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A Thin, Dark Line

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
Publishing House

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Chapter One

“I’m stuck in a rut.” Saying it out loud made me cringe, and I stared at my breakfast with growing horror.

Snatching up my plate, I dashed out the back door and trudged across the short expanse of lawn between my small house and the larger one next door. The grass was cool and damp beneath my feet, and I made silvery tracks through the gathered dew and wet footprints on the wooden steps leading to the back porch.

I paused before the door and took a deep, shuddering breath, quelling the urge to pound on it and instead rapped softly.

“Come on in!”

“Jane! Look at—ah!” I tripped over the threshold and lurched into the kitchen. The two pieces of toast slid to the edge of my plate, teetered, then fell, landing almond-buttered side down. “Oh, shit!”

The four-year-old sitting at the table banged his spoon against his bowl and grinned. “Oh shit!” he chirped.

The woman standing at the stovetop turned and leveled a pointed glare at me.

“Sorry.” I stepped over the mess to place my now-empty plate on the table and press a kiss to the little boy’s mass of red curls. “Robby, honey, don’t repeat that word.”

He tipped his head to look at me. “Is it a bad word, Aunt Weez?”

I collected the cereal he’d somehow stuck to his cheeks and forehead and scraped them back into his bowl. “Yes, it’s a bad word. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. I’ll have to tell Mommy.”

“You little snot.” I tweaked his nose and went to stand next to his mother.

Jane flipped the golden pancakes and said, “Don’t worry, baby. Mommy heard her. If Aunt Weez says another bad word in front of you and your brother, Mommy’s going to wash her mouth out with soap.”

I grinned and snagged a pancake from the platter. “You and what army?”

Jane bumped her hip against mine. “Me and Junior here.” She patted her rounded, pregnant belly.

I bit into the pancake, gasped and sucked air between my teeth to cool the steaming bite.

“They’re hot, you goof. Grab a plate. I made plenty, and I take it that was your breakfast.” She pointed at the floor with her spatula.

I groaned, remembering what had sent me racing over, and left my half-eaten pancake on the plate while I grabbed the roll of paper towels and stooped to clean up the mess.

“This is what I always have for breakfast, Jane.”

“I know. Toast with almond butter.”

I moaned. “This is awful.”

“What’s awful?” Robby leaned sideways to peer under the table at me.

“Sit up in your chair before you fall over.” Jane added more cereal to his bowl. He popped upright and attacked the cereal with gusto.

She checked on the pancakes and then said, “What’s awful?”

“I have this,” I pointed to the smear on her floor, “every morning.

Every morning!” “So?”

“So, it’s boring. I’m boring.” I stuffed the used wad of paper towels into the garbage and wet a few in the sink.

“Who told you that?”

I knelt to wipe the floor. “No one had to tell me. I just know. It’s true.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

I sniffed and eyed the thin waft of smoke rising from the stovetop. “You’re burning the pancakes.”

She spun around. “Well sh—shoot!”

I took one last swipe at the floor, tossed the paper towels in the trash, and dragged the can over so Jane could scrape the remains of three burnt pancakes into it. Then I leaned against the counter as she placed the griddle back on the burner and poured small pools of batter onto it.

“Now, tell me why you’ve decided you’re boring.”

I worried a cuticle and said, “Jane, when I burn a piece of toast, do you know what I do?”

“Um . . . Throw it away?”

“No! I scrape off the burnt part and carry on.”

“And that makes you boring? That’s . . . I don’t know . . . resourceful. Frugal.” She swatted my hand. “Stop ripping your cuticles off.”

Forcing my hands to my sides, I said, “I like simplicity and routine. I do the same thing. Day in, day out. Year-round. For the last six years.”

“Do you enjoy what you do?”

“Well, of course. I love it.”

“Then what’s the problem? Does this have to do with it being your birthday?”

I shrugged. “Turning thirty is a big deal. What if this is it? What if this is all there is to my life? All there will ever be?”

“Aunt Weez!”

I barely had time to brace myself as the six-year-old barreled across the kitchen and plowed into me. He buried his head in my stomach and wrapped his skinny arms around my waist, squeezing for all he was worth. I returned his hug just as enthusiastically.

“Hi, munchkin. Long time, no see.”

Harmon laughed. His freckled face was lit up. “You were just here last night, Aunt Weez.”

“Was that just last night? It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve seen my boys.” I ruffled his mop of straight hair. While the boys had Ben’s red hair and coloring, their features were replicas of their mother’s.

He giggled and stood on his toes to peer over his mother’s arm. “Are we havin’ pancakes, Mom?”

“Yep. These are the last ones. Go climb up in your chair, okay?”

