RACHEL BLAKLEY BALL | **ONE LAST THING**

Tess is about to leave the house to pick up the cake for Jeffrey's birthday. It's a sunny day in mid-January, reminiscent of the morning ten years before when Jeffrey was born. The following day, too, his first whole day of life, was just as inexplicably bright. For as long as she lives, she will never forget how, as she was wheeled out of the hospital, dazed and wearily cheerful, she instinctively moved her hand over his scrunched face to shield it from the glaring light. Now, passing by his bedroom in the hall, she feels compelled to describe the old scene to her son. She takes a step back and raps gently on his door; she peeks in when he calls out with a distracted, "Yeah? What?" But because she finds him slumped against the foot of his bed, staring up at the noisy little television sitting on top of his dresser, she can only bring herself to remind him to leave the two-liter bottles of soda in the kitchen unopened while she goes out, or they'll go flat before his friends arrive.

"I know, Mom," he says. "I heard you the first million times."

She goes down the hall to grab her coat and purse, passing John, who sits at the dining table grading papers. She tells him where she's off to.

"But I thought you already picked up the cake," he says, without looking up. He crosses something out on the paper in front of him.

"I *talked* about picking up the cake."

"Ah," he says slowly, his head still bowed.

She's out the door. Jeffrey's party starts at one o'clock, and it's already almost noon, but it's only a five-minute drive to Mirabella's, a straight shot down the hill to the first cluster of local businesses, where, in addition to the bakery, there's an espresso machine repair shop, a credit union, a dry cleaner, and a tapas bar that, once upon a time, she and John frequented. The parking lot is less than half full. She saunters across it to the bakery, not noticing the sign that has been taped over the hours of operation until she is gripping the handle of the locked door. *Sorry. We're closed today. Please visit our Clover Heights location!* She tries the door anyway, as if maybe for her—for Jeffrey—it will open. It rattles in protest.

She hits red lights all the way across town. Twice, other drivers cut her off, puffing pebble-gray clouds of exhaust into her air vents. Everyone else drives at a maddeningly slow pace. She murmurs angry pieces of advice under her breath and switches from lane to lane in an attempt to get around the sluggish, stupid cars. In the end it makes no difference. It's twenty minutes past noon by the time she reaches Clover Heights, where the air out on the street is tinged with the yeasty, sweet smell of the bakery.

Unlike at their Mirabella's, this one always has a line out the door, and today it stretches two doors down, ending in front of a glitzy little consignment shop. At the sight of the line, Tess's heart sinks. She takes her spot, stand-

ing a few feet back in order to not block the consignment shop's doorway. Women enter and leave the shop in pairs with plastic bags hooked around their wrists, their conversations preceding them. "But it's different for her," says one woman to another as they leave the shop. "*She* doesn't have to worry about the boss finding out." The woman's friend snorts and elongates her neck to look up the street. "You feel like grabbing a snack?"

Not noticing Tess, the two women take their place in line ahead of her, blocking the doorway. Tess clears her throat. "Excuse me? Excuse me—yes. Hi. The line actually ends back here." The women glance at each other, exchange a few indistinct words, and decide to go someplace else. The line moves ahead a pace. Tess steps forward to close the gap in front of her, stepping ahead of the doorway. Now she's standing in front of a bookstore, its large window display at her side, which is composed of paperbacks suspended from the ceiling around a sign declaring, *READING IS ALWAYS IN SEASON*.

Ahead of her in line, a teenage girl leans against the bookstore window, her shoulders touching her reflection. She is part of a group of three teenage girls, the other two standing closer together. Tess tries to pay the girls no attention, but it's difficult, standing so close to them now.

"You *would*," she hears one of them say. "Especially with him."

"Like you're such a saint," another says accusingly.

"I think we can all agree," the third says, "that none of us fall into that category anymore."

Out of the corner of her eye, Tess can see the girl who is leaning against the window look over at her. After a while, the girl pushes away from the window and bends toward her group of friends to say something to them. Whatever it is, it makes them all laugh. They each glance over. Is the fly of her trousers undone? A daub of dried toothpaste smeared across her chin? Though maybe the girl has said something that isn't an insult per se—perhaps Tess simply resembles a teacher of theirs. Still, it agitates her. She has to remind herself that these are just teenage girls and that deep down she pities them for precisely that reason. The girl who looked first may as well be Tess twenty years ago, pinch-lipped and attentively quiet, maroon eye shadow dark in the creases of her eyelids. At sixteen, Tess felt a certain kind of superiority over adult women. She looked at them at the mall and parent-teacher meetings, observed them in television sitcoms, and thought: never let me turn into that. She refused any notion of one day getting married, and she wasn't ever going to be encumbered by a bawling kid—that much she knew for certain.

