



The Coincidence of Coconut Cake

By Amy E. Reichert

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You've Got Mail meets *How to Eat a Cupcake* in this delightful novel about a talented chef and the food critic who brings down her restaurant—whose chance meeting turns into a delectable romance of mistaken identities.

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The day that Al's mean-spirited review of Luella's runs, the two cross paths in a pub: Lou drowning her sorrows, and Al celebrating his latest publication. As they chat, Al playfully challenges Lou to show him the best of Milwaukee and she's game—but only if they never discuss work, which Al readily agrees to. As they explore the city's local delicacies and their mutual attraction, Lou's restaurant faces closure, while Al's column gains popularity. It's only a matter of time before the two fall in love...but when the truth comes out, can Lou overlook the past to chase her future?

Set in the lovely, quirky heart of Wisconsin, *The Coincidence of Coconut Cake* is a charming love story of misunderstandings, mistaken identity, and the power of food to bring two people together.

And don't forget to check out Amy E. Reichert's fun new novel *Luck, Love & Lemon Pie*, available now!



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Editorial Review

Review

"Deliciously entertaining! Amy E. Reichert's voice is warm and funny in this delightful ode to second chances and the healing power of a meal cooked with love." (Meg Donohue, USA Today bestselling author of DOG CRAZY and ALL THE SUMMER GIRLS)

"Amy E. Reichert writes like your best friend and reading her words is like having that friend whisper them into your ear. *The Coincidence of Coconut Cake* is a delicious story of food, love, and a wink at what people will do to have their cake and eat it, too." (Ann Garvin, author of THE DOG YEAR and MAGGIE'S WATCH)

"Amy E. Reichert whips up the perfect recipe for a deliciously fun read. Combine humor and romance with a dash of drama, then let it simmer. The sprinkle of Wisconsin pride is icing on an already irresistible cake. Warning: do not read this book hungry!" (Elizabeth Eulberg, author of THE LONELY HEARTS CLUB and BETTER OFF FRIENDS)

"What a wonderful treat! Delicious descriptions of food and love and Milwaukee (I know! Who knew?). A sweet, endearing read." (Megan Mulry, USA Today Bestselling Author of A ROYAL PAIN)

"*The Coincidence of Coconut Cake* is a smart and delicious debut—a read as satisfying as the last bite of dessert after a lovingly-prepared meal. The novel is as much a celebration of the midwest and regional food as it is a love story between chef Lou and food critic Al. I adored Lou and her quirky makeshift family of restaurant customers and co-workers. Their missteps and milestones kept me racing through the chapters, craving another course." (Susan Gloss, author of the novel VINTAGE)

"Amy Reichert brings sweetness and substance to her delicious debut. Sign me up for second helpings!" (Lisa Patton, bestselling author of WHISTLIN' DIXIE IN A NOR'EASTER)

"Amy E. Reichert takes the cake with this charming tale of food, friendship, and fate." (Beth Harbison, New York Times bestselling author of IF I COULD TURN BACK TIME)

"...Reichert's quirky and endearing debut skillfully and slyly examines identity and community while its characters find love in surprising places. Clever, creative, and sweetly delicious." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"A delectable novel." (*Bookreporter*)

"Highly recommended that you eat before reading this book...a light, fun read that feels a bit like eating dessert for dinner." (*RT Book Reviews*)

"Well-developed secondary characters and detailed descriptions of the Milwaukee food scene will leave readers hungry for more. Fans of Stacey Ballis and Erica Bauermeister will find lots to love." (*Booklist*)

"This is a fun read peppered with dashes of humor, dollops of sadness and drizzles of sensuality." (*All You Magazine*)

“Light, fun, and easily digestible, this sweet romance is worthy of second helpings.” (*Real Simple*)

About the Author

Amy E. Reichert, author of *The Coincidence of Coconut Cake* and *Luck, Love & Lemon Pie*, loves to write stories that end well with characters you’d invite to dinner. A wife, mom, amateur chef, Fix-It Mistress, and cider enthusiast, she earned her MA in English Literature and serves on her local library’s board of directors.

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The Coincidence of Coconut Cake

• CHAPTER ONE •

Lou hoisted up her gown and winced as she tottered across the parking lot. The sparkly four-inch heels had looked so pretty in the box, but they felt like a mortar and pestle grinding each bone in her foot. She missed her green Crocs.

Lou plucked at the tight elastic, squeezing her under the sleek black dress her fiancé, Devlin, had given her. He walked five steps ahead of her, so she scurried to catch up.