“ ’Kay!”

“Happy birthday, Eloise.”

I smiled at the red-headed, burly man who was standing in the doorway. “Thanks, Ben.”

He didn’t plant a smacking kiss on his wife’s lips as he usually did. Instead, he went to the cupboard, took down a stack of plates, and placed them on the table.

Jane scooped the last pancake off the griddle and onto the plate without a glance in his direction. I switched off the burner and looked between husband and wife. Jane avoided eye contact as she set the pancakes on the table and poured the milk and orange juice.

I turned to Ben, but before I could say anything, he winked. “Nice outfit, El.”

I squeaked in embarrassment, heat climbing from my chest, into my neck, and infusing my face. I’d rushed over in my standard sleepwear: an oversized pink T-shirt. Thankfully, it hung almost to my knees.

Jane laughed. “Will you grab the syrup, Eloise?”

“Sure.” I escaped into the pantry where I fanned my burning face.

I found the bottle of syrup, and as I reluctantly left my momentary hiding place, the lights in the kitchen clicked off. “What . . . ?” I came out to find the entire family singing Happy Birthday and saw a plate piled high with pancakes, a candle burning in the center of the stack, sitting at my place at the table.

Torn between laughter and tears, I sat down. “Guys, this is incredible.”

“Make a wish! Make a wish!” Robby banged his spoon against the table.

“Hurry, Aunt Weez.” Harmon leaned forward in his chair. “Blow out your candle, then we’ll give you your presents.”

“I wanna open presents!” Robby said.

“Boys,” Jane said, and they quieted immediately. She grabbed my hand.

“Happy birthday, El.”

I glanced around and decided that if I were in a rut, it was a good one to be in.

Chapter Two

The stylish clothing boutique was housed in a grand old home a block from the library in the historic district of town. A CLOSED sign made from a clothes hanger hung in the window, but when I tried the front door, it was unlocked.

“Sal?” I called as I entered.

The space had been opened during the last remodel, creating an airy and welcoming atmosphere with an old-world feel. There was a faint, yet pleasing, hint of lavender in the air, and Verdi’s *La Traviata* played softly through hidden speakers.

“Patrick? Hello, anyone here?”

A pale pink scarf draped over a rung of a black iron ladder caught my eye, and I wistfully fingered the gauzy, butter-soft material, not even bothering to look at the price tag.

“Ah, I thought I heard your voice,” Sal Florenelli said in a deep, musical tone.

The tall, dark-haired man buttoned his crisp, olive dress shirt as he descended the staircase, revealing a stunning glimpse of his sculpted torso. I grinned and wished, not for the first time, that he wasn’t involved with my cousin.

“Hey, Sal,” I said, and stepped into his arms.

He pressed a kiss to each side of my face. “Happy birthday, love.” I sighed. “I was hoping you’d forgotten.”

“What kind of friend would I be if I did?” He appeared horrified. “One I would greatly appreciate.”

“Nonsense.” There was a soft chime. “Ah, there’s the baklava.”

“Baklava?” I followed him upstairs and into the apartment that was as elegant and inviting as the store below.

“I’m trying out new recipes.” Sal led me into the state-of-the-art kitchen.

“The scones and tea were a hit with the customers, so I thought I’d try other things, as well.”

“Why not something easy, like brownies?” I leaned a hip against the granite countertop as he donned toile-patterned oven mitts and removed the baklava from the convection oven.

“Pedestrian and unimaginative, love.” He picked up a mixing bowl and spooned some kind of sauce over the pastries. Then he retrieved a small plate and offered me a wedge.

I shook my head. “Give it to me on a paper towel. You know my reputation with china.”

With a sigh, he produced a black cloth napkin from a drawer in the island.

“I’ll remind you that my brownies are pedestrian and unimaginative the next time you devour the entire pan.” I bit into the flaky, golden pastry. “Oh my God.”

“Good, isn’t it?” Sal grinned as he arranged them on a platter.

“To die for.” I brushed at the crumbs raining down my shirt. “Will you marry me and serve me this in bed every morning?”

He wiped away the flakes that clung to the corner of my mouth. “Not my type, but if I were to make an exception for anyone, it would be you.”

“I’m flattered. Speaking of your type, where’s my cousin?”

“He went to an estate sale in Columbus, but he’ll be back this evening for the dinner.”

“Oh, Sal. Please tell me you’re not still planning that,” I said as I followed him into the boutique.

“I gave you fair warning.” He turned on the Tiffany floor lamp at the base of the stairs. “Stop whining. It’s terribly unbecoming in a thirty-year-old woman.”

“Shut up.”

“Pat told me about the conversation you had with him the other day.” He placed the platter of baklava on a small serving table beside the cash register.

