

Chapter 1

I'm pouring myself a cup of our house-blend coffee when Merry blows past me to the front door, her running shoes squeaking on the black-and-white tiles. She flips the 'Open' sign over to 'Closed' like it's a winning poker hand, and the plastic slaps the window glass. The old brass doorknob clicks as she twists its lock for what might be the last time ever.

All summer, I've been trying to freeze-frame these 'lasts', mentally recording the sights and sounds I think I'll miss most.

"You save any for me?"

Samson jiggles his favorite cup, a sleek blue insulated tumbler etched with U.S. Navy insignia, and I arch an eyebrow at the rhetorical question. I'd never put my emotional support cup ahead of his mission-critical refill.

"I've got more than enough hands with all the kids," he informs me as he reaches for the carafe and pours enough to get him through closing time. "You can just do paperwork or whatever while we finish clean-up and pound out tomorrow's prep."

"So...you want me out of your way."

He looks at me sideways as he twists the tumbler lid, no doubt trying to assess if my teasing tone belies an imminent eruption of what he's been calling my 'empty nest angst.'

"Yep," he nods. "I've got these kids running smooth as a V-8 today. Your mopey mood would just gum up our engine."

Before I can protest the 'mopey' diagnosis, he jostles my right shoulder with his left. "You've got, what, forty-eight more hours with them?"

I shake my head. "Jim and I aren't driving Mabel to her move-in day til Thursday."

Mabel's new suitcases remain bundled like Russian nesting dolls on her

bedroom floor next to, at last count, nine leaning towers of her 'essentials'.

"But Merry's leaving in the morning," I add.

At least Merry's all packed for her return to the dorms, her belongings neatly organized in transparent packing cubes to maximize her luggage space.

I've loved having both girls home all summer, their boisterous energy caulking every crevice of free time. But now I feel pierced, bombarded with the shrapnel of all these lasts. I can't stop imagining our dinner table without the cacophony of M&M. When was the last time Jim and I had an empty house?

I'm not sure my memory's slideshow will go back that far. How far? Twenty years back, seven military moves ago, eight Air Force postings prior. A lifetime.

"These last few weeks disappeared faster than popsicles at a preschool," Samson says with a shake of his head. Nodding my agreement, I blink and curse my overreactive tear ducts.

Merry's over at the corner table, chatting with the last customers, two women with three sugared-up preschoolers and a milk-drunk newborn. Her khaki shorts and red t-shirt are covered by a white lab coat she brought back from college, rather than one of the cute monogrammed aprons I'd ordered for all the staff.

I sigh. With teenagers, some battles just aren't worth the ammo.

"It's all happening pretty fast, huh? How're you feeling?" Samson asks, misinterpreting my sigh.

"Fine," I say, because the more accurate answer of 'deflated as a popped pool floatie' would just confirm his earlier assessment of my mood. Besides, I'm sure this punctured feeling is a totally normal response to having your heart bisected and shipped off to two different locations.

Not that I'm going to be dramatic about it or anything.

When I glance across my shoulder at Samson, he's looking at me with

obvious disbelief. He runs his thumb along his jawbone, where his salt-and-pepper beard appears a decade past his curly black hair, with a single blotch of gray at the right temple.

Stuffing my meandering thoughts back into my brain's junk drawer, I attempt an honest answer. "Actually, I feel like I drank a cocktail where the inebriation and the hangover are dancing a tango. One minute, I'm fizzy with joy over how smoothly they're launching into the big, bright world; the next minute, I'm queasy with worry about all the terrible things that could happen to them once they leave our safe little town."

"Nobody would buy that drink," he says with a shake of his head. "But I know the feeling." He gives my shoulder an empathetic squeeze. He's headed back to the kitchen before I can ask him how long it lasts, if it ever goes away.

While Merry takes the last customers' payment and assures them there's no need to rush off, I top my coffee with a splash of maple syrup, then power off the automatic coffee machine we rely on to meet the café's need for volume and speed. Good old-fashioned drip coffee is our top seller year-round. The cinnamon, slightly nutty aroma of our custom-roasted coffee is the café's signature scent, and my personal contribution to the enchantment of this place.

Merry powerwalks across the dining area, then bangs through the saloon-style swinging doors into the kitchen. When she shouts, "Last shift, done!" the other teens cheer, and I have to blink ferociously until my vision clears.

I drizzle cold cream from the mini fridge into my sweetened coffee, ensuring it's a degree or two below scalding, then grab a spoon and swirl it before taking my first sip. Closing my eyes and unclenching my jaw, I try to recenter. I focus my attention on identifying each piece in today's symphony of cafe scents: the lingering sweetness of this morning's pancakes, the smoky caramel of the wood-fired maple syrup drizzled over them, the buttery richness

of biscuits and peppery tang of Samson's famous gravy, and some faint floral notes drifting in the open windows from the house up the side street. Calm now, I open my eyes.