“Overstuffed truffle and foie gras sausage,” Lou said.

Devlin’s face crinkled in confusion. “What?”

“It’s a new dish, inspired by how I feel in these clothes. Maybe served over brown butter dumplings . . .” Lou tilted her head, visualizing the newly formed meal. Devlin frowned at her and sighed.

She wilted at the familiar reaction. “I’m sorry. It helps distract me.”

His features softened as he looked at her. “You’ll be fine. You look stunning.”

Lou gave a feeble smile, stepping into the soft, yellow light of the Milwaukee Country Club’s foyer, the cushy patterned carpet springing back with each step. Black-and-white pictures adorned the buttery walls, telling the club’s upper-crust history. Many showed eager young men in white standing behind wealthy gentlemen in funny pants. Hunger for something more burned in the young men’s eyes. Lou understood.

Lou turned toward Devlin, looping her arm through his.

“You didn’t need to ship me off to the salon all day, or spend so much on this dress.” She smoothed the fabric over her hips, the snug undergarments matching the tightness in her stomach. She wore a floor-length, black strapless column of jersey with matching elbow-length gloves—simple, elegant, and too expensive.

“It’s my gift to you. You never pamper yourself.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Get used to it. The future wife of a prominent attorney should enjoy a little spoiling.”

“How am I supposed to top all this for your birthday?”

“For starters, you’ll make your grandmother’s amazing coconut cake. I’ll tell you the rest later.” He winked.

Devlin smiled down at her, and Lou’s breath caught a little in her throat. He looked dashing in his tuxedo. Its classic lines fit his athletic frame, giving him an air of latent power and manliness; the faint smell of cloves

lingered around him. His thick, dark hair offset his crystal-blue eyes—her very own Disney prince. He set her bejeweled arm on his and resumed their progress into the crowd. Lou clung to his Italian-wool-clad arm as if it were a life preserver as they wandered through the perfumed and primped throng of attorneys and spouses at the annual firm gala.

The private club swam with glittering women and powerful men. Waiters in white tuxedo jackets swerved through the crowd, delivering twenty-year-old scotch and white wine to thirsty guests. Additional waiters carried trays with appetizers, the obligatory bacon-wrapped water chestnuts and peeled shrimp with cocktail sauce. Lou sighed at the dull offerings, imagining what she could do with this party's budget.

Devlin steered her toward a group of older men with elegant women by their sides.

"Bill, how are you?" Devlin said, extending his arm toward the largest man. "And you remember my beautiful fiancée, Elizabeth." All eyes turned to her. Lou gritted her teeth at his introduction.

Bill turned to Devlin and Lou. "We were just talking about the new restaurant critic for the paper, A. W. Wodyski. Have you read his reviews?"

Devlin shook his head. "I've heard of him but haven't had the time to read. The Churman case is taking more time than expected. Any good recommendations?"

"The opposite. He obliterates every restaurant he reviews. But he does it in the most entertaining way. Like Dennis Miller as a restaurant critic."

"Really?" Lou faked indifference, biting back the real commentary she wanted to share about such arrogance.

"He hasn't ever given a positive review. I've even heard a few of the restaurants he reviewed had to close."

"I don't buy that," said Devlin. "No one review could close a restaurant that was good."

"It could if they were struggling to begin with," Lou said softly, frowning. She opened her mouth to continue, but Devlin nudged her with his elbow. She nodded and stayed silent as the conversation flowed back to clients and billable hours. Lou flicked open her rhinestone-studded clutch and pushed a button on her phone. No new messages. She closed the bag.

A waiter appeared with drinks for the group. Lou looked at his name tag, then into his face and said, "Thank you, Tyler." He startled a little, then nodded in acknowledgment. Lou smiled. The rest of the small group continued talking about upcoming trials and the difficulties of finding good nannies. Lou watched the waiter flit into the crowd toward the bar, empty glasses appearing on his tray as he crossed the room, bobbing swift nods as he took new drink orders efficiently. He served without interrupting, moved quickly without rushing. Lou had turned to follow him when she felt a tap on her arm.

When Lou looked, Bill's wife stood too close, radiating musky perfume. "So how did the two of you meet?"

Before Lou could answer, Devlin turned toward them. "Elizabeth used to work at Giuseppe's years ago."

"They had a made-to-order-pasta station where people could sit and watch the chef," Lou added, smiling at the memory.