And yet. After college, she met John, and he convinced her otherwise, at least about the marriage part. Jeffrey was unplanned, a shock to them both.

But what joy Jeffrey brought them! Also pain, exasperation, and agonizing, unending worry—but all of that was mitigated by the joy. She loved their funny little conversations on the drives to and from school, the mud pies he insisted on selling to her in exchange for his own hand-drawn money, his imaginary friends and archenemies. When nightmares tormented him, there his flaxen blond head would be at her side of the bed, and without him having to ask, she let him burrow beneath the covers between her and John. Once, when she asked him what he wanted to be when he was grown, he said, "A time scientist." She inquired about the specifics of such an occupation, but he only gave her an inscrutable smile.

Every year, a few weeks before his birthday, she asks Jeffrey what sort of cake he wants. She's not much of a baker, but to see the look in his eyes when she carries out

the finished product, you'd think she's just constructed the Colosseum. Over the years, she has baked him a soccer field, a brontosaurus, a fire engine; the most time-consuming cake was a rainforest overrun by anacondas. But this year is different. What he wants this year, what he has insisted he *must* have, is the same cake that his best friend Christopher had at his birthday party earlier in the year: a double cherry black forest cake from Mirabella's. When Jeffrey described the cake to her, his face brightened at the memory. It was so *incredibly* delicious, he said. It tasted like nothing else he'd ever had.

Is this the beginning of the end? He no longer cares for her homemade cakes; he barely looks her in the eye anymore. Soon enough, will he pull away from her in public, will he tell her nothing about his life? Ten is almost twelve, almost thirteen, and once he's a teenager, he's going to start getting anxious about getting on with his own life. Soon he'll be gone, and she'll be lucky if he calls the house once a month to see how his poor mother is doing.

She stops herself. She does what she always does when she's in danger of being carried away by an unraveling train of thought—she looks down at her open palms and waits until she feels herself retether to the earth.

The strained whine of a garbage truck coming up the street draws her attention upward. While she's been lost in thought, the line has moved forward, and she's automatically inched along with it. The girls ahead of her are no longer paying her any attention, but she reaches into her purse anyway for her compact mirror. There is nothing stuck to her face. There is no need to touch up her lipstick, which is so close to the natural color of her lips that it's barely visible anyway. She tucks the mirror away. She gazes down at her shoes. The scuffed tips of her loafers point to a crack in the concrete.

At last, she steps through the doorway of Mirabella's.

It's bustling inside the bakery. The room is happy and lively, noisy with conversation and the chirping of the cash register. Of the dozen people remaining ahead of her in line, half of them are gazing up at the looped handwriting on the bakery's blackboard; the other half are peering down into the glass display case, which is packed to its full capacity. This, in part, is why there is always a line running out the door: there are so many options that it takes customers forever to choose. People nibble the toothpick-speared samples set atop the display case, ask questions, change their minds midway through placing their order. If it were up to Tess, there would be a separate line for people who know exactly what they want. Everybody else could be indecisive together.

A dimple-chinned employee takes the order of the teenage girls. Another worker, carrying a stack of flattened pastry boxes, meets Tess's eye and tells her she'll be right with her, then teeters off out of view into the kitchen. Across the room, the espresso machine hisses wetly; the scent of ground coffee wafts over. Someone drops their plate in the bus bin too roughly, clanging it against another dish.

The woman comes back, wiping her empty hands clean on her apron.

"What can I get for you?"

"I'd like a cherry black forest cake," says Tess. "And if you wouldn't mind writing—"

"We're all out of black forest."

Tess stares at her. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," the woman says. "We just sold the last one."

