

RWA AWARD WINNING STORY

# CUPCAKE MEMORIES

*A dash of mystery  
An act of kindness  
A taxi ride in the rain...*

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Cupcake Memories  
By  
Carolyn Wren

“Taxi, *Taxi*. Wait, yes, yes, oh thank God.” Bea grabbed a fistful of her ballgown and held the tiny evening bag over her head as she flew down the steps of her café. Torrential rain was always welcome during Perth’s long dry summers, but did it have to fall on the rare occasion she’d ditched chef whites and rubber-soled shoes for silk and stilettos? *Typical*.

“Duxton Hotel.” She dove through the rear door and let out a shriek as she knocked her head against another person diving in the other side.

Jonas Ryan, foodie man of the moment, hotness incorporated, owner of Soup du Jonas, the so-called *Soup King*.

“I’m sorry, did I steal your ride?” He scrambled backwards.

“No wait, it’s fine. We’re both going to the same place anyway. Silver Spoon awards, right?”

“What gave it away, the hired tux?” He tugged at his silver bow tie.

“More like the famous face, gracing all of your five-star online reviews.” She smiled to soften the teasing of her words, nudging aside a brightly-coloured gift box beside her to fasten her seatbelt. Who was the gift for? A thank you to the judges for the trophy he was odds-on favourite to win?

“Hi, Jonas. Beatrice Rose, Bea for short. We’re both nominated in the Artisan Café’s category.” She held out her hand.

“You’re Bea’s Bites? We’re shop neighbours too, aren’t we? I’ve been meaning to call in and say hi. After all, soup and bread make the perfect combination.”

His smile, and the touch of his damp palm against hers sent a flutter of heat throughout her nerve endings. *Woah, get a grip*. “I’m right around the corner, and you’re welcome anytime. My door’s always open.” *Damn, did that sound flirty?*

The brief conversation took them from trendy Northbridge to the Duxton Hotel’s sweeping driveway. “Let me pay. You’d better go in, we’re running late.” She waved away his objections, holding out the gift box instead. “Don’t forget this.”

He shook his head. “Not mine. I assumed you’d brought it?”

The package, wrapped with such care and attention, took on a new meaning. “Damn.” Bea turned to the driver. “Someone left this behind. Where was your last drop-off?”

“St Mark’s Hospital.”

*Double damn*. “You should consider going back there. This might be important.”

His look defined the phrase, *not my problem*.

On impulse, she tugged at the pink bow and lifted the lid. Nestled inside was a single cupcake...with a gold solitaire diamond ring perched on the choc icing topping.

“Bloody hell.” Jonas echoed her own shock. “Is that an engagement ring?”

Bea threw the disinterested taxi driver a glare. “You must have a name for the booking, or a phone number. Can’t you ask your depot or something?”

“He hailed me from the street, same as you did. Look, lady, the owner can lodge a lost property form, and I’ll hand in the box tomorrow, or the next day, okay? Problem solved.”

Bea eyed the delicate cupcake. Stuffed in some hot lost property cupboard, both the cake, and the romantic intention, would be ruined in two hours, let alone twenty-four. The sugary sweet aroma of chocolate and vanilla filled her nostrils, and her resolve. “Take me there. To St Mark’s.”

“What?” The driver and Jonas spoke simultaneously. The driver added, “It’ll cost you extra. The meter’s still running.”

To her surprise Jonas refastened his seatbelt and slammed the door shut. “You heard what the lady said, take us to the hospital.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “The ceremony’s already started. What if you’re not there to receive the award?”

“If *I*’m not there? What if *you*’re the winner?”

“We both know you’re going to win.”

“I never count my chickens.”

Once underway, Bea pulled out her phone, using its illumination for a better look. She turned the box in her hands, searching for a card, or a name. “A hospital is an odd place for a proposal, don’t you think?”

“Not really. It could be a doctor, or a nurse, or even a new dad inspired by the birth of his baby.”

She tapped the driver’s seat. “Was the owner alone? Or with someone? Did you get a good look at him?”

“Alone, and no, he was wearing a rain jacket with the hood up.” His cranky tone put a stop to her questions. She poked her tongue out behind his back, and was rewarded by a strangled chuckle from her handsome companion passenger.

Jonas took the box from her hand. “Is that something against the side, an envelope?”

She eased it out with her fingertips, being careful to avoid the cake.

“Do you think we should open it?”

“I don’t see we have any choice. It’s our only clue.”

Inside the envelope was a square photo, yellowed and creased with age. A man and a woman, dressed in formal evening clothes, standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, laughing. Written on the back were the words ‘Cupcake Memories. Your George.’

“The mystery deepens. I love a good mystery.” Jonas pointed to the couple. “They could be us.”

He was right. Although the picture was in black and white, their colouring—her fair and him dark—was spot on. The man’s top hat and cane gave him a rakish appearance, and the woman’s flowing gown was pale and wispy.