“I was there for a lunch meeting, but they canceled last minute, so I sat at the counter in front of this cute little cook.” Devlin put an arm around her shoulders. “I came back every day that week.” Devlin looked down at Lou and smiled.

“On Friday, he left a single red rose and his business card with the tip.”

“She called the next day and soon she’ll be my beautiful bride.”

“Beautiful and she can cook,” Bill said. “No wonder you closed the deal.”

“I always close.” Devlin wrapped her arm around his and said, “Excuse us; I see Susan and I need to ask her about a deposition she did for me.” He guided Lou away, merging into the crowd and toward the French doors.

“I’m going to hit the restroom before dinner starts. I’ll meet you at the table?” Lou turned and eased open the six-paneled bathroom door with her gloved hand, letting the silence melt some of her tension.

•?•?•?•?

In the tiny room doubling as a bathroom stall, Lou struggled, realigning her undergarments to their original positions, trying to get her emotions under control. Devlin didn’t understand what her restaurant meant to her. He seemed to think he was rescuing her from a life of hard labor, a life his mother endured as she worked two waitressing jobs to feed and clothe her academically gifted son. She touched her ring, a pristine rectangle like an ice cube that could melt into nothing. She tried to find comfort in Devlin’s symbol of love for her. She shimmied her hips to slither the dress into place, picked up her purse, and left the sanctuary. As she scrubbed her hands, a slender young blonde emerged from another stall and joined her at the sink.

Lou smiled at her in the mirror and said, “Don’t you hate having to use the ladies’ room in these outfits? I feel like the Incredible Hulk in Catwoman’s bodysuit.”

The fresh-faced girl looked startled and tilted her head to one side. She must’ve been a summer intern, eager, ambitious, and idealistic. She wore a simple black cocktail dress accented with a pearl necklace and matching earrings, the uniform of the young and preppy. There were a dozen like her at the party, all with chin-length hair, minimal makeup, clutching small bags containing lip gloss and too many business cards. Probably not a superhero fan.

“Are you Mr. Pontellier’s fiancée?” The young woman squinted her eyes, emphasizing her question.

“Yes, I’m Lou.” She extended her unclad hand toward the pretty girl.

“Oh, I thought your name was Elizabeth.”

“It is, but all my friends call me Lou. Devlin prefers Elizabeth.” Lou half smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m Megan.”

She shook Lou’s hand, but instead of releasing after the appropriate number of pumps, Megan pulled Lou’s hand closer, examining the skin. Lou looked at the shiny scars dotting her pale hands and forearms. It looked as if a makeup artist had been testing for the perfect shade of pinky-red.

“Occupational hazard.” Lou pulled her hand back.

“What do you do?” Megan’s face looked curious.

Lou rubbed the marks, feeling the smooth bumps.

“I’m a chef. My pastry chef says the more battle scars, the better the food.”

“You must be the best chef in the city. It must be nice to come to events like this and get waited on for a change.”

“You’d think.” Lou’s grin shook a little, the muscles tired from too much forced use. Her purse buzzed, and she almost sighed out loud with relief. “Excuse me.”

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Lou rushed out of the bathroom, pulling her phone from the purse. Devlin waited in the hallway holding a wineglass. She held up a finger while answering the phone and walked outside, Devlin following her.

“What’s up?” she said.

“Need to be rescued?” said the confident voice of Sue, Lou’s sous chef and best friend. Lou looked up at Devlin, cringing as she observed his tapping foot and raised eyebrow.

“Not yet. Something wrong?”

“No, just checking in. I know how much you love those events. I thought we could fake a catastrophe if you wanted to get out.”

“I’ll survive. At least the company is good.”

“The lawyers and their spouses are good company? How much have you had to drink?”

“Not them. Devlin.” Lou smiled at him as he pointed back to the building.

“Really?”

Lou sighed. “I gotta go. Text me later to let me know how the rush goes. Bye.”

She slid her phone back into her purse and turned to Devlin.

“Sorry about that. Thanks for the wine,” she said as she took the glass he offered.

“Can you not be a chef tonight?”

“I can try.”

“You should hire someone to cook for you. Then you’d have more free time.”

“I can’t afford that. Besides, cooking is the best part.”

“I’d think you would enjoy a night off.”

“I do. But my idea of pampering doesn’t involve high heels and elbow-length gloves. At least not with a gown.” Lou gave him a gentle hip bump and a smile.

“The night is young.” With a placating smile, Devlin held the door open for her and followed Lou back inside. “Soon you won’t need to work anyway, and I can spoil you all the time.”