She waits for the woman to add, *But let me double check for you.* Or, *We could have one made, if you don't mind waiting a few hours. We'd be happy to deliver it . . .* though that, she knows, is awfully far-fetched. Tess looks plead-

ingly over the display case at the woman, but there are no offers of any kind, just the impatient raising of the woman's eyebrows as she waits for Tess to decide on a substitute. At the far end of the display case, there are two levels of cakes on display, each centered on its own scalloped-edged, gold-laminated cardboard circle. All of the cakes look impeccably baked and frosted; all of them, Tess is sure, taste just as heavenly as the cake Jeffrey has requested. But none are right.

"Let me just—" she says, fumbling inside her purse. "Let me make a call."

She glances over her shoulder, tells the next customer to go ahead, and steps aside. Apologizing to another customer trying to get by, awkwardly maneuvering around what little space there is to move into, she somehow manages to get her phone open and call home. John picks up after several rings.

"It's me," she says. "Can you get Jeffrey?"

"What's wrong?"

"Just get him, will you, please? I'll explain later."

She hears the receiver being set down. But it's John who comes back onto the line a minute later. He tells her Jeffrey doesn't want to talk. Their son is in the middle of a very important episode of whatever show he's watching. *Now* will she tell him what the matter is?

She explains the situation.

"It's cake, for God's sake," says John. "Won't he like any kind?"

He should know it isn't true. "It looks like they might have lemon," Tess says, rising up on her toes. "And maybe a raspberry one, or red velvet. But wasn't that what we had on New Year's Eve? He hated whatever we had at the Bowmans'."

"Tess, I honestly don't have a clue."

"Forget it," she says, suddenly tired of John, and of all the noises and people around her, and of the very existence of birthday parties at all. She tells him she'll be home soon and shuts the phone with a clap. She steps toward the front of the line.

"Excuse me," she says. "I was in line before. I just had to step away for a moment."

The man standing where she's trying to cut in looks at her blankly. He licks the front of his teeth. "I didn't see you in line."

She looks at everyone waiting behind him, hoping that one of them will speak up. Didn't any of them see her? They all avoid her eyes. "Please," she says, to no one in particular. "It will only take a minute."

There's no employee who can vouch for her, either—the woman who was helping her has disappeared, replaced by another. Tess looks at the line again with a sinking feeling. Then she looks at her watch, studying the ticking face on her wrist. She has no time to stand in line again. What she has is just enough time to drive over to some other less popular bakery on her way back home.

She moves toward the door. But someone stops her before she can step out—an elderly man sitting with his wife at the table nearest to the exit. One last bite of a croissant and a half-drunk cup of coffee sits between them. Shards of pastry have fluttered over their table. The wife is using her fingertip to pick up the pieces and deposit them onto an unfolded paper napkin.

"There's another way," the old man tells Tess, so softly she almost can't hear him. The wrinkles running into his temples are deep. "Go to North Market."

"Pardon me?"

"North Market," he says. "Tell them Chuck sent you."

Tess shifts her gaze to the wife, who is still preoccupied with tidying up the crumbs. She wears a disapproving look on her face. But whether it's for the mess or for

her crazy husband, Tess can't decide.

"It'll be practically identical," the old man says. "No one except for you will know the difference."

"Thanks," she says, smiling warily at him. "But I've got it covered."

Yet she does go to North Market, because once she gets back to the car, it's the only bakery she can think of that isn't out of the way—and the old man has embedded it in her mind as the only possibility. She speeds back across town, going by the same shadowless buildings she passed on the way over. At State Street, she pulls into the North Market parking lot. There are people everywhere. So many *slow* people everywhere. On foot, she weaves around families pushing their carts into the store and dodges a woman in a stained smock who steps toward Tess with a trayful of paper cups filled with something pink and pulpy-looking.

"I know it's not the prettiest thing," the woman calls out after her, "but it really is very tasty. Really, ma'am. It is!"

The bakery is in the back of the store. Tess has never felt so relieved to see a counter free of other shoppers. But it's a feeling that quickly descends into disappointment. There's nothing wrong, exactly, with any of the cakes in the case, but they all look so plain, so sad, as if they've been sitting there waiting to be brought home for months.

A bakery worker comes out to greet her. He wears a chef's hat, tall and erect. "Can I help you?"

The chocolate cake on the uppermost shelf, a big rectangular sheet cake piped with a shell border around its edges and sugar confetti thrown across the top, will have to do. She points through the glass and asks for it. The baker nods. He opens the door on his side and crouches down. He grunts as he slides the cake out. It's large, but isn't he used to this sort of thing? Maybe he usually works over in produce, or in the video rental department, and they've sent him here just for the day. She has the urge to step behind the counter and do it herself. He can print out the sticker while she gets the cake in the box and tapes it shut.

