

A shadow falls over the wall and my heart leaps into my throat. A man—a tall man—emerges from the back room.

“Hi!” he says. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. I hope you weren’t waiting long. Can I help you?”

I can’t answer. My heart’s lodged in my windpipe and my body’s still humming, but in a different way. A way it hasn’t hummed in oh, about two years.

*Whoa.*

This is the hottest armed robber I’ve ever seen.

Although now I’m starting to think he probably works here. The streaks of flour on his black t-shirt are a dead giveaway. I hope it’s flour. I suppose it could also be cocaine, which might explain why he was hiding in the back.

“Hi,” I squeak. I clear my throat. “Hi.”

“Hello.” He’s smiling—*damn*—but is starting to look a little confused. I don’t blame him. I’m probably gaping at him. Idiotically. At the haphazardly spiked hair the color of caramel, at the smudge of chocolate high on his cheek. At square, long-fingered hands that swipe at the flour on his shirt. “Sorry. I’m kind of a mess. I was in the back working on a new recipe. I really hope you weren’t out here waiting too long.”

Am I melting? I kind of feel like I’m melting. *Working on a new recipe?* This guy speaks my language.

“Want a cookie,” Charlotte informs him, and reality reaches out to snap me back to earth. Hard.

What am I *doing*? I’m not a teenager. I’m a mother. A widowed mother whose first priority is her child. Not guys. Not even hot guys, who bake.

His eyes—they’re blue, I notice; not like Max’s, which were dark—drop to Charlotte in her stroller. No doubt she’s staring at him expectantly. She can be pretty demanding when it comes to cookies. But his face softens. His smile morphs from the *can I help you* variety into something genuine. I melt just a little bit more.

“I can help you with that,” he tells her. “What’s your favorite kind of cookie?”

Yesterday it was Oreos. I know this because we didn’t have any, which is something the entire apartment complex was probably made aware of. I say a quick prayer that he has whatever she wants today.

“Shapes,” she says.

*Oh, thank God.* This is an easy one. There are trays of cut-out cookies visible in the display cases.

“I have shapes,” he tells her. “Lots of shapes. Would you like a pumpkin?”

“No,” Charlotte says.

“A pumpkin is fine,” I tell him quickly.

“It’s okay. I have others,” he says with a grin. I bristle a little. She’s *my* daughter. If I say a pumpkin is fine, it’s fine.

But he’s already moved on. “An acorn?”

“Nooo.”

“Hmm. How about a squirrel?”

She thinks for a moment. “Uh-uh.” The stroller moves as she shakes her head.

“You’re a hard sell,” he tells her. “Let’s see. What else do I have?” He squats behind the case and reaches in, drawing out one of the trays. “I know.” He takes a piece of tissue paper between his fingers and picks up a cookie from the tray. “How about a princess?”

“A princess!” Charlotte crows. Sure. *Now* she loves princesses.

“I think we have a winner.” He stands up and slides the cookie into a small paper bag. “How about you?” he asks, lifting his eyes to me. “Would you like a princess too?”

A heat that starts in my neck rushes up to settle into my cheeks. They burn. I don’t even know why.

“Whatever you have is fine,” I mumble.

“You got it.” He bends down again and plucks a cookie from the tray. I don’t even see what it is, because I’ve turned my attention to my wallet in the sudden realization that I was so excited by the Springhollow Holiday Bake-Off that I didn’t check to see if I even have cash on me.

“Thank God,” I mouth to myself when I discover a five-dollar bill crumpled in the zippered change section of my beat-up wallet.

“Here you go.” Two small brown bags sit on the counter beside the cash register.

“How much?” I ask.

“A dollar thirty.”

I head for the counter, pushing Charlotte’s stroller ahead of me, and hand him the five. His fingertips brush mine as he takes it, and again when he puts the change into my hand. I tighten my fist around the money and shove it into my jacket pocket. He picks up both bags and hands one to me, then comes around from behind the counter and gives the other to Charlotte. He’s tall. Like Max.

“This one’s yours,” he says, and squats down to hand it to her. “A princess just like you.”

“What do you say to the nice man?” I ask.

“Fank you,” Charlotte says, and beams at him. She’s all round baby cheeks and pearly little teeth and long eyelashes. It’s an enchanting picture for sure, which is probably why he smiles again.

Talk about enchanting.

“Thanks,” I tell him.

“My pleasure,” he says, and stands up straight. We both watch as Charlotte reaches into her bag and pulls out her cookie. The princess has piles of yellow sanding-sugar curls and wears a crown studded with silver edible pearls. The artwork isn’t on par with the sugary masterpieces in the Tiers of Joy window, but I actually prefer it. Charmingly homemade will win every time over irritatingly perfect. At least with me.

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