

All That Matters

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Chapter 1

A smile of approval lifted the corners of Chloe Lawson's mouth as she sampled her latest dessert creation. Rich chocolate from a bittersweet royale torte melted heavenly on her tongue. She'd gotten the cream glaze perfect. Not too thick and with just the right hint of cognac.

She loved being in the kitchen, working hands-on with the pastries and cakes she sold.

The sumptuous aromas of confectionaries floated in the oven-warmed air of her trendy bakery, Not Just Cakes. Having only opened five months ago, business had taken off in ways she'd only dreamed of. She sold a variety of desserts to local restaurants, and had been building a wedding cake clientele with a steady stream of referrals. She'd had to hire extra help to keep up. Her instructions to Jenny and Candace were uttered succinctly and with time-tested methods that worked flawlessly.

"Chloe, do you want me to start frosting the cupcakes with the gènoise?" Candace asked, standing at the work table. Sandy-colored freckles dusted the bridge of her nose, her red hair pulled back into a loose ponytail.

Responding, Chloe said, "Thanks. That would be great."

Jenny filled piping bags with fresh white icing. "We have an order for six dozen of those cupcakes going to the Borah building later this afternoon. It's some official's birthday."

"Make sure we have the exact name, and I want you to put in a party praline as a special treat for them. In fact, when the stores open downtown, run up the street to the card shop and pick out a birthday card we can all sign."

"Sure, Chloe." Jenny set the piping bag down and jotted notes on a pad of paper.

That settled, Chloe refocused her attention on the torte and another sample bite. Satisfied she'd done a perfect job, she smiled.

Cake making took an exact process. Everything had to be calculated and balanced. For example, baking only in aluminum cookware. The shining surface of stainless steel became too heat-reflective, causing the sides of the pan to cook the batter faster than the middle, creating a dry finished product.

Not only did Chloe like the intricacies of baking, she loved the variety of textures she created: the silkiness of buttercreams and rich, thick mousses. Chocolate and vanilla sauces beneath fresh berries. The tart or sweet fruit fillings of a seasonal offering.

Baking drew out a blissful happiness within her, linked to her adolescence, an otherwise blur in her young adult life. Decorating cakes had been the silver-lining in her dark cloud when she turned fifteen, and the crazy-normal world as she knew it turned topsy-turvy.

Her aimless mother, Wanda, chose her boyfriend over Chloe, and left Chloe behind with Ethel Lumm-her mother's mother.

Chloe wouldn't have the confidence she did today without her grandmother's encouragement. Funny how being suspended in the ninth grade had been the catalyst toward a new direction in her life. Ethel had been the driving force behind Chloe's change with a suggestion so simple it had been the start of a fresh perspective during her teenage years.

Chloe had taken to being in the kitchen, rolling out her first fondant in junior high and landing first place in the Western Idaho Fair's junior division with a three tier rose cake.

Ethel, nothing like Wanda, had a giving heart, plus a savvy mind. She'd offered the encouragement needed to help Chloe figure out her talent. Due in large part to Ethel's suggestion, Not Just Cakes had located in the Grove Marketplace.

Ethel had her own business here. Ethel's Boutique, a clothing store, racked up sales from the full-figured woman who wanted to be stylish without dieting. Ethel didn't feel it bode well for the heavier woman's mental state to think of herself shopping in a plus-sized store. So Ethel was fond of saying, that even when Oprah was at her largest, she always looked fabulous because she dressed with class. Given that, Ethel's Boutique boated clothing for the "voluptuous and sexy" woman.

Behind Chloe, the heat of the oven radiated next to her back. Sunrise hadn't shown its gingered hues yet, and already, the kitchen heated to an

uncomfortable degree. She kept cooling fans running, but certain glazes and icings dried out as she applied them so she took care to make sure the room stayed the proper temperature.

Chloe wore her blond hair in a ponytail. Beneath her kitchen whites, she had on a pair of capris and a thin tank top. Both didn't fit real well. She'd lost weight. Eleven pounds to be exact. It had taken her months to shed and a year to slowly put on. Too much sampling and not enough exercising. With little time for shopping, she hadn't fully updated her wardrobe to the next size smaller.

Besides, she wasn't one to be overly concerned about fashion sense. If she could have, she would have worn rubber flip-flops from the discount store, but practicality won out. That and the desire not to smash her toes if she dropped a heavy pan on them. Instead, she'd laced on a pair of white tennis shoes that already had fallen victim to pink coloring paste.

