

Weddings by Design, #2

The Icing
on the Cake

A NOVEL

JANICE
THOMPSON


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To Lauren Giles,
bride extraordinaire and forgiver of
“the great cake faux pas.”
Bless you!

1

Half-Baked

Families are like fudge, mostly sweet with a few nuts.

Author unknown

I've never understood that expression about how you can have your cake and eat it too. I mean, if you eat it, it's gone, right? What would be the point otherwise? And if you're one of my customers—really, I hate to brag, but how can I resist?—you're probably going to scarf it down in record time anyway.

Then again, I can always bake up another yummy one lickety-split, in any flavor you like. German chocolate with homemade butter pecan frosting. Lemon chiffon with raspberry filling. Strawberry shortcake with juicy, fresh-picked berries. You name it, I can bake and decorate it. No event is

too large or too small. Weddings, birthdays, baby showers, bridal extravaganzas . . . I've created cakes for all of 'em.

Okay, now I sound like I'm doing an infomercial for my business. But no one would blame me for gushing, I suppose. Cakes *are* my business, and they're the tastiest on Galveston Island. Ask anyone. Even Bella Neeley, the island's most popular wedding coordinator, recommends me to her brides at Club Wed. Not that I'm prone to bragging, of course. That would just be wrong. Still, I don't mind admitting when things are going well, and right now I'm living a sweet life—pun intended. For the most part.

I pondered my good fortune as I headed to my newly refurbished bakery on the Strand on the first Saturday in May. I mean, finding one of the hippest spots on the island to place Let Them Eat Cake, smack-dab in the middle of Galveston's business district? Primo! And in May, no less! Talk about perfect timing. Just enough time to set up shop and then prep for all of the June weddings I'd booked. Oh, and get my act together for the church's big fund-raiser, which I'd been talked into chairing. Surely it would all come together. I hoped.

I pulled into a parking spot in front of the bakery and paused to glance at Parma John's pizzeria next door. I still couldn't believe I'd managed to land the space next to Galveston's favorite eatery. I could almost envision the restaurant's patrons loading up on pizza and then heading over to my place to have dessert. At least that's how I hoped it would all go down. In an ideal world. At about the same time I earned my own cake decorating show on the Food Network. Oh, and won the lottery.

Not that I'd ever purchased a lotto ticket, mind you. My father's latest sermon on the woes of gambling shied me away from the temptation to buy one, thank you very much. Still,

my future looked as shiny as a new penny right now, and I couldn't help but think the best was yet to come, golden ticket or not. And garnering patrons from Parma John's was the key to the equation.

I'd just started to celebrate my upcoming successes by heading into the pizzeria to grab a thick, gooey slice of the Mambo Italiano special—heavy on the cheese—when I realized my mother was standing outside my new bakery. She wore the same concerned look on her face I'd seen hundreds—no, thousands—of times before. Yikes. This could only mean one thing.

I released a slow breath, offered up a rushed “Lord, help me!” and got out of the car. Seconds later, as I fumbled through my stash of keys to open the bakery, my arms filled with bags from the superstore, Mama lit into a frantic conversation, her words as choppy as the Gulf of Mexico during a category 5 and nearly as fast as the wind that took the roof off of our little church during Hurricane Ike.

“Scarlet. I'm. Glad. You're. Here. Aunt Wilhelmina's. Looking. For you. And you know. How she is.”

Yes, I knew how she was. Still, I wouldn't have a cake business without Aunt Willy. Of this I was reminded daily.

“She called. My cell phone.” Mama paused for breath. “Three times. This morning.”

“Oh? Weird. Didn't get any calls from her.” I stepped inside the bakery and felt my burdens lift right away as I took in the ambience of my new place. Ah, life! How divine! How sweet! How—

I turned back to my mother. She paled and released a slow breath. “You must've overlooked her calls. Wilhelmina said she tried to reach you. But you wouldn't answer your cell phone. This won't set well with her. You know?”

My confidence soared right out the window as I thought about the fact that Auntie was mad at me. Her ability to fund Let Them Eat Cake had been key to my success, and her willingness to build out my new facility on the Strand was a huge blessing. My gratitude often bordered on obsession with trying to keep her happy, and that wasn't easy. She was, after all, our state's most adored cake diva. Emphasis on diva.

"I really don't think I've missed any calls. That I know of, anyway." I reached into my oversized purse and came out with my new iPhone, the one with a hot-pink case. Oops. Sure enough, Aunt Willy had called three times in a row. I would pay a heavy price for missing her calls. She hated it when I didn't answer.

In a flash, I realized what I must've done. "I guess I left my ringer off after my meeting at church last night. We had a get-together with the kids who are going on the missions trip so we could talk about the fund-raiser. Sorry 'bout that. But what's so important?"

"With your aunt, whoever knows?" Mama's eyes narrowed to slits, and her voice lowered. "But she's on the island. That's really all I came by to say. She should be arriving at the bakery any moment. Just wanted to give you a heads-up."

Ack.

I walked up the four steps that led to the main level of the bakery, my arms still loaded down with bags from the superstore. Mama followed on my heels, talking the whole way. When she paused for breath, I managed to sneak in a few words.

"Sorry, Mama. I had to go into town to pick up some supplies. I've got cake samples to bake before the grand opening, and you can see for yourself that I'm nowhere near ready to start baking yet." I placed the bags down on a table and

gestured to the room filled with unopened and half-opened boxes, bins, and bags. “This whole place is a mess, and we open in two days.”

“Right.” Mama glanced around, wrinkled her nose, and nodded. “Well, better get busy, honey. Your aunt is liable to be upset that you’re not ready for clients yet.”

I reached for a knife and slit open the tape on the closest box. “Aunt Willy’s bound to be upset no matter what I do.”