Lou turned to look at Devlin, her eyes pleading with him to listen. “Business is improving. I love it. Why do you keep bringing this up?”

“Elizabeth, you work too hard and you’ll need more time once we get a house and have kids. You’ll still get to cook amazing food, but you won’t need to worry about staffing and rent and bills. It’s the ideal situation for you.” Devlin gave her a kiss, took her hand, and walked right over her plans. Lou struggled to breathe under the weight of his version of their future.

•?•?•?•?

After dinner, Lou escaped outside into the prematurely warm April night. She peeled off the gloves and stepped out of her shoes onto the cool grass of the practice green, moaning with relief as she texted Sue.

Steady night?

Lou looked up at the stars, waiting for the reply ping.

We hit a new record. 102 plates. Need another server.

Lou let out a whistle of appreciation.

From behind her, she heard voices beyond the edge of the green. Lou walked toward the sound to see a handful of white-coated waiters smoking cigarettes and rehydrating. One of them was Tyler, the waiter she had noticed earlier.

On it.

Keeping her eyes on the servers, Lou slid the phone into her bag, picked up her shoes, and walked toward the group, stepping gently as the soft grass switched to rough pavement.

“Ahem, excuse me. Tyler?” Lou said. Three startled faces looked up, eyes wide at the intrusion. “Sorry, I don’t mean to interrupt your break, but do you have a moment?”

“Lou?” Devlin’s voice cut through the darkness behind her.

“Crap,” Lou said, digging her card out of her clutch. “I own a restaurant—Luella’s. If you’re looking for a steady job with good tips, give me a call.” She pressed the stiff paper into Tyler’s hand and turned to see Devlin standing behind her, staring at the waitstaff. She heard them scatter. Devlin’s brow wrinkled as he spoke.

“I wondered where you disappeared to. Ready to go?”

Lou exhaled, realizing she had held in her breath, anxious about what Devlin might say. “Yes, please. My feet are killing me.”

Devlin looked at her heels dangling from her fingers. “I see that. Why don’t we walk around so you don’t have to put them back on.” He smiled at her, and she relaxed. He took her arm and led her to where his Jaguar waited for them. He guided her into the front seat, pulling a cream gift box from the back with the words “La Perla” adorning the top.

As Devlin slid into the driver’s seat, Lou raised one eyebrow at him and said, “Is this part two of your own birthday present?”

Devlin winked, then started the car.

“You know, it’s customary for other people to buy you gifts,” Lou said.

“Consider it the gift wrap to what I really want.”

Lou rolled her eyes and opened the box as Devlin drove out of the parking lot toward his condo. Inside, a tasteful nightgown of robin’s egg-blue silk and creamy lace sat nestled in crisp tissue paper. As she lifted it from the box, the delicate material caught on the rough edges of her callused hands, the dainty lace ready to snag. Her spine tensed with worry about destroying the diaphanous fabric. She slithered it back into the box, swallowed, and said, “Shall I try it on when we get back to your place?”

Devlin pointed his chin toward the box. “Look on the inside of the lid.”

Lou’s eyebrow rose in question, but she flipped the lid over to see a key taped inside.

“A key? To what?”

“My place.”

“I already have a key.”

Devlin exhaled in frustration.

“I know you already have a key,” Devlin said. “I’m trying to ask you to move in with me, and doing a piss-poor job of it. I don’t want to wait until we’re married, Elizabeth.”

Lou swallowed and set the lid back in place.

“Maybe we can save the nightie until I move in—leave it at your place until then?” Lou asked.

Devlin smiled, certain of his success. Lou licked her lips, trying to unglue them from her suddenly dry teeth.

•?•?•?•?•

Lou squinted as she studied Harley, her pastry chef, between the shiny shelving separating his domain from

the rest of the kitchen at Luella's. He didn't seem to notice her. She could see the amber bottle of vanilla on the shelf a few feet away in his station. She took a step closer, watching Harley's back, squinting at the glare of fluorescent lights off stainless steel. The whirr and snick of Harley's mixer kneading bread dough broke the silence. Another step. Another step. She reached her hand toward the vanilla. Whirr, snick. Whirr, snick. Just a few more inches. Almost there. Just an inch more.

Harley spun when Lou's shirt started to ring. He saw Lou's precarious position and shook his head, denying her. With a sigh, Lou fished the phone out of her bra and put a smile on her face.