It was just another day as she began to decorate a cake.

The phone rang and Chloe's hand squeezing a piping bag didn't miss a beat as she finished the reverse shell border. While it seemed as if the phone's early ring didn't cause her concern, her pulse skipped and she swallowed. The other bakers wouldn't have seen much of a change on her, if anything. But she felt her face flush from a momentary rush of heat.

Just as suddenly as it rang, the phone quit.

Chloe glanced at the clock. 4:48am.

The phone rang once more, startling her.

Setting the piping bag next to her cake turntable, Chloe ran her hands down the sides of her white smock, unmindful she had a damp cloth on the counter for this very purpose.

She snagged the phone, and in almost an accusatory voice, she answered, "Hello!"

As had been the response from days passed, nobody spoke into the receiver.

Chloe had had about enough of this. She had caller I.D. on her bakery phone, but the calls came in as "unknown." Originally, she'd assumed a wrong number, or possibly a high school prank at this odd hour. She no longer thought that.

An aching curl pooled in her belly, low and tight. She felt sick, as if she'd sampled too much frosting.

"Hello?" she said once more.

Nothing.

Finally, she dared to breathe into the receiver, "Bobby-Tom? I swear if it's you-"

The line clicked dead and Chloe hung up with a twist of anger knitting her brows.

Attempting to compose herself, she didn't acknowledge either helper. But in her peripheral vision, she saw the women exchanging raised eyebrows. Chloe wouldn't make a big deal about this and tip anyone off there could be something sinister about the call. But she knew the truth. This was the sixth time in five days that someone had called her and hung up without saying a word.

And not just at the bakery. Last night, she'd answered her home phone and had the same results. This couldn't be a random incident. Someone knew who she was, but even more frightening, where she lived.

Looking through her reflection in the kitchen's row of narrow windows, all Chloe could see in the alleyway was pre-dawn gray and the mellow light of a lamp illuminating the cook's entrance at the back of the Mexican restaurant.

There's nobody out there.

She blinked and her reflection came back into her view. Her appearance seemed unpolished this morning. Usually her ponytail didn't have a single strand out of place. Today pale wisps framed her face, bracketing its oval shape. Her eyes looked a darker blue, almost a violet shade. The shape of her mouth didn't seem as wide, rather more narrow as she caught herself biting her lower lip again in thoughtful contemplation. She stopped the bad habit, reminding herself that she shouldn't worry.

The only person who'd pull a crappy stunt like this was Bobby-Tom Drake and she wanted to forget her ex-husband existed.

Bobby-Tom had called a handful of times since their divorce, all jacked up on liquor and blithering on about, "Baby, I made a big mistake letting you go." He didn't get drunk on a regular basis, but when he did, he spilled his guts like a road kill rattle snake.

He'd been making babies with his new wife since the day he married her, and the whole thought of his fertile procreation caused Chloe to wince as if she'd sliced her finger with a serrated blade.

Chloe had always been attracted to the bad-boy types, thanks to her mother's guiding light. When Wanda Lawson left, the seed had been planted in Chloe that a broken man is better than a good one, because a woman can fix a broken man and make him good if she loves on him enough.

Yeah, right. Only if she can have six kids in just about as many years.

Squeezing her eyes shut a moment to keep the unexpected sting at bay, Chloe remembered the day she'd first met Bobby-Tom out at the Firebird speedway in Emmett. The race track was known for hard-partying boys who drove fast and liked their women thin and pretty. Bobby-Tom had been in between girlfriends and Chloe slid right in to take up the empty spot. Good old Bobby-Tom oozed more charm than a box of magically delicious cereal.

He had a swagger to his gait that molded a leanness to his butt in his 501 Levi's. Just about perfect in every way, except he smoked a pack of Marlboro's a day. She disliked the tobacco scent that clung to his shirts and skin, but forgot about that the second he flashed her a straight white grin. He called her baby from the start because she looked younger than twenty-one, and it stuck for the nine years they'd been married.

"Baby, bring me another cold one."

"Baby, you sure look pretty today."

"Baby, let's go out and shoot some pool tonight."

"Baby, Bobby-Tom needs some loving."

Nine years was a long time for baby-calling. Long enough for her to try every fertility treatment known to man to try and have a real baby to take care of.

When they divorced, Bobby-Tom remained as broken as the day she'd met him and no amount of her loving could fix him into holding onto a steady job outside of racing and not having a roaming eye-which he swore he never acted on, but those brown-eyed peeps had roamed just the same. He'd hooked up with another woman before their court date had declared them officially over, and he and Delilah had gotten married within three months.