I love every detail of this magical space where we've spent so many happy hours as a family. Our retro "1950s diner/ice cream parlor/malt shop" vibe is established by the brushed-aluminum tables and the candy-apple-red upholstery of the bar stools, chairs, and booth cushions. Gooseneck lights with brilliant chrome barn shades accent the cotton-candy pink walls, and matching pendant lights hang from the bubble-gum pink ceiling.

On either side of the cherry-red front door leading onto Main Street, the white window ledges are stuffed with Tiffany-blue knick-knacks that came with the place. Diners love the "summer at the shore" atmosphere, especially during the gunmetal gray days of our Northern Michigan winters.

Wandering over to the front of the cafe, I people-watch out the windows for a minute, waving to a few locals who catch my eye. Plenty are out and about downtown, enjoying our balmy late summer weather. The sun's been loyal as a Labrador Retriever all season, and today's breeze off Lake Michigan is perfection.

The last customers finally leave, their little ones no doubt leaving a sticky syrup trail all the way out the door. I don't miss the grubbiness of the preschool years. Not that teens don't bring their own brand of mess, with their dirty clothes scattered like breadcrumb trails and their Jenga towers of empty soda cans that never seem to find the recycling bin. There will be less mess after M&M are gone, that's for sure. I'm trying to keep the things I won't miss in the front of my mind.

Samson's voice rises as he barks assignments to the crew, and I'm drawn back into the chaotic energy of the back of the house.

"You sure you're good?" I ask once I reach the kitchen.

Samson nods, waving his laminated checklist of daily closing tasks in a 'get-outa-here' gesture.

One thing I appreciate about the military men who've surrounded me my entire adult life, they can rock a checklist. I keep moving until I reach what Jim and Samson call my "cloffice." Sandwiched between the kitchen's back wall with the electrical panel, the sidewall of the pantry, and the door to the utility corridor, my very professional office is so snug that if someone flings the walk-in cooler door wide open, it deepens the dent in the side of my roll-top oak desk. I think of it as my cockpit and, for the last three years, it's where I've created menus, chased down hard-to-find ingredients, emailed vendors, and paid endless invoices.

I'm comforted by the squeeze of the tiny space, as I open my laptop to work on our fall menu. The thing about fall menus is that they have to appeal to year-round residents more than the summer menus we use to lure first-time visitors, but the new items also have to be things we can turn around quickly without a ton of prep, since our staff gets much smaller once summer ends.

"MOM!" Mabel's voice pierces the soft cocoon of instrumental music in my earbuds, which have officially failed to deliver on their noise-canceling promise. Unsure if I've been working for five minutes or 45, I swivel my chair toward her voice and catch her mid-eye roll.

If I squint, I can still see the bold three-year-old within our newest high school grad. As a chubby preschooler evading her babysitter to crash our grown-up lawn party, she showed up ready to rumble in a neon green tutu over leopard print leggings and a sparkly purple swimsuit. Now she's a soon-to-be college freshman in a merlot-hued, V-neck blouse that accents her full figure and makes no attempt to disguise her stomach rolls. I love that she refuses to shrink into our society's template for beauty, that she never shrouds her plus-size body in penitential black. It also wakes me up in a shivering sweat at 3 am.

"Why are you squinting? Were you asleep?" Mabel asks as she stares into my wide-open eyes. (They might've been a little glazed over from staring at a draft menu, but they were definitely open.) Her hands-on-hip stance conveys the

indignation of a girl who disdains sleep as much now as she did in toddlerhood. We used to find her building mega-cities out of empty cereal boxes at midnight, or serving tea to her action figures at 3 am—our little night-shift worker.

“What do you need?” I ask as I slip my earbuds back into their case. Mabel’s eyes graze my plain red t-shirt and ancient jeans, and I sneak a sideways glance at my reflection in the laptop screen. A fair amount of my wavy brown hair has escaped its bun, and not in the attractive “messy bun” look the teens can pull off.

Mabel switches deftly from condescending judgment to plaintive request mode. “Do you have all the sundae stuff ready?” Her face-framing burgundy-dyed curls stay perfectly in place as she juts her chin pointedly in the direction of the kitchen’s center island, where I obviously do not have an ice cream party prepped.

It was my idea to give each of the departing teens a sweet sendoff, but I underestimated the hours and the gallons of ice cream it would involve. You’d think at least a couple of the summer crew would have worked the same last shift, but no. Somehow, the departure schedule has required individual sundae sessions, followed by nearly endless hugfests, before eventual teary send-offs. It’s felt like we’re in the running for the longest Midwest goodbye on record. But I love that the summer staff have such positive memories at the cafe that they cry to leave. Being sad when something ends means it was pretty wonderful, right?

