

CHAPTER ONE

Supposedly it's against the body clock of a teenager to get up early in the morning, but Silver loved to rise before the sun to work with her grandfather at the family business, Tomasino's Bakery. On these quiet mornings, they would roll out the dough together and bake the pastries that went on sale at 7:00 AM, under the supervision of Pope Francis, whose portrait hung on the wall.

"Gramps, is it illegal for me to work here?"

"Of course not; don't be ridiculous."

"I'm only fifteen."

"Only fifteen!" he scoffed. "You know what *I* was doing when I was fifteen?"

"What?" said Silver, sprinkling some flour on the dough.

"Well... The same thing you're doing right now. It wasn't exactly breaking rocks with a pick ax, but my point is there's nothing wrong with a little hard work. I pay you, don't I?"

"Yes."

"And it's not illegal, as long as you're family. I wouldn't do that." There were several other people working with them in the big kitchen in back of the store, and he turned to one of them and said, "Esther, we gotta get those cronuts going for that catering job."

"I know," the woman said, waving a hand in the air. "It's all under control."

"What is it with the cronuts?" he said as he turned back to Silver. "I talked to a guy I know in New York who's in the business a couple months ago and he said 'Get ready for the cronuts. They're coming your way.' You know, I talk to these bakers in New York and it never fails, they can always tell me what the next trend is going to be. Used to always take almost

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exactly two years to get to Milwaukee. Always. But then came the internet and now everyone knows what people are eating in New York. So now it's more like two months until it gets here!"

Once upon a time, Gramps had resisted the internet with all his might, but now he loved it. He said it made doing business so much easier.

Silver started cutting up her dough with a triangular-shaped metal cutter. "Gramps, wouldn't it be funny if we made up a trend? We could invent something totally ridiculous and tell our customers it was from New York and was the new, big thing."

"Sil, you're a little devil, like your mother."

"But wouldn't it be funny? Let's do it!"

"I'll think about it."

"We could make it gross or shocking."

"Gross or shocking? There are people making pastries that look like private parts these days. I don't really know how you can get any more gross or shocking."

"Good point," Silver said. She glanced up at the Pope and then asked her grandfather, "Gramps, do you think gay people should be allowed to get married?"

"Where the hell did that question come from?"

"Just in the news and stuff. What do you think?"

"I think that ship has sailed, and it's fine by me. But the Church? Won't happen in my lifetime. Maybe not even in yours."

"Mom said your brother was gay."

"Yes, he was. But I don't want to talk about it. Not because it bothers me that he was gay, though."

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Silver knew why Gramps didn't want to talk about it. It was because his brother had died of AIDS, long before she was born, even before anyone really understood what the disease was. She didn't know any details; she only knew that it had been a horrible medical trauma for her family. And now it felt like they were facing another, even though everyone was telling her it was all going to be all right.

"Has your mom been sleeping okay?" Gramps asked her.

"Yeah, they gave her some pills to help with that. She's been in kind of a good mood, actually. It's weird."

Gramps shook his head. "Not weird at all. She's been very sick, Sil, and now she knows why. She knows there's an answer, and that the pain might go away. She has hope again."

"Still, I'd be really freaked out if I were her, having to go into the hospital and go through... all that."

"You'd have to know what that kind of pain is like, kid, and I pray to God you never do."

Silver didn't want to go to the hospital the next day, but she knew she had to. Her mother needed all the support she could get. "What if the surgery doesn't take the pain away?"

Gramps threw a handful of flour onto the cutting board. "The human body is an amazing thing. I believe the pain will go away. If your grandmother could get better after giving birth to your mother..."

"What was wrong with her?" Silver asked.

"Uh... Female things. You know. Oh, it was so bad. And I knew that very day that she would never have another child. I would never have a son. So I named your mother 'Nicola.'" Gramps' name was Nicolas.

"Do you mind not having a son?"

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“Well, I would’ve liked to have had more kids, sons or daughters. And I would’ve liked to have had nosy relatives and neighbors mind their own damn business!”

Silver hauled a heavy tray of cookies to the oven, then came back to the cutting board and asked Gramps, “Has Dad called about Mom?”

Gramps sighed. “Yes, he called yesterday and I gave him an update. It was a delight, as always.”

“That’s *sarcasm*,” Silver said. “Mom was teaching me about it when she got real sick.” Silver’s mother was also her teacher.

“It might be nice if he called your mother, you know? He won’t do it.”

“Do you think he’s a coward?” Silver knew she should not be asking this.

“Now, you know I can’t answer that, Sil,” Gramps said. “We’re trying to be polite here, trying not to bring you into all this. Don’t make it even harder for me. Don’t tempt me to say negative things about him.”

