



Tabitha secured tape over the cardboard box they'd already filled. "I'd forgotten how much fun packing is. Reminds me why I don't go anywhere."

Livvy smirked as she stood by the closet, trying to figure out which items should fill the second box. "Hey, I was finishing breakfast while you were still snoring in the other room."

A pillow came out of nowhere. Livvy barely had time to swat it away before it hit her square in the face.

"I do not snore."

"Believe me, you do. As co-inhabitant of this house, I have had many opportunities to marvel at your nasal talents."

"You are no picnic either, I'll have you know. You use all the hot water every time you shower and can't cook a decent meal to save your life. Who would have thought a competitor on *Cake That* would fall apart completely when she has to do anything in the kitchen besides bake?"

Livvy's kitchen failures were no secret. Within two weeks of living together, they had agreed to modify their cooking arrangement. Desserts and breakfasts were her domain, but Tabitha did the heavy lifting for dinner. If the other bakers on *Cake That* ever found out her secret, she'd be laughed off the set.

“I can’t believe it’s here already.” Livvy pushed an apron draped hanger out of the way. “I’m probably going to die of embarrassment, but who cares? I’ll be on television.”

“You have to take this one.” Tabitha reached into the closet and removed a retro-inspired apron. “It’s my favorite.” The subtle brown, aqua, and white pinstriped material sported a ruffle of brown with white polka dots along the top and bottom edges. The same material created the apron’s deep pockets and contrasted perfectly with the simple aqua ribbons that tied around the waist.

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving it behind.” Livvy took the apron and folded it neatly into the cardboard box sitting on the edge of her bed. “Can you rummage through my top drawer to find the matching headband while I keep looking?”

While her friend sifted through a drawer full of headbands that coordinated with her collection of aprons, Livvy pulled a red and white polka-dotted apron out of the closet. Its sweetheart neckline was trimmed with a tiny ruffle of cotton, and the waist tied with a simple white bow.

“While you’re at it, grab the red and white headband that matches this one.” She paused mid-fold. “You don’t think it’s too many polka dots, do you?”

Tabitha laughed as she continued to sift through the endless tangle of material in the drawer. “You’re in trouble if too many polka dots is against their dress code. I think that’s ninety percent of what you’ve got in there.”

“I’m a polka dot girl.” Livvy shrugged. “What can I say? They’re too cute.”

“They do garner attention.” Tabitha’s brows raised as she shook her head. “That’s for sure. So, I think I’ll stick with something a little more sedate.”

“You need to live a little.” Livvy plucked a black and white headband from the drawer and held it up to Tabitha’s long blonde hair.

“Please.” Tabitha snatched the band from Livvy’s grasp. “I

live just fine, thank you. I'm simply not the life of the party like you are."

"Don't put that back." She giggled as she retrieved the band from Tabitha. "I think I'm going to take the matching apron with the purple trim and bow. With the ones I packed last night, I'll have ten sets. That's one for each episode of the show. Is it too much?"

"For me? Yes. For you? Absolutely not. They choose people with personality, and you have it to spare. The audience and judges are going to fall in love with you."

Livvy struck a superwoman pose, with fists on her hips and head held high. "What's not to love?"

She laughed as Tabitha rolled her eyes at the theatrics. Tabitha's mom always said they were as different as night and day, but they brought out the best in each other. Too bad she couldn't take Tabitha with her to the show. A tendril of fear spiraled through her.

"What if I don't win?"

"Don't start that again." Tabitha ran the packing tape over the box to secure the flaps. "You're good enough to win, Livvy."

"But what if I don't? I know the show is taping during the slow season, but I usually still have orders for customers' holiday events. It pays the bills when people don't want to stand in the cold for a cupcake. If I don't win, the truck—"

"You are going to do great." Tabitha placed a hand on each of her shoulders, making Livvy look her in the eye. "I can't promise you'll win, but I think you will. You're the best. Besides, God knows what you need. He'll take care of it."

"I know. You're right. I've got to stop worrying about this. I prayed about it before I sent in the audition tape. I prayed about it before accepting. Now, I've got to trust. I only wish it were easier."

Tabitha's eyes shut, and Livvy followed suit. A prayer was coming. Her friend was a prayer warrior like no one she'd ever

met. Livvy might be the life of the party in their friendship, but Tabitha was the anchor that held them steady.