“I’m not really upset over my birthday,” I said, because I knew he wouldn’t let the subject drop. “I just . . . I’m thirty years old, and I haven’t done anything with my life.”

“Of course you have. You—”

“Well, that’s what I decided this morning. It’s not so much that I want to change, it’s that I feel like I should want to. Am I making sense?”
“Vaguely.”

“So I’ve decided as long as I’m comfortable in this rut—”

“Perceived rut.”

“Then I’m fine.” I swiped another piece of baklava. “Except, perhaps, for a few small changes.”

“Like what?” He guided me away from the pastries.

I bit my lip. “Well, I don’t know yet, but I’m sure they’ll come to me.”

“How about learning how to button your blouse correctly, for starters?”

I glanced down. “Damn. I’ll fix it when I get to the library.”

“And this will be a nice change, too.” He draped the scarf I’d admired around my neck. “Some color.”

“I never wear pink.” He grasped my elbow and pulled me in front of a full-length antique mirror. “Besides, this would not fit in my budget.”

Standing behind me, he arranged the scarf artfully. “You should wear more pink. Brings out your eyes and adds a little color in your cheeks. And as for your budget, it’s a gift.”

“You can’t—”

“I can, and I will.” He squeezed my shoulders and turned me to face him.

“Happy birthday.”

I smiled and stood on my toes to kiss his clean-shaven cheek. “Thank you, Sal.”

“My pleasure. Now, dinner tonight is at seven. I’m cooking.”

“You don’t fight fair.”

“And, don’t worry. It’ll just be the four of us, unless Ben comes, as well.”

After witnessing the tension between Ben and Jane this morning, I doubted he would. “Should I bring anything?”

“A batch of those pedestrian, unimaginative brownies.”

I was laughing as I started down the sidewalk. The door opened behind me, and Sal yelled, “And don’t forget to fix the buttons on your blouse!”

The library was cool and dark as I stepped inside. The smell of crisp paper and glue permeated the air: the aroma of books, old and new.

I closed the door and leaned against it, breathing deeply, letting my vision adjust to the dimness. I loved my job as the head librarian, loved the order and structure, loved the amassed, growing collection of books.

The municipal building that once housed the library had burned down while I was still in graduate school. Ophelia Leary, my predecessor, had offered her stately home in the historic district as a replacement, since there wasn’t enough funding to rebuild. When she’d died a year after I came back to Dogwood, she bequeathed her grand house to the city with the stipulation that it remain the library.

Now, shelves lined every wall, upstairs and downstairs. Ms. Leary’s antique furniture remained.

I dropped my purse on the circulation desk in the large foyer and wandered through the house, going from room to room turning on the lights and pulling aside the heavy, brocade draperies. Sal and Patrick had helped me arrange the Persian and Aubusson carpets that ran over the hardwood floors, the plush Louis XIV settees, and the high-back chairs. They’d also picked out fabric for the well-cushioned window seats.

Even before the library had moved to Ms. Leary’s house, it had been my second home. And I tried to make it feel that way for all of its patrons.

I wrestled the pliers into place around the nut. “Damn it.” I half-lay on the bathroom floor, putting all of my weight into loosening the nut, but it refused budge.

“Eloise?”

The pliers slipped, and I fell forward, cracking my head against the metal drainpipe. “Shit!” I crawled from under the sink and rubbed my forehead as I staggered to my feet. “What?” I turned to see one of my assistants standing in

the doorway. She faltered, and I felt abashed. “I’m sorry, Tabitha. You needed me?”

“There’s a . . . um . . .” She blinked slowly, and I couldn’t tell if her allergies were bothering her or if she was attempting to regain her train of thought.

“Yes?” I said, trying to curb the surge of impatience. “There’s a . . . a man. Downstairs.”

“And?”

“Well . . .”

Why can’t I hire anyone with a skill level above incompetent? “You and Annie can’t help him?”

She paled. “He . . . we . . .”

“Oh for the love of—” I took a deep breath and set the pliers aside. “Okay, fine. I’ll come down and deal with him. Did you guys at least shelve the stack of books Lora Emery returned this morning?”

“Well, no . . .” The blinking sped up. “But . . .”

“Does he need help finding a book? Which room did you send him to?”

“We . . . we wouldn’t allow him past the front desk.”

I frowned. “Why the h—” Cursing, El. “Why on earth not?” “He . . .” Blink, blink. “Um . . .”

I pushed past her and trotted down the main staircase, watching my feet to make sure I didn’t miss a step. Once on level ground, I smiled and held out my hand as I stepped around Annie, who was bedecked in pink as always—one of the reasons I never wore the color.