"Here we are," the worker says, lifting the cake up with both hands, but as he swivels and steps toward a table a few feet away, his right knee buckles, and the cake slides off its cardboard tray and smashes onto the floor. They both stare at it for a minute. Then the worker turns back toward the case, his face pale and serious. "Is there another one I can get for you?"

She feels like crying. She feels like throwing in the towel and calling it a day, just driving home and telling Jeffrey that he has to go without cake this year. She can imagine how he will look at her, stunned, then hurt, then angry, and how he will blame it all on her alone. Though she will try to explain, it will come out sounding like a string of excuses. The closed bakery, the traffic, the line. "Whatever, Mom," Jeffrey will say, rolling his eyes. Indignantly, she pictures the faces of the teenage girls, the woman who told her the cake was sold out, the crazed man who gave her that bizarre recommendation—what had he said?

"This probably won't make any sense to you," Tess says, feeling foolish and utterly desperate, "But Chuck told me that you might—what I mean is, do you have any . . ."

The worker nods. "What sort?" he asks, quietly.

"Double cherry black forest," she says.

He disappears into a back room. Clanging follows. She hears the seal of a door smacking open and closed, then plastic being stretched and torn. She checks her watch;

it's nearly one o'clock. Well, that's it—she's going to be late. She digs around in her purse for her phone.

"Where *are* you?" John asks.

"I know, I know. Listen, when the kids arrive, can you tell their mothers—"

"There's already three or four of them here, Tess."

"You can handle them, can't you? If any of their mothers ask, just say I'm upstairs finishing up one last thing. Okay? I'll be there soon. I promise."

She hangs up before John can protest further. The bakery worker reappears from the back room. He holds a rose-colored pastry box in the crooks of his elbows. He smiles and shakily hands it to her over the display case, exhaling.

"Is that all?" he asks, wiping his brow.

She nods. She is gripped by the desire to look inside, wanting to see if it really is what she asked for, but this seems tacky to do, and pointless besides; it's this or nothing. Anyway, there's a sticker sealing the lid shut. Her eyes drift down to the price printed on the label.

"Is this correct?" she asks. "Two *hundred* dollars?"

He frowns. "You're free to go stand in line at Mirabella's, if you want."

She almost starts to push the box back toward him. But—Jeffrey. What's a few hundred dollars for reciprocation of love? Still, the number rings in her head as she takes the box, as she carries it to the checkout line, as she sets it on the floor of the passenger seat in the car and drives the rest of the way home. She is so enraged that she almost forgets to turn down the alley instead of parking out front, scarcely catching herself in time. She feels the cake shift gently inside its box as she carries it in through the back door. She imagines the bakery worker laughing in his private back room. She thinks of his stupid, shaky arms. Who cares how good of a cake it is—she'll go back there tomorrow and ask to see the manager and tell him exactly what she thinks about their little operation. She'll write a letter to the paper. She'll do something.

Standing in the back hall, she hears children in the front room laughing and romping about. John's voice floats above them, warning them, uselessly, to be mindful of a table lamp. She uses her house key to score through the sticker that holds the lid of the pastry box shut. Cut loose, the lid lifts up slightly on its own. She bends it back the rest of the way.

The cake is something. It really is. The old man wasn't crazy after all: it does look just like the one at Mirabella's. The chocolate icing glistens. Dozens of dark glossy red cherries sit snugly together on top. The cake has even been placed on a thick gold paper insert, scalloped around the edges. There's just enough room to curl her fingers beneath the edges of the insert to lift it up.

It's remarkably heavy for a cake. Though when was the last time she held one? It's been a whole year. These cakes, they're like infants: so much heavier, and yet so much more fragile, than you remember.

She carries it down the hall, taking the two little carpeted steps down into the front room with care. The children notice her at once. Seeing what's in her arms, they all come close and gather around. Jeffrey's face is flushed, his cheeks and neck gone pink. He takes one glance at the cake and looks as if he might start crying with happiness. "You *got* it," he says, in a half-whisper. His friends stare in awe. They all lean in; their eyes gleam. Jeffrey's face, front and center, is the happiest among them.