"Happy birthday, handsome! You're up early." She turned her back to Harley, looking out the front of the gleaming kitchen.

"So are you," Devlin said. "I was planning to leave a message. I figured you were still sleeping."

"I have vendors coming early today," she lied.

"Fine. You're still planning on getting out early tonight?"

"Unless it gets busy, I should be over by ten. Is that okay?"

"Not until ten? I wanted more time to celebrate with you. Can't you leave that restaurant earlier?" She could practically hear his puppy-dog eyes over the phone. Lou tapped her finger on her lip and considered revealing the imminent visit she had planned, but any desire to appease him was outweighed by her excitement to witness his shock when she showed up in a few hours with the cake. Nothing beat cake for breakfast, especially early surprise birthday cake.

"Sure."

"Great. Can you get my dry cleaning, too?"

Lou sighed. "I don't know if I'll have time."

"Please? For my birthday?"

"Ugh. Sure."

"You're the best."

"I love you, too."

Lou stuffed the phone back into her shirt and returned to her mission. Now was her chance, as Harley layered fragile phyllo dough into a strudel, hunched in concentration. At over six feet tall, heavily tattooed, with teddy-bear brown eyes and a rumbly voice, he was more Jolly Green Giant than Hells Angel, but Harley protected the vanilla like a mama bear. Lou tiptoed toward the shelf, keeping one eye on him, the other on her target. She needed this cake to be spectacular, so she needed the best vanilla—Harley's. He knew a guy who knew a guy in Mexico who made small batches. It was the most potent vanilla she'd ever tasted. She'd seen him mark the sides so he could tell if anyone used it. As long as his back stayed to her . . .

"No," Harley said without turning.

“Hmph.” Lou dropped her hand. Her shoulders sagged. She needed that bottle. “Please, Harley. I need your good vanilla for the cake.”

“He doesn’t deserve it.” Harley turned to face her, shaking his head from side to side. “And I can’t believe you’re moving in with him.”

Lou twisted her apron in her hands. “I haven’t agreed yet. That’s why I need the cake to be perfect.”

“He won’t appreciate the subtlety. He wants you to move in, so it’s inevitable.”

“I don’t know. A ring is one thing. Moving in . . . it’s too real.” She reached toward the bottle again.

Harley watched her, waiting for her next move. His neat, blond beard covered his jaw like Kenny Rogers’s circa 1985, and an ever-present black bandanna covered any hair he had. His full name was Harley Rhodes. Whether from predestination or paperwork, the name fit him.

“Dammit, Harley, as my pastry chef, I respect you. As a friend, I value you. But right now you’re pissing me off. I pay for the stuff. I’ll use it when I want.” Lou grabbed the bottle and scurried back to her mixer. She could feel Harley smile at her retreating back.

She took a deep breath, blew it out, and began pulling ingredients off shelves, confident where each was, never pausing to think before grabbing. Lou set out a large bowl, then measured each cup of flour, leveling the top. A cloud puffed with each addition to the bowl.

“You should weigh it,” Harley said, standing behind her. Lou jumped with a little yip.

“My grandma didn’t weigh it.”

“You’re better than your grandma.”

If only. Luella had been Lou’s favorite grandma. Some grandmas took their grandchildren to parks, or bought them books and dolls, or shared their special stories. Her grandma shared her recipes. She taught Lou how to check when a roast turkey was done, chop veggies without cutting off a finger, and bake a coconut cake grown men swooned over. A fog of comforting smells had perpetually blanketed her kitchen—an expression of her love so strong you could taste it. Lou caught the culinary bug during those early days and loved that she was named after her grandma, even if Lou believed she’d never make food quite as delicious.

Lou rolled her eyes at Harley’s overconfidence.

“I’ll do it her way.” Lou stared at Harley until he returned to his station. Back to the cake. She added the baking powder and salt and whisked them together. Next, Lou combined the coconut cream and milk in a separate small bowl, lifting it to her nose to enjoy the heady scent.

Lou used her stand mixer to cream the butter, blending until it was smooth. She poured in the sugar and kept mixing until the batter was pale and fluffy. Ingredients in baking were mixed in a specific way to create a specific result—a lot like relationships, Lou thought. If people didn’t blend well together, you’d never get the outcome you wanted. Next, she added the coconut extract and Harley’s vanilla. Before capping the vanilla, Lou dabbed a little behind her ears as if it were Chanel N°5.

