



Cake Pop
Crush

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Aunt Carol and Grandma Sue,
two resilient women I admire and love

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Chapter One

I knew I shouldn't be awake. My eyes opened onto a gleaming moon and stars outside my window, and I had that topsy-turvy feeling of being out of sync with time. The clock said 4:30 A.M. I shut my eyes and tucked deeper into my covers, but it was no use. My stomach pinched uncomfortably. School was starting again after the two-week winter break, and my nerves knew it.

There was only one cure for that: baking.

In my pajamas, I tiptoed out of my bedroom and down the shadowy hallway. My dad had left half an hour ago to go to work at our family bakery, Say It With Flour. So I knew

he wouldn't be hovering over me with his running commentary: "Alicia, you're sifting the flour too quickly," or "Don't beat the eggs to death." My five-year-old brother, Roberto, was still sleeping, and I could hear Abuelita Rosa snoring happily (and loudly) away in her bedroom. So I had the kitchen all to myself.

I carefully laid out all of my measuring cups and spoons on the counter, then got my mixing bowls ready. Everything had to be in place before I could start so there'd be no missed steps or surprises. Surprise is the easiest way to ruin perfect baking. Open an oven door too soon, and the cake falls. Drop a cold egg into hot butter and it curdles. I've never liked surprises.

When I was satisfied that I had everything ready, I turned on the oven. None of my friends could ever get away with using stove tops and ovens alone, but I'd been baking with my parents since before I could walk, so my dad had given me free reign in our kitchen long ago.

My abuelita loves to tell the story of how, when I was a newborn, I had colic. Apparently that means I cried for hours at a time for no reason at all. Go figure. My mom even made this

sling for me so that she could hold me close while she baked. I still cried constantly, until the morning Mom put a small shaker of cinnamon in my hand. She was baking *capirotada*, a kind of Mexican bread pudding. She'd been trying to get the recipe right for weeks, but it wasn't working. I started shaking that cinnamon like a rattle, and pretty soon I'd sprinkled it all over the bread. Abuelita said I fell asleep in that sling clutching the cinnamon in my tiny little fist, and my mom's *capirotada* finally came out perfect, all because of me. Every day after that, my mom gave me a spice to hold while she baked, and Abuelita swears that I always knew when to add just the right dash to every treat. Maybe that was the start of it all, or maybe it was just a story Abuelita had made up. It didn't really matter. Because like other kids were born for math or art or sports, I was born to bake. To me, there is nothing better in the world than a hot oven and a spice rack full of possibilities.

I grabbed my tattered recipe book, flipped on the small TV on our kitchen counter, and scrolled through the DVR listings until I came to my favorite show, *The Baking Guru*. I pushed **PLAY**, then smiled as Renata DeLuca's exotically beautiful face flashed

onto the screen. I DVR her show every day on the Food Network, and I keep a running log of her recipes in my notebook.

Renata's claim to fame is a chocolate buttermilk cake with ginger icing topped with almond shavings. It has a secret ingredient, too, and it's the only recipe she won't share on her show. Legend has it that she made the cake for the president once, and afterward he placed enough orders for that cake to last his entire lifetime. Did I believe it? Yes, I did. Because every single Renata DeLuca recipe I'd ever made was amazing.

"Welcome, fellow bakers!" she said now. "I hope you're all enjoying a bright, sunshiny day!"

"Not yet." I glanced out the window at the still-dark sky.

"Well, even if it's not sunny where you are, it will be after we make our Lemon Sunrise cake pops!"

She ticked off all the ingredients, and I started collecting them from the fridge and pantry.

She flipped her long waves of curls over her shoulder and once again I wished that I could get my thick, stick-straight mane of chocolaty hair to curl as perfectly as hers. My mom had curly hair, too, and in some strange way, watching Renata always

makes me feel a little closer to my mom again. She died when I was nine, and the memories I had of her used to be so sharp that sometimes, for a split second, I would forget she was gone. But lately, some of those memories have gotten cloudier, harder to call up when I want them. But I do remember her hair always smelled like chocolate, with just the tiniest hint of roses.

As I laid out my ingredients, I thought about school. Sure, I was excited to see my friends again. But I hated the idea of the unknown assignments and tests lying in wait for me. Once I had them all plotted out on my calendar, I could make a plan for studying. Right now, though, all those unknowns were ballooning in my mind.

But as I listened to Renata's cheery voice, I forgot about the unknowns. I forgot about everything except the steady weight of the measuring cups in my hands. The second my hands dipped into the bag of pillowy flour, my stomach untied itself, and by the time Roberto stumbled bleary-eyed into the kitchen asking what smelled so good, I was ready to face my first day back at Oak Canyon Middle School.