Bobby-Tom hadn't pestered her in a year, so the phone call made her pause and wonder. The caller's silent approach wasn't her ex-husband's usual method.

That knowing fact caused the hairs on the back of Chloe's nape to tingle.

Then again, maybe paradise with six kids wasn't such paradise after all. Rather than blubbering in his beer, he was crying in it and too ashamed to form the words of remorse.

Chloe staved off a snort. Well, she sure wasn't going to be his life jacket. He could sink.

"Jerk," she uttered beneath her breath, but loud enough for Jenny to respond.

"Yes, Chloe?"

"Sorry . . . it's nothing." Chloe shook the cobwebs from her mind, then panned her surroundings.

The kitchen gleamed with cleanliness and an orderly line up from angled spatulas and cooling racks to brioche pans and pastry bags. The stainless countertops gleamed, and the large utility mixing bowls churned dough for the day. Bright yellow walls and skylights gave the room a cheerful environment.

Chloe had nothing to dwell on in her past. She had wonderful things planned for a successful future. And being scared by a stupid hang-up caller wasn't on her list.

With that, she began her work day anew, revelling in the idea that she had become her own woman.

With a quirk in her optimistic smile, she didn't even care she'd be turning the big four-oh this year as divorcee of ten years, with no current boyfriend or prospective boyfriend, nor prior kids . . .

Oh please, let's not be a martyr.

Chloe staved off a heavy sigh. But she had a great dog to keep her company and make her laugh while she withstood evenings alone, then going to bed early. Boo-Bear, her two year old Bichon Frise, sometimes chewed up the mail when it slipped through the slot in her front door. She missed a few bills every now and then, but figuring out which ones added some spark of adventure to her otherwise neutral single life.

As Chloe tasted the last of her bittersweet cake, she couldn't help feeling a little bittersweet until she remembered something her grandmother always told her.

"Honey-bee, sometimes in life, things jump out at you that you least expect."

Putting a bright-side spin on Ethel's words, Chloe hoped that the something jumping out at her today would be a good thing and not an ex-husband looking to patch a hole in his torn life.

Fixing broken just wasn't in Chloe's cards these days. She liked to think of herself as a woman who could be content with a man just as he was. If she ever met one who piqued her interest enough.

But she really had no time to think about romance when her fledgling business had grown to busting at the seams. With the way the speciality cakes had taken off, her kitchen space felt like it had shrunk. She needed to hire an extra hand just to mix the batter and icing, and do the baking.

Chloe had more bakery ideas she wanted to try, but she hadn't expected she'd be contemplating them this soon. There was a party line of cakes she could do, hosting events, in-home baking for those who wanted fresh bakery items right out of the oven.

And she could expand. The unfinished building butting next to her dining area wall spanned one hundred and twenty thousand square feet. Directly in front, two individual spaces at two thousand square feet apiece. A vacancy sign in the windows called for tenant improvements. She could lease one of the spaces. Of course, her rent would double. But so could her business.

Biting her lip, Chloe pondered the possibilities.

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"At six-forty in the morning, this is no way to start the day." John Moretti gave his nineteen year old son, Zach, a hard stare. "Where were you last night?"

"With friends."

John heard his blood pressure thumping in his ears, knowing where this would be going. They'd had the same go-round a dozen times. "What friends?"

With hooded eyes, Zach replied smartly, "Freddy Krueger and Chucky."

John's lack of amusement was revealed in his non-flinching glare and lack of commentary.

Eventually Zach grunted, "I was with VeeJay, Toad, Tom and Corey."

The usual four suspects, all from good homes, but none of the boys seemed to have their acts fully together.

John ran his hand through his hair, walking the length of the galley kitchen. He gave pause, looking through the length of uncovered picture windows. Twinkling lights from the valley below had slowly been snuffed out as the city awakened for another day in early July.

The temperature promised to be hot. When John had stepped outside to get the newspaper around 4:00am, the dark air that met his bare legs had still been thick and warm from the previous day. Wearing just a cotton bathrobe and boxer shorts, he hadn't readily gone back inside. He'd stood with his back to the double front doors of his sprawling Quail Ridge home, gazing at the view below, wondering how he could fix a problem that had been growing out of control since his wife's death.