At seven o’clock, Silver walked to the front door of the shop, unlocked it, and turned the sign on it from “CLOSED” to “OPEN.” No sooner had she taken her place behind the counter than the door opened and her fantasy became a reality: an absolutely perfect guy walked in. At seven in the morning, any absolutely perfect guy should have been getting his summer beauty sleep, but Jake Sullivan had things to do, as usual. Wanted and desired by so many for so many reasons, he of course did not know who Silver was, and barely glanced at her as he ended a text, put his hands against the glass pastry display and said with an air of disgust, “Yeah, I’m here to pick up some cronuts.”

Silver might have guessed that his attitude was a result of “cronuts” not being the most manly non-word in the English language, if she had been able to think at all. But all she could do

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was *feel* his shoulder-length brown hair, his slightly-tanned skin, his hazel eyes, his cheekbones, his adam's apple, and every bit of his body that was visible to her. "What?"

"*Cronuts*," he repeated with the confidence of a popular guy who was going to be a junior in the fall. Oh, the junior year of high school! All of the fun and none of the stress. Jake was a football player, she knew. Everyone knew that. Everyone in the neighborhood at least, and that was all that mattered. "120... cronuts. Sullivan."

"Let me just check here," Silver said as she fired up the Tomasino's Bakery computer. Her voice was shaking. Her legs were shaking. The blood was rushing to her face. "Oh... We have you down for 100."

Jake shook his head and rolled his eyes. "My mom said you might screw this up. It's *120*, not 100."

"It's okay, we have lots of extras. We'll just have to box twenty more for you."

She stood motionless, staring at him, until he said, "Um, could you do that, then?"

Silver laughed. "Yes. Yes." She went to the door of the backroom, but not too far away from him, not too far. "Esther, we need 20 more cronuts in that order for Sullivan. Could you box them up and bring them out here?" She didn't even want to say the name "Esther" in front of Jake Sullivan. It was an old lady name. Was she doing old lady work? She'd never thought of it that way before.

"What, are your legs broken?" Esther yelled back at her. "They'll be ready in five minutes and you can come back here and get them."

A pack of wild horses couldn't have dragged her into that back room. She had to be closer to him. She walked around the counter and stood where he could see her, cursing the white apron that covered her beautiful, young body. She wanted to be naked. She wanted Jake to

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be naked. She wanted them to be naked together, in a bed. On a sofa. On a floor. Anywhere.

“What are the cronuts for?”

“Exchange Student Appreciation Day,” he replied, still not really looking at her. “Like, welcoming them for the summer.”

A line to grab hold of! “Oh! The exchange students!”

He turned toward her, finally, surprised at her enthusiasm. “Yeah.”

“My cousin Natalie, well, her family will probably be there. They’re hosting an exchange student this summer, someone from—oh, I don’t know. Natalie told me, but I forgot. Anyway, I’m sure they’ll be there. Is your family hosting someone?”

Jake nodded. “Yeah, a guy from Uruguay.”

What should I say now? What? “Your name is Jake, isn’t it?”

“Yep.” He did not ask her name.

“I really like that name.” His skin, his beautiful skin. If only she could smell him, too.

“I don’t,” he said.

“Really? Why?”

He finally looked at her, right in the eye, but he didn’t tell her why.

“My dad’s waiting in the car,” he said, a very difficult thing for him to say, being so close to getting his driver’s license. Not that he cared a thing what some little girl he’d never seen before thought of him. But still. “Can you check on those...?” He refused to say “cronuts” again.

And Silver refused to say “Esther” again. “She’ll bring them out when they’re done.”

“I just need to get going.”

“I know,” she replied. She also knew that she should stop staring at him, but she absolutely couldn’t.

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Esther emerged from the back room carrying two huge white boxes and set them on the counter. “Would it be too much to ask you to ring these up?” she said to Silver.

“No,” Silver said, reluctantly retreating behind the counter. Would her hands shake as she rang up his bill? Yes, they would.

“Isn’t that a lot?” Jake said when she told him the total.

“Not really. The other bakeries around here charge more.”

He handed over his father’s credit card. “But why are they so much more expensive than donuts?”

“Well, it’s the cost of the dough, plus they take longer to make. We had to hire a new guy part-time because of the demand.” She ripped the receipt from the register and tried to touch his hand as she gave it to him. She didn’t quite make it.

He stuffed the receipt in a pocket of his jeans and grabbed the boxes from the counter top. “Okay, thanks.”

She ran around the counter and followed him to the door. “Let me open the door for you.”

“Thanks,” he said again.

And that was it. She watched him walk down the street and get into his father’s car, turned and almost ran past her grandfather and Esther and the bakery workers, and hit the restroom door hard.