“Um, Bea? You know this engagement ring? It’s fake, more Two Dollar shop than high end jewellery store.”

“*What?*” He was right. With better lighting, the ring revealed itself as nothing more than a cheap imitation, gold-coloured metal topped with a glass, or possibly plastic gem. Her heart sank. She’d dragged him away from a prestigious award ceremony on a wild goose chase. She was so mortified she couldn’t even look him in the face.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Why?” Jonas didn’t sound annoyed, or angry. Instead, his handsome face was lit with eagerness and excitement. Okay, eagerness and excitement looked *damn* good on him. A frown marred his forehead as she continued to stare. “What’s wrong?”

Heat raced into her cheeks. “Nothing.” She cleared her throat. “Before I could afford a bricks and mortar store, and was trying to earn a living by cooking, I’d make cupcakes in my tiny kitchen and take them to birthday parties, baby showers, that sort of thing. It always made people happy. I have my own cupcake memories. Maybe that’s why I want to reunite this one with its owner.”

He covered her hand with his. “I sold my homemade soups at weekend markets, poured into disposable coffee cups I found in a discount store because they were the only thing I could afford.”

She squeezed his fingers. “And now people queue around the block, in *summer*, for your hot soup. I’d say you’ve officially made it.”

“For now. Until the next trend comes along.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“I try to do that with everything. My motto is seize the moment.”

Wow that grin was addictive. No wonder female bloggers went out of their way to interview him and rave about his food.

She cleared her throat a second time. “We’re almost there. Any ideas on our next move?”

“I guess we could stand in the hospital foyer and yell ‘George!’”

She grinned at his mischievous expression. “Or we could ask at reception.” She addressed her next question to their driver. “Can you drop us off at the same spot?”

The same spot turned out to be the main entrance, overflowing with people moving in and out of the double doors, shaking wet umbrellas, competing with cars dropping off and picking up in a continuous stream.

They raced inside, dodging the continuing rain and stood in the noisy, crowded space. A little girl with her arm in a sling, pointed. “Mummy, look, it’s Elsa.”

Jonas gave her an admiring head-to-toe look, accompanied by another cheeky grin. “I can see the resemblance.”

Bea willed the blush from her cheeks. “Thank you, but my princess impersonation is not helping to solve our mystery. See if you can find a map or directory board.”

She was about to ask a passing nurse when something caught her eye. An older man was walking towards a vending machine, his steps slow and careful, leaning on a silver-tipped cane. Bea held up the aged photo and stared at it. The man in the picture had a similar-looking cane. *Was it possible...?*

“George!” she yelled the name across the room.

Jonas physically jumped. “Bea, when I said that in the taxi, I didn’t actually mean—”

“He’s looking at us.”

“*Everyone’s* looking at us.”

She waved away his whispered comment. “This is different. George?” she asked again, and the older man nodded, just a single jerk of his head, but it was enough.

Grabbing hold of Jonas’s hand, she half dragged him to where George was standing.

His confusion was obvious until he saw the box in her hand. A mixture of emotions crossed his lined features, ending in pure relief. “You found it? How?”

“In the taxi.” Jonas said.

“Thank you. Thank you. I don’t know what to say.” He swiped his free hand across one cheek, wiping away a tear before holding it out. “May I?”

Bea handed over the precious package. “Of course. It’s yours after all. Can I ask—”

George wasn’t listening, striding down the hallway with surprising speed, his cane tap tapping in time with his steps.

Bea and Jonas shared a glance, unsure if they should follow.

He stopped at a room a few doors down and beckoned them forward. “Come in, please.”

An elderly woman was lying in the bed of a shared ward, her snowy-white hair and the pristine white cast on her left wrist blending into the hospital’s utilitarian linen. She smiled as they entered, but it was a vague smile, and there was no recognition on her face. George took a seat beside her, and lifted her hand. “I’m back, Grace.”

“Back?”

“I said I was going to get a cup of tea.”

“Did you? I’m sorry, what did you say your name was again?”

A flicker of pain crossed George's face, but he sucked in a shuddering breath and held up the box in his hand. "I'm George, and you're Grace and I have something better than tea. These lovely people found it for me."

"They're dressed very fancy. Are they going out dancing?"

"Perhaps." He placed the box on the bed. "Why don't you open this? Here, I can help you with the bow."

"Is it a present?" She lifted the lid with her uninjured hand, and was silent for a few seconds.

Bea held her breath. Judging by the utter lack of movement or sound beside her, Jonas was doing the same.

The awful veil of blankness fell from Grace's face, replaced by a radiant smile. She raised her fingers to his cheeks. "My Georgie. My darling Georgie."

"Hello, sweetheart. I love you so much." George's voice cracked on the last word. His tears were flowing freely now, as were Bea's.

Jonas wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. She snuggled into his side, welcoming the comfort he offered. The fragrant aroma of herbs and spices clung to his skin and hair, a scent *way* more seductive to her than any aftershave.

His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath and his voice had a quivery edge to it. "You did a good thing."