“Lord, be with Livvy on this new adventure. Help her do her best and be a light to those she meets. Let her compete with grace and confidence in the abilities You’ve given her. No matter what the outcome, let her know without a doubt that You’re in control and taking care of her. You’ve laid out the path she’s to take, and You will continue to do so after the show ends. Grow her and bless her through this opportunity. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

Peace settled over Livvy. She could almost see her friend’s prayer lifting to the throne room of heaven, where God caught it to Himself. Livvy offered her own silent prayer of thanks for giving her a friend as strong in her faith as Tabitha. Before the amen, she added a quick prayer asking God to grow the same kind of faith in her own life.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Much better. Thank you.” Livvy smiled and glanced at the clock on her wall. “But now, I’ve got to get going. Are you sure you don’t mind taking my boxes to the post office for me?”

“It’s not a problem. You worry about being careful on the drive out to California. I’ll make sure your clothes and stuff are waiting at your home away from home when you get there.”

Livvy pulled her in for a tight hug. “You’re the best.”

“I know.” Tabitha pulled away, placed a dramatic hand to her chest, and rolled her eyes. “Who could compare? Now get out of here, or you won’t have time to sightsee on your trek across the country.”

She couldn’t stop the smile stretching across her face as she grabbed her keys and a mint green helmet from her nightstand before waving goodbye one last time. “Here goes nothing.”

EVAN JONES SHUT the door to his truck without taking his eyes from the house in front of him. Was he in the right place? While by L.A. standards it might be average, it made the small Texan ranch house he'd grown up in look pathetic.

Everything he'd received to prep for his time on *Cake That* mentioned he'd live in a house with the other contestants, but nothing had prepared him for a mansion. He lifted his duffel bags from the truck bed. Before he could start up the walk, a motorcycle roared to a stop next to him.

The greeting he meant to offer his fellow competitor stuck in his throat as he turned to find a woman pulling a light green helmet from her head. Dark brown hair danced just below her shoulders, shimmering like silk in the California sun as she ran her fingers through it. A single lock of teal framed her face, deepening brown eyes which lit up as she turned to smile at him. Not what he'd expected, but a beautiful surprise.

"Hi. I'm Livvy."

The duffel bags he carried prevented Evan from immediately taking her offered hand. He dropped some of his load onto the sidewalk and shook her hand before picking it back up.

"I'm Evan." He hoped his smile was as open as hers and that his surprise didn't show on his face.

"Is it just me, or is this place a little daunting?" She motioned to the house with a tilt of her head. "I mean, it's beautiful, but I've never seen a house this big, at least not up close or intending to stay awhile."

He followed the direction of her gaze. Enormous copper framed windows stood out against the much lighter tan of the stone walls that rose to three stories, though one was sunk below street level at the front of the house. A multi-car garage sat at the south end of the home, and a chimney rose from the gray slate roof. The fireplace inside would set a mood more than fill a need.

Terraced garden plots followed the sloping stairway that led to the front door framed in large windows. In homage to the

California sun, a large bay window was positioned to the left of the entrance.

The front door opened, and a slim woman made her way toward them. Even hurrying down the walk, her movement reminded Evan of royalty or one of the women on the beauty pageant shows his momma liked to watch. Each step was designed to give the appearance of grace and beauty, though the straight set of her shoulders and intense expression told him she was used to taking charge.

“Apparently, in California, people don’t walk.” Livvy leaned in next to him, her voice meant only for him. “They glide. Do you think we’ll all be gliding after a couple of weeks, or maybe you have to be a local?”

The woman drew closer, and Livvy forced a bland expression. Only a hint of her good humor remained in the upturned corner of her lips. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Livvy was going to liven things up in this competition or erase his smile at the thought.

“You two must be Evan and Livvy.” The woman’s saccharin voice sounded forced as she clasped her hands in front of her chest. “I’m so glad you made it safely. I’m Rhonda, one of the production assistants on *Cake That*, and I’ve been charged with getting all our wonderful contestants settled.”

A pause was usually an opening for others to speak, but Evan had the distinct impression this moment was nothing more than trained politeness. He waited for her to continue.

“Before you go in, I need to give you some instructions. A camera crew is inside the door. Don’t look at them. Look at the house. Take in everything you can about the home. We need these reaction shots to splice together with other interactions away from the competition. The other contestants are waiting in the den. Join them for a few minutes, and then get your room assignments and get settled in. Got it?”

Evan saw Livvy look at him from the corner of his eye. He gave her a nod and shrug.

“It sounds great.” Livvy turned a brilliant smile on their host. “I can’t wait to meet everyone.”

“Perfect. Right this way.” Rhonda led them into a large entryway before turning to the left and waving them through an arched doorway. She gave a final reminder as they moved past her into the room. “Don’t be shy. Go in and introduce yourselves to the other contestants. And most of all, don’t watch the cameras.”