Being up all the night had put John into a foul mood. He should be used to this with Zach, but the hollow feeling of not knowing where his son was and with who, still left him shaken.

"I called you repeatedly," John said, glaring hard into his son's face. "Why didn't you pick up?"

Zach's shaggy hair fell across his dark brows, his mouth set in a grim line-as if he were the one who should be indignant instead of the other way around. "My cell died."

"Then why do I even pay for it if you can't remember to keep it charged?"

"I don't know."

Those three words happened to be Zach's stock answer these days.

John turned away, faced the coffee maker and poured his fourth cup. He quietly drank, wishing he had the right answers. Or at the very least, some wrong ones. Anything to be proactive rather than the constant passive-aggressive battles he'd been doing with his son for the past three years.

Had it been that long since Connie died? His sweet wife, his rock, his solid hold on life who'd been taken from him in a car accident. That day shook his world to the core and he'd never recovered. Not really. None of them had.

Prior to Connie's death, Zach had been a sophomore, and on the high school football team. His grades had never been stellar, but he'd tried and passed all his subjects. John's daughter, Kara, had big dreams of trying out for the cheerleading squad at Boise High.

But none of that was to be. Connie had died, leaving John in charge of two teenagers he didn't really know. That knowledge had hit him hard. He'd always considered himself a good provider and ethical man because he practiced law and knew the system.

He worked hard, late into the evenings, making sure he kept his wife and children in a lifestyle which suited them. The big house in Quail Ridge spanned five thousand square feet, and sat on a hillside comprised of three-stories. A main living area, a master bedroom upstairs, and the kids' rooms and media room downstairs. They had a swimming pool, hot tub and tennis court on the street level. He'd made sure Connie had a state-of-the-art kitchen and marble floors, heavy wool rugs imported from Italy, and a housekeeper once a week so she could stay active in the kid's lives.

While his wife put in uncountable hours at football clinics, Brownie's, and volunteering for the P.T.A., John had separated himself from the family nucleus, staying diligent about keeping his firm in order. He believed in gender rolls. He made the money. His wife spent it and took care of the kids.

But during the last three years of being a single parent, John had come to the stony conclusion that his 1950s thinking had been detrimental to the well-being

of his kids. While he thought he'd been working to make life better for them, he'd really been short changing them and screwing them up in the process.

After Connie's death, it became crystal clear, he didn't know either of his children. And they'd made that fact quite abject, and rather in his face, whenever they had the chance.

They resented his absence in their home most of their lives. Now that he was making the effort to be here for dinner, they'd rebelled and all but isolated themselves, putting him between a rock and a hard place to try and repair a decade of damage.

There were moments, like now, when he felt like giving up.

"How are you going to make it to work on time?" John asked.

"I might not."

"You're going to get fired."

"Uncle Mark won't fire me."

Since he'd opted not to attend college, Zach worked for the family business, Moretti Construction. Under his brother, Mark's guidance, Zach strapped on a tool belt. But apparently, he thought himself above reproach.

"Make sure you show up on the job, Zach," John cautioned, but felt as if his words fell on deaf ears.

"Are we done?" Zach asked, slouching and stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets.

His son had classic good looks for a young man, and was old enough to get a girl in trouble. Who knows what Zach and his four cohorts had been up to last night. Probably drinking and pranks or something else stupid. The infinite possibilities had crossed John's mind many times while wondering where Zach was.

John had a briefing at nine this morning and the backs of his eyelids felt like sandpaper. The day would be long and arduous, but he couldn't miss work.

Ignoring the ache that enveloped his bones, John replied, "We're done."

Zach marched down the stairs, closed the door to his bedroom and amped his music to a high decibel that could pop nails from the sheetrock.

The coffee in John's cup looked murky and black, much like his life. He knew he was messing up on a daily basis. Unable to see his way out of this, he'd consulted a family counselor and taken the kids in a last ditch effort to bring some control back.

Zach and Kara had hated the group sessions, and it had been an effort to get them to go before they'd flat out refused and made themselves scarce during the appointment times. John's own family had been against him pursuing a therapist one-on-one, but John had gone anyway. His father, Giovanni, before he'd died last year, had all but called John an idiot for not seeking help within the Catholic church. To John's way of thinking, talking to a priest would get him no where.

But neither had the therapist, and eventually, even John talked himself out of going, excusing himself by saying his schedule was too busy or he had booked appointments he couldn't change.

So much for trying to repair damages. The outcome had been unsuccessful and things had declined ever since.