She added the flour and coconut mixture, a little of each at a time, to the butter mixture. The key to a light, delicate cake was to not overmix; handling it too much made the cake dense and tough. If you tried too hard, you ruined it. She wanted Devlin to understand and love the restaurant as much as she did, but every attempt to involve him ended in anger and silence. Too much mixing, Lou thought.

She looked into the bowl. The perfect mix. At least she could get this right.

Lou divided the cake batter into the pans and carried them to the baking ovens. Harley heard her coming.

“Turn back around,” he said.

“Harley, I need to bake them.”

“It’s bad enough you wear my vanilla like perfume; you can’t use my baking ovens, too.”

“Technically, they’re my ovens.”

Harley crossed his arms and stood in front of them. “I have bread proofing.”

“Fine.” Lou stomped back to the main cooking line and put the cakes into the small, yellow-doored oven behind the grill station. This was the oven she used when a dish needed roasting or braising, not quite as precise as the baking ovens, but it’d do. After all, her grandmother had never used a fancy oven. She walked the dirty bowls to the sink, using her finger to scoop up leftover batter, closing her eyes to fully experience the balanced flavors—not too sweet, plenty of coconut, but not so much you couldn’t taste the vanilla. Perfect. Grandma would be proud.

“You want in on this?” Lou held out the bowl. Harley walked over, took a fingerful, and dabbed it on his tongue.

“And?” asked Lou.

“Should have used the scale.” But Lou could see a faint smile in his whiskers. As his hand reached for another sample, she pulled it away.

“Then no more for you.” She set it by the sink and walked away but saw Harley sneak the bowl back to his corner.

With the cakes baking, Lou made some breakfast for the two of them. She slapped a few slices of bacon on the heated griddle. Sizzling started immediately and the scent of rising coconut cake mingled with the smoky salt of bacon. “Heaven.” She buttered day-old baguettes to toast, then cracked a few eggs for breakfast sandwiches. “Now some cheese. Brie? Emmental? Mmm, smoky onion cheddar.”

The sounds of her cooking bounced around the empty restaurant like a Super Ball, reminding her of where she was and why. She still couldn’t believe Luella’s was hers, that she’d mustered the guts to open it. If Sue and Harley hadn’t promised to work for her, she never would have done it. Going it alone was never an option. Each month she felt a thrill of shock when her balance sheet squeaked into the black. The profits were tiny, but they existed. After over a year of hard work, it looked like Luella’s just might make it.

Standing at the sink to eat breakfast, Lou drained two cups of coffee laced with enough sugar and cream to

make it dessert. She set her dishes in the sink for the dishwasher just as the timer dinged. Heat blasted out when she opened the oven; the sweet smell of coconut saturated her nose. The cakes glowed with golden perfection, tender to the touch—perfect. She had made four rounds, so that if she screwed up two taking them out of the pans, she'd have backups. Besides, her staff would devour the backup cake during prep. While the cakes cooled, Lou made the frosting: more softened unsalted butter, more fresh coconut milk—just enough to make it spreadable—powdered sugar, and more of the precious vanilla. So creamy and decadent, Lou used her finger to scoop out a Ping-Pong-ball-sized glob.

After frosting the cake and sprinkling on toasted coconut for a little crunch, Lou glanced at the clock. The little hand hovered by the seven.

“Damn!” Lou slid the freshly frosted confection onto the cardboard box, then folded it around the cake. She tied the box closed with butcher’s twine, grabbed her keys, waved to Harley, and rushed to the door as Sue entered the kitchen. Lou noticed Harley stop and stare at the newest arrival.

“Morning, Lou. Hey, Harley. Coffee on?” Sue said in his direction, avoiding eye contact. Eyeing the box in Lou’s hands and sniffing the vanilla-and-coconut-scented kitchen, she finished braiding her long, red hair. She always wore two braids while cooking. If things got really hot, she’d tie them on top of her head in an overexcited Pippi Longstocking look. Lou smiled at Sue’s no-nonsense greeting.

“Yup,” said Lou. “Gotta go, I’ve got to run some errands before I surprise Devlin with his cake. He’s expecting it tonight, but I thought a prework birthday party would be a nice treat. I’ll be back later. The backup cake is by the coffee—dig in.” Then Lou leaned in to whisper, “Let me know what Harley says.”

“Sure thing.” Sue walked out to the coffee station, then, with a mouth full of cake, added, “He doesn’t deserve you, Lou.” But Lou rushed out the front door toward the corner, purse in one hand and cake in the other, eager to surprise her fiancé.

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