Mabel is pursing her glossy lips and shaking her head, presumably because I haven’t answered her instantaneously. “Mom, I think your executives are dysfunctioning again.” She scowls at my snort-laugh, and her voice reaches its most blistering pitch to inform me, “This is Merry’s last shift!”

Yes, of course I know this. Although I might be subconsciously trying to ignore it. Merry’s going into her junior year down in Kalamazoo, where she’s been thriving as a Biology major. So much so that she’s pretty confident of an

internship placement next summer. Which means that even if Mabel comes back to the cafe for our busy season, it will never again be the four of us together. This joyous chapter of our family is finished. My only choice is nostalgia or nothing.

“On it,” I say.

Propelling myself past Mabel toward the stainless steel island, I gather an assortment of syrups, nuts, and jellies for toppings. I collect bowls and spoons, dodging Bruce, whose awkward shuffling from the dishwasher to the silverware cubby is a runway obstruction to the rest of the team’s airliner-like efficiency. Samson says the ‘agility and coordination package’ is sold separately with some kids, and Bruce didn’t get the upgrade.

As Mabel and I assemble the farewell festivities beneath the hanging pots and pans, I wonder what it’s going to be like this time next week. What will it look like to run my little family business without my family? I try to remind myself of all that will stay the same, like Samson and the regular diners, but my mind boomerangs back to what won’t. No more cheers of “Let’s Go, Air FOURce!” before we open for breakfast, no more competitions of kids versus parents to inject fun into tedious tasks like assembling takeout boxes. M&M assure me they will not miss these moments, but I refuse to believe it. You never know how much you’re going to miss something until it’s gone.

In summertime, our back of the house feels like an overstuffed popart with staff squeezed in and bubbling out at the seams. I love it, but the chaos and claustrophobia help me appreciate the calmer rhythms of our off-season months. In another week, it’ll be back to just me and Samson most days. And dear, bumbling Bruce. God help us. Of the dozen local kids who’ve made up this summer’s crew, I know he’d be Samson’s last choice to retain through the winter - if we had a choice. But we need the help, and Bruce is the only one who won’t be leaving when school starts.

Beyond his clumsiness, he’s just not an easy kid to connect with. When his

face isn't parallel with the floor, his eyes stay hidden behind a curtain of shaggy blonde hair. Unlike all the other teens we've had through the years, he seems antisocial and detached somehow. Walled-off.

The kids are gathering around the island, forming a necklace-shaped loop with Merry as the golden pendant. Her dark blonde hair swishes against her pale cheek as she turns toward each person congratulating her. I think she's genuinely enjoying her inclusion in the little rite, but she might just be playing along for the group's sake. There's no trace of my genes in her introverted personality or Scandinavian appearance. She's all Jim, just bottled into a more petite form with a porcelain-doll face.

Mabel holds an ice cream scoop like a microphone, serenading her sister with some pop tune she knows Merry hates. Mabel's features and coloring match mine, testifying to the Hispanic strands in our mixed heritage, but her theatrical disposition is all her own. I take no responsibility for it, no matter what Jim says.

I wish Jim could be here. To offset the financial squeeze of the girls' college costs, he's just started a new job at the ski resort, leaving me to manage the cafe's daily operation alone for the foreseeable future. Which is fine. I'll be fine.

Samson is walking toward the freezer, but stops abruptly to catch my eye.

"Glitter on a cow pie's still a cow pie."

I take a second to absorb this koan. "You know, mostly I don't think of you as being from the Midwest, but every now and then it peeks out from under your world-traveler trenchcoat."

His eyebrows lift. "You make me sound like a flasher on the subway."

"Oh! Well, I was picturing, like, a Carmen Sandiego figure."

"I'm not sure that's better?"

"You're a man of mystery, Samson."

"That I am," he agrees and steps past me to pull the 5-gallon bucket of vanilla out of the freezer.

When Samson slides the bucket in front of Mabel, I glance at Bruce. He's hunched like a heap of wet laundry on one of the stools, his head tilted down to his empty bowl. Maybe once things settle down around here, I'll be able to figure him out, connect in some way.

A sudden breeze cools my right side, and I scan the room for the source.

"Dad!" Merry yells, spotting Jim walking through the back door a second before I do.

The teens shout a chorus of hellos at him before syncing up to chant, "Mis-ter-Jim, Mis-ter-Jim!" like he's the captain of the football team.

Jim's eyes scan the kitchen and catch mine. Whatever he sees in my face brings him straight to my side, where he wraps his arm around my shoulder. I lean into him, smelling his citrusy cologne and a remnant of something automotive.

Mabel starts scooping ice cream into the bowls as they're passed to her by the other teens. I grab a napkin off the pile on the island for the tears I can't hold back any longer. I'm truly grateful for the time we've shared here, for the community we've created and the magic we've made together. But no matter how much gratitude I muster, it can't cancel out my grief. The endings are just beginning.