It pained John to think he'd royally messed this up. Connie would be beyond disappointed, but then, maybe in life she'd felt something akin to that anyway and never said anything. He'd put her on a pedestal, probably regarding her in a higher esteem than she wanted. And probably not listening to her the way she'd tried to get her feelings across, giving her more credit for infallible juggling than she'd liked.

Now their children hadn't been able to reconcile being without their mother, so rather than let him take care of them in his inept way, they'd detoured down trouble lane.

And John Moretti only had himself to blame.

Bright sunshine burst into the living area, bathing the white sofas in yellow light.

He needed to wake Kara up and get her moving for summer school. She'd failed two classes, and the choices he'd given her were: summer school or he'd take her car away. So far, so good. Checks with the counselor's office

confirmed she'd been attending when she should. Kara actually liked school so it wasn't that she didn't want to be there. She just hadn't academically applied herself. She loved the social times shared with her posse of best friend forever: football and basketball games, dances and parties. But after getting F's in math and government, now she wailed, "OMG, I have to waste my summer at Boise High."

She had a part-time job at the mall working in a make-up kiosk, and the income gave her a financial freedom from him-one that produced a belly-button piercing against his wishes. He hadn't even tackled a punishment for that one. Right now, her education took priority.

He moved through the house with purpose, knocking twice on his daughter's door before giving himself entrance without her permission.

In the slats of light peeking through plantation shutters, John could see clothes strewn on the floor, a purse knocked over on the bureau, and various cosmetics laying across the desk.

Kara, fast asleep, didn't hear him come in because the side view of her slender figure didn't move in her queen-sized bed. Her clock radio played music from the local rock station-apparently the alarm had gone off but had been disregarded.

John took a step toward the bed, dodging the landmine of junk on the carpet. "Kara, you need to get up for school. You're late-"

The words stopped short, as if sliced by a sharp blade.

His daughter wasn't alone in the bed.

Another person laid beside her, turned way from John so the face was indiscernible. All he could make out: shortish hair, sandy blonde with a slight wave that fell passed an ear. His daughter's bed mate hugged the down pillow with an arm that sheets partially hid.

Anger seething through his veins as John grabbed the covers and threw them aside, ready to kill the boy invading his home, his daughter's bedroom.

"Get up," he hollered.

"What's the matter?" Kara muttered, her sleek hair falling over her face as she rose to a sitting position.

"Who's the boy?" John spit out, ready to hit the kid. Assaulting a youth could be charged as an illegal offense, but rationality wasn't on John's short list right now.

The boy, dressed in an oversized Boise High t-shirt and boxer shorts, stirred to consciousness and rolled onto his back.

"Huh?" he said.

Kara blurted, "That's Ashley, Dad!"

Ashley sat up, pushing the sandy hair off her brows. Gazing directly at him, she stifled a yawn. "Hey," she said sleepily.

John backed away, the situation hitting him in the stomach as if he'd been punched. "Ashley?"

"Yeah."

"But I thought . . ."

"She got her hair cut yesterday, Dad." Kara's body stiffened as she slid her legs over the bed. "I can't believe you thought I'd sneak in a boy. We came home at ten o'clock when you were in the study working. I told you I had a friend with me."

John vaguely remembered that. Eyeball deep into his briefs, he hadn't given Kara a glance.

"I didn't know she was spending the night," he said stupidly in his defense. For an attorney, he floundered miserably right now to come up with a forgivable reason he'd neglected his own daughter.

There was none.

Kara flicked her long, black hair over her shoulder. "Ashley got tired and I didn't want her driving home so her mom said she could stay here. I didn't ask you because you never care."

John stared blankly.

"Sorry," he muttered, then headed for the paneled door. In an effort to retain some semblance of authority, he tacked on, "Time to get ready for school."

"You know what the problem is in this house?" Kara's irritated tone trailed after him. "Nobody trusts anybody."

Halfway up the stairs, John didn't want to be badgered with a lecture. Not from a seventeen year old girl who hadn't experienced the world the way he did.

John gathered his belongings, snagging the briefcase from the leather barstool.

Pulling a few deep breaths into his lungs to reset his racing pulse, he went to the garage and sat behind the wheel of his BMW.

He turned the ignition, adjusted the mirror, then gazed ahead at nothing really. He took a moment to just chill before heading out and into the craziness of the day.

It seemed as if everything in this house always turned around to make him the bad guy. Even when he tried to be the good guy.

Man, he really needed some help.