selected you as the winner of the most prestigious baking competition in the world, didn’t he? Wouldn’t it make sense that we would seek your help above everyone else’s?”

Rose blushed. It was flattering, if highly suspicious. Apparently she was never going to live down that competition. “But you said before that you wanted the book instead of the cook. What book were you talking about?”

“We heard that at the Bliss Bakery you use a . . . special book that makes your treats magical and delicious,” Mr. Butter said. “That the secret of your success is thanks to—”

“Nope!” Rose lied. *How could they know about the Booke?* “No special book! We do all our baking from memory. Whoever told you about a special book was pulling your leg. Yanking your chain. Lying through their teeth—”

“And that is precisely why we brought you here,” said Mr. Butter. “You are our only hope, Rosemary Bliss. We desperately need your help. Not just for us, but for the good of anyone who has ever turned for hope and happiness to a sweet baked good.” He removed his glasses and dabbed at his eyes with the corner of his handkerchief. “Will you help us in this, our time of greatest need?”

Mr. Butter obviously cared about baking, Rose thought. True, he *had* kidnapped her, but her mother would never have let her go anyway, so in a sense, Mr. Butter had no choice if he wanted Rose’s expertise.

And her family was going to need the money.

Maybe she could do a little bit of good and earn some money for her family. True, she’d made that wish that she could be done with baking, but maybe baking wasn’t done with her.

“I can help you,” said Rose. Gus dug his claws into her leg, which made Rose yelp. “*I wasn’t*”

done!” she muttered to the cat through her teeth. She turned to Mr. Butter. “I can only help if you let me call my parents and tell them where I am. They are probably insanely worried by now.”

“Of course you can call your parents,” Mr. Butter said. “After you bake.”

The hair on Rose’s neck stood on end. “So you’re holding me hostage!”

“Hostage!” Mr. Butter laughed. “I don’t even know the meaning of the word. You’re free to go any time.” He examined the fingernails of his right hand. “After you’ve completed your duties, course.”

“You can’t keep me here against my will!” Rose cried.

“Against your will?” Mr. Butter fanned the idea away with his hand. “We are not holding you here. You may come and go as you wish. . . . once our five main recipes are perfected.”

Rose was getting nowhere with this man. She thought of her parents, how Ty and Sage would have returned from their deliveries by now. Albert and Purdy would ask where Rose was, and they would say that she’d wanted to make a few deliveries on her bike. It would be conceivable that Rose was still out and about. Maybe her family wouldn’t start worrying until sundown. She could finish the baking here by then, or at least find a phone.

“Fine,” she said at last, gripping Gus so tightly that he knew not to scratch. “I’ll bake first.”

“Come,” said Mr. Butter with a smile. “Let me show you where we work.”

Mr. Butter led Rose down a bright corridor, with Mr. Kerr taking up the rear. From within her backpack, Gus leaned forward, both his paws on her left shoulder, the sound of his constant low growl a comfort in her ear.

Mr. Butter opened a steel door and Rose was hit with the smell of sugar and chocolate and bleach and the heat of roaring ovens, and the sounds of industrial hissing and churning and buzzing and pounding.

Mr. Butter led them out onto a steel catwalk—with railings, of course—overlooking a vast factory of gleaming stainless steel. Giant metal paddles churned enormous vats of chocolate. Dozens of hairnetted workers piped white dots onto hundreds of chocolate cupcakes that rode on a conveyor belt like luggage at an airport. A monstrous mechanical press sealed snack cake after snack cake into plastic wrappers, then another conveyor belt dropped the packages into cartons.

Rose stared down at the scene in distaste. She was used to individually packing each precious cake in a white box and tying it off with baker’s twine.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” said Mr. Butter, inhaling deeply and spreading his arms majestically. “We produce eight thousand snacks of one sort or another every minute. Our facilities here are larger than the Pentagon, and we have more delivery trucks working for us than the U.S. Postal Service.”

When they reached the end of the catwalk, Mr. Butter led Rose and Gus into a tiny glass-walled room that was suspended precariously over the factory floor. She looked down at the tangled mess of conveyor belts and was reminded of the stomach-churning feeling she’d had when she looked over the railing at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

The suspended room was empty except for an illuminated glass pedestal, on top of which sat a glass dome. Inside the glass dome was a small hemisphere of chocolate cake, stuffed with white pasteurized cream. She recognized it instantly as a Dinky Cake.

“Why do you have an entire room devoted to a Dinky Cake?” she asked.

“It’s not *just* a Dinky Cake,” said Mr. Kerr, squinting his dark eyes.

“Beneath this hallowed dome,” Mr. Butter began, like he was delivering a sermon, “lies the very genesis of the Mostess Snack Cake Corporation. Our empire was built on the Dinky Cake. Each year the average person in the United States devours upward of seven pounds of Dinkies.”

“Ugh,” said Rose, remembering the way some of the kids at school used to gobble up the cakes two bites. “So, why is this one in a jar?”

“This,” Mr. Butter said, once again lifting his glasses and wiping his eyes, “is the first Dinky Cake we ever made. And it’s every bit as fresh as it was the day it was manufactured by my grandfather back in 1927.”

Rose was horrified. The Dinky Cake was almost a century old—it should already have rotted away. “That’s vile.”

“It’s *sensational*,” Mr. Butter spat, pressing his spindly arms close to his sides. “It’s the power of preservatives—something your homespun cookies lack. Two days after you bake a cake, it dries out and winds up in the garbage. But with preservatives, each Dinky is guaranteed to be as delicious as the day you bought it, no matter when you eat it. The cakes are, in a way, immortal.”

Gus, who was staring at the Dinky, began to heave.

“Oops! My cat has a hairball!” Rose cried as she whisked Gus out of the room and placed him gently on the catwalk, where he continued to dry heave. “I would like to leave now,” he said quietly so that only Rose could hear him.

“I want to go home, too,” said Rose, equally quiet. “But we have to find a way out of here.”

“We want you to go home as well!” said Mr. Butter, who had stepped out of the glass Dinky shrine just in time to hear Rose. “But there is work to do first, so now we are going to bring you to our master test kitchen. It’s the happiest place on Earth.”

“I thought that was Disneyland,” Gus whispered.

Mr. Butter put his thin arm around Rose’s shoulder. “Your mission, which you’ve already accepted, will be to perfect the recipes for our five key products. After that, you will be absolutely free to go. With our thanks, of course.”

“Of course,” Rose said with a gulp. “Perfecting a few recipes should be easy.” She looked at Gus. But the cat only shook his head and sighed.

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