Bea tightened her arms around him. "*We* did."

George turned back to them, his face ruddy and wet, but beaming with happiness. "Grace isn't too bad at home, but the noise and the unfamiliar surroundings are playing havoc with her Alzheimer's. Since they insisted on keeping her in for observation, I thought I'd nip home and bring back something familiar for her." He raised his hand to touch Grace's cheek. "I proposed like this, with the ring on a cupcake, over fifty years ago."

"They cut off my wedding rings, Georgie. They cut them *right* off my finger." Grace's voice rang with outrage and loss.

"I know, dearest, and we'll fix them. In the meantime, I borrowed this one from Maddie's dress up box. Maddie is our granddaughter."

"I know who she is...for now, anyway."

His reassuring smile had a poignant edge. George eased apart the edges on the cheap, adjustable ring, and slipped in onto her swollen finger above the cast. "There you go, a perfect fit."

A single tear ran down her cheek. "Perfect, just like Paris."

Remembering the photo, Bea freed herself from Jonas's arms and handed it to George. "I'm sorry for prying, we were looking for clues, and it worked." She gestured to his cane.

His smile turned rueful. "A motorbike accident from my wild youth, the darn hip never did heal properly. But if it led you to me, it's worth it."

He held out the picture to his wife. "Here, Grace, look how young we are."

"You'll always be young to my eyes, *always*."

Jonas slipped his hand into Bea's as he addressed George. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

"Thank you, we're fine. Our son and his family are on their way right now." George gestured to their clothing. "Grace is right, you do look like you're going out dancing. I hope my silliness with the taxi didn't spoil your plans."

"Nothing important." Jonas said.

"Can I give you some advice? Don't waste a moment and make memories at every opportunity. You'll treasure them later, I promise you."

"We will." Bea had to swallow the lump in her throat.

Grace was laughing as she swiped sticky chocolate icing from the cake and held it to her husband's lips. He nipped at her fingers, the light of love bright in his eyes. Bea knew their presence in the room, and in the lives of these two special people, was no longer required.

Happiness. Sadness. Relief. Concern. A myriad of emotions swirled through Bea's mind as they walked back along the corridor. To say the night had taken an unexpected turn was an understatement. To punctuate the point, a lock of hair from her topknot surrendered and fell forward over her face, and her stomach added to the party by letting out a loud grumble, reminding her she'd missed dinner.

"How do you think the ceremony's going?" Jonas asked.

"I suspect you're the owner of a shiny silver trophy by now."

His answer was a wide smile. "Or maybe you are?"

"Let's have a look." Bea retrieved her phone. "Hmm. #SoupKing is trending, so is #SoupduHotness. I think we have a winner."

Jonas visibly groaned. "One damn blogger coined that phrase and now it's stuck."

"You should know, #MissingSoupKing is also trending. It looks like your absence has been noticed. If we leave now, we can catch the after party."

"Can I offer another alternative? I have a batch of French Onion Soup at the café."

*Great*, he'd definitely heard her stomach rumbling.

Jonas continued, "It's a new recipe with a secret ingredient, and I'm looking for a taste tester."

"Is the secret ingredient toasted fennel seeds?"

That stopped him in his tracks. "How on earth could you know that?"

She tapped the side of her nose. "Excellent olfactory senses."

"I'm impressed. Now you *have* to try my soup."

She gave him a mock sigh. "If you insist. I have a fresh baked garlic and cheese pull-apart, if you want to take a detour to my café on the way back? It's just like you said, bread..."

"...and soup make the perfect combination."

They stopped at the hospital entrance. Bea eyed the row of taxis and used her phone to order an Uber instead. The rain had finally lessened to a half-hearted drizzle. Jonas lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. His lips were warm against her skin, making her wonder if he tasted as delicious as he smelt. "I'm sorry you lost the award, Bea."

Acting on impulse, she leaned forward and brushed her mouth over his. *Delicious*. "I'm glad you won it."

His megawatt smile came back in full force. "Do you know I've never baked a cupcake?"

"You're in luck, I'm great at it, and an expert teacher."

"Is that an offer?"

"Depends, I don't work for free. That soup better be good."

He threw back his head and laughed, a deep rumble of sound and oh so sexy. "What do you say, Beatrice Rose of Bea's Bites, wanna go make some memories at a two-person party? Wait, hang on, sorry, did that sound corny or sleazy or both?"

She grinned at his babbling apology. "Neither. And you're on, Soup King."

The playful comment drew another groan from him. "Promise you'll never call me that again."

"Remind me later."

"How much later?"

"A day? A week?" *A month, a year, a decade...*

As their ride pulled into the drop-off zone and Jonas opened the door for her, Bea looked back through the hospital doors and sent a silent hopeful wish to George and Grace. *To your past memories, Grace. May you hold onto them for a while longer.*

She glanced at the man beside her, the warmth and attraction showing in his eyes. *And to our future memories, whatever they may be, I promise to treasure them, always.*