Ain’t it the truth, ain’t it the truth.

“Maybe, but please don’t let her hear you calling her that,” my mother cautioned. “You know how she feels about nicknames.”

I turned to face Mama, frustration setting in. “Then why does she call me Sticky Buns?” I set the knife aside and ripped open the box, pleased to find my kneading machine inside.

“It’s a term of endearment, Scarlet.”

“Sticky Buns? A term of endearment?” More likely a twisted attempt at humor—Aunt Wilhelmina’s way of pointing out the vast size of my backside. Not that she could possibly understand my weight issues, irritating as they might be. Auntie tipped the scale at 103, dripping wet. Roughly. Maybe 104. I made at least two of her. Okay, two and a quarter, but who was keeping track?

I turned to face my mother, who grimaced. “Honey, let’s give her the benefit of the doubt. If anyone knows her buns, it’s your aunt Wilhelmina. She’s been baking longer than you’ve been on planet earth. Almost double that time, in fact. She’s considered to be the best in the state.”

Thanks for the reminder. As if I could forget.

“I know, Mama.” With the box now fully opened, I reached down to grab the kneading machine, which I used routinely to make so many of my breads.

“She knows her stuff.” Mama knelt down to help me. We hefted the machine beyond the glass display cases to the kitchen in the back. “And she’s got the best reputation in the state.”

“For her cakes. Not her sticky buns.” I settled the kneading machine into place. *And certainly not for her good attitude.*

“Yes, for her cakes. And there’s a reason for that. She built her business from the ground up. Hit the road straight out of culinary school and never looked back.”

I leaned against the countertop, ready to admit defeat. “I know, I know.” How many times had I heard this story? Aunt Willy was known across the state for her fabulous cake designs. She was our very own Ace of Cakes. Our Cake Boss. Our Cupcake Champion. Our Best in Show.

I sighed and then repented for the images that last one presented.

Mama clucked her tongue and gave me the usual motherly look. “I’m just saying that she’s got a lot of advice to offer.”

“And does so freely.” An elongated pause followed my words. “But I’m not complaining.”

“You’re not?” The look on my mother’s face let me know that she didn’t quite believe me.

“No. Not really.” I paused again as I thought through my response. “Okay, maybe I am. It’s just that she’s not easy to please. And I wonder if I’m going to spend the rest of my mortal life trying to prove myself to a woman who’s never going to think I’m good enough. You know? That would be a terrible way to live.”

“Honey, calm down. Take a deep breath.” Mama patted my arm and offered a look that only a mother could give—half sympathetic, half guilt trip. “Ask yourself, ‘What would Lucy do in a situation like this?’”

“Huh?”

Mama reached for a dust rag and went to work on the kneading machine. “Haven’t you seen every episode of *I Love Lucy* a dozen times?”

“Two dozen.” But I still couldn’t figure out what that had to do with anything, at least where Aunt Willy was concerned.

I headed back to the front of the store to finish unpacking. Mama caught up to me. “So again I ask—what would a good Scottish girl like Lucy McGillicuddy do?”

“She would probably . . .” I found myself distracted by my mother’s McGillicuddy reference. What did any of this have to do with being Scottish? Some link to our own heritage, perhaps? I shrugged. “She would probably start her own business and make a mess of things, then admit defeat. After trying to weasel her way into Ricky’s show at the *Copa Cabana*, I mean.” I knelt to slit another box open and pulled out a stash of large mixing bowls. “Is that what you’re suggesting? I should put on a show?”

“No.” Mama shook her head. “Not the kind you’re talking about, anyway. Just a show of affection for the woman who’s invested in you, and a promise to yourself that you won’t quit, no matter how tough things get.”

I felt the wind go out of my sails at her words.

Mama lit into a conversation about how my father never quit the ministry, even when the congregation dwindled down to a handful of parishioners. How he kept going, even when folks headed out to larger megachurches.

Gee, Mama, this is really cheering me up.

She patted my arm—using the hand with the dust cloth. “Maybe you don’t want to learn from Lucy’s failures, but you can certainly take a little something from her tenacity. She never gave up.”

“Never ever,” I admitted. Rising with the bowls in hand, I nearly lost my balance. I caught a glimpse of myself in the ornate mirrors behind the glass shelves and noticed my messy hair and plump cheeks. Ugh. If Lucy looked like me, she’d give up, all right.

Mama paused alongside me to gaze at my reflection, a smile lighting her lovely, non-chubby—albeit wrinkled—face. “And she never saw herself as anything less than a star, honey. Never.”

I sighed and turned away from the mirror, because the reflection staring back at me proved I was anything but. “I’m not sure that’s completely true, Mama. Remember that episode where she thought she had no talent at all?”

“Okay, okay. But you get the idea. She kept trying to weasel her way into the show—your words, not mine—and managed to become a superstar in the process. To her fans, anyway. And you need to do the same.”

“I will. I mean, I’ve got that big gig coming up at Club Wed next month. Hannah is counting on me. It’s her special day.”

I smiled as I mentioned my best friend’s name. Hannah’s wedding—a lavish Irish affair—would be the proverbial icing on my cake, career-wise. What a gorgeous June bride she would make! Just thinking about it got me excited. And it didn’t hurt that the event would take place at Club Wed with the infamous Bella Neeley coordinating. If I played my cards right, the pictures might even end up in *Texas Bride* magazine. One could hope, anyway. And one could also hope that the magazine might sneak in a photo or two of my new digs.

I thought about my aunt’s reaction should my name appear in print. She would swoon with delight, no doubt. Right after

taking the credit. But who could blame her? She had made all of this possible for me. And with her help, I really could achieve my dreams, one sticky bun at a time.

Yep. We made the perfect team. And perhaps, if I kept her happy, I really could have my cake and eat it too.