“I’m sorry, I was upstairs trying to—”

The man towered over me; a rangy, lean figure. A simple black T-shirt and worn, faded jeans delineated muscles that were long rather than bulky. His hair was dark, unruly, and overlong.

His nose had been broken at least once. A scar bisected his left eyebrow. It was a face of lines and shadows, hollows and angles. Not handsome, too

sharp and chiseled to be labeled as that, but it was a striking face. A familiar face, but I couldn't quite place it.

It was his eyes that were so disconcerting. They were deep-set, almost almond-shaped, hooded, and heavily lashed. And they were a cold, metallic gray.

I felt frightened and unsettled. From the glint in his eyes, he knew what I was thinking, what impression he made, but his face was carefully blank and showed nothing.

"He—" My voice squeaked, and I felt a flush climb my neck as I cleared my throat. "H-hello."

I jumped when his hand swallowed mine, forgetting I had offered it. Even dazed, I caught the impression of calluses, nicks, and long-healed scars roughening the wide palm and long, blunt fingers before he let go. I took a hasty step backward and bumped into Annie. The man said nothing, but his dark eyebrows winged upward.

I cringed, realizing I'd forgotten to correct the habitual misbuttoning of my shirt. On top of that, my black, knee-length skirt and white blouse were no longer crisp and unstained. Thankfully, I put my new scarf away with my purse. My shirt was halfway untucked, and my skirt was twisted around my waist, the back zipper now ran along my right hip and thigh.

"How . . . how may I help you?" I aimed for a casual and professional tone but didn't think I achieved it, with my appearance and tomato-red face.

He glanced behind me and said, "As I told these ladies, I've been out of town for a while and I'm just getting back. I'm looking for work. You're Eloise Carmichael?" His voice was low and quiet—controlled—and rumbling with a faint accent.

"I am, yes. What sort of work do you do, Mr.—"

There were two squeaks of alarm behind me.

He turned his gaze back to me. "A little bit of everything."

He didn't offer me his name, but Annie leaned forward and hissed in my ear, "You can't hire him! I won't work with a convict."

Then I realized who he was: Cormac O'Malley. He said nothing as he watched me for several long minutes before turning and wrenching open the front door. The elderly woman who was just entering jumped backward and, after peering at his face for a moment, gasped.

I was surprised when he hesitated and stepped aside to hold the door open so she could pass. He dipped his dark head. "Mrs. Robertson." He glanced back at me and stepped out. I braced myself, but instead of slamming the door, he closed it quietly.

"That was . . ." Mrs. Robertson wheezed, clutching her purse to her chest.

An old memory, sharp and clear, came to me. I was thirteen, sitting on the side of the road with skinned hands and knees, a mangled bicycle, and a pile of dusty, tattered novels. A sixteen-year-old boy—tall and lean with gray eyes that seemed tired and sad—stopped and knelt in the dirt to help me collect my library books. Then he carried them as he walked me home. The next morning, my repaired bicycle was waiting outside the front gate. Two years later, the same boy went to prison.

Shaking off my stupor, I brushed past an astonished Mrs. Robertson, ignoring Annie and Tabitha's indignant exclamations, and flung open the door. When I got to the sidewalk, I looked in both directions and finally spotted him turning the corner onto Main Street.

"Mr. O'Malley!" I darted after him, my low-heeled pumps impeding my progress. He glanced back. I waved. "Cormac, wait!" He stopped. I limped toward him.

Damn heels.

I was breathless as I reached him, and my heel caught in a crack in the sidewalk. Oh hell. I braced myself as the concrete rushed up to me, but before I could complete my face-plant, I was hauled upright. Once I was steady, he released me.

“Th-thank you,” I said as I absently rubbed my arms where he’d touched me, still feeling the heat of his hands, even through my blouse.

He nodded but remained silent.

“Cor . . .” I felt my blush intensify. “Mr. O’Ma—” “Cormac will do.”

“Cormac.” I couldn’t place his faint accent. It came and went so often that I wasn’t sure he had one. “Can . . . can you change out an elbow drain pipe?”

“Pardon?”

“Pipes. Can you do pipes?”

The tautness of his mouth eased as one corner of his lips twitched. “Yeah, I can do pipes.” The beginnings of a smile disappeared. “I did carpentry and plumbing work in prison.”

“Perfect!”

That sardonic brow arched again.

“I—I mean, you’re hired.”

He stared at me. “Why?”

I shifted and wiped damp palms against my skirt. “Wh—why?” “Why are you hiring me?”

“Because I...” I swallowed and remembered that thin, serious sixteen-year-old boy. I met his gaze squarely and answered honestly. “I think I owe you one.”