



The Traveling Tea Shop (LoveTravel Series New England)

By Belinda Jones



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Love isn't always a piece of cake...

Laurie Davis has always followed her passion. After escaping family drama to start a new life in New York City, she's up for whatever challenges life brings. So when an opportunity arises for her to use her travel industry expertise and serve as an assistant and tour guide for her idol, Pamela Lambert-Leigh, star of television's *Tea-Time with Pamela*, she jumps at the chance.

But Laurie's exciting adventure ends up entailing a lot more than scouting locations for the cake queen's new cookbook when Pamela's sassy mother and sulky, rebellious daughter tag along for the trip. As they cruise around bakeries in New England trading local delights like Red Velvet Cake and Whoopie Pies for British specialties such as Victoria Sponge and Bakewell Tarts, more secrets than recipes are revealed.

Now, in between rediscovering romance, learning to forgive family, and finding the best dessert on the East Coast, Laurie, Pamela, and the gang might find there's nothing a nice cup of tea, a sweet treat, and a little bit of friendship can't heal...



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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Belinda Jones' previous novels

"Original and beautiful...totally enchanting and very moving."—Carmen Reid

"Wickedly funny, aching romantic."—Claudia Carroll

"Deliciously entertaining."—*HEAT* (UK)

"Fast-paced, enthusiastic, good-hearted."—*Marie Claire* (UK)

"Definitely worth cramming in your suitcase."—*Cosmopolitan* (UK)

"A glitterball romp."—*Glamour* (UK)

"A sparkling read."—*OK!* (UK)

About the Author

Following ten years as a magazine journalist and travel editor, Belinda Jones began writing novels inspired by her adventures, including *The California Club*, *I Love Capri* and the prequel to *The Traveling Tea Shop - Winter Wonderland*. She has visited more than twenty-five countries and hopes to write her way around the world by the time she's done! Originally from the U.K., she currently lives on the magical island of Coronado, California with her American dog, Bodie.

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Dearest Reader,

What an utterly yummy experience it was writing this book for you—because of you I got to sample an abundance of sweet treats and call it work!

My first experience of The Wonder of Cake was eagerly waiting for my mum to let me lick the mixture from the bowl as a kiddywink, so it seemed appropriate that I set out on the research trip with her. The only snag is that she really doesn't have a sweet tooth, so as I would be marveling at all the exquisite fondant-swirled delights on offer, she would be ordering a bowl of carrot soup. (Though I have to say, she did succumb to the Boston Cream Pie!)

Of course, there's more to The Traveling Tea Shop than cake! With four leading ladies, there is an abundance of emotions to explore, as well as the idyllic setting of New England. I knew it would be leafy and picturesque but I was amazed how different each state was, though it was the littlest—Rhode Island—that captured my heart. That said, I look forward to hearing where you would most like to have afternoon tea!

In the meantime, cozy up with a cuppa and a cupcake—you are welcome to leave little smudges of frosting

on the pages as you turn them!

Your author,

Belinda xx

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A bumper batch this year . . .

My first book was dedicated to James Breeds, and in a way they all are. Thank you for the most splendid week in NYC, my sweet-toothed soulmate.

Cream-swirled gratitude to this tasty bunch: Charlie Romano & David Garcelon at the Waldorf Astoria New York, Warren Brown of CakeLove, Paul Drumm at Kenyon's Grist Mill, Amanda Bryan at The Newport Sweet Shoppe, Kim Houdette at AD Makepeace, Scott Cunningham of ScottCakes, Tuoi Tran and John Murtha at the Omni Parker House Hotel and Robert Alger, Jennifer Vincent and Sam Messer at the Trapp Family Lodge.

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The hosts with the most: Nancy and Bill Bagwill at Cliffside Inn, all at the Castle Hill Inn, Rauni Kew at Inn by the Sea, Mary Jo and Michael Salmon at the Hartstone Inn, Zorina and Larry Magor at the Omni Mount Washington Resort and Sam von Trapp at the Trapp Family Lodge.

Cupcakes galore to my U.S. publishers The Berkley Publishing Group, in particular the exuberantly wonderful Jackie Cantor and lovely publicity mastermind Courteny Landi.

My fabulous, inspiring new agent Madeleine Milburn and lovely assistant Cara.

My dreamy mother Pamela (always) and character-inspiring Charles. You two were always worthy of a romance novel! Dad Trefor and Suzanne for their weekly Skype sessions, Brother G for summer memories at Dartington and Sam Adam for the ultimate teatime treat at the Wolseley!

Special canine love to Bodie, who tagged along on the road trip to help me walk off the extra calories and relished every dropped crumb.

And finally, my husband Jonathan, who no doubt is still wondering how I could spend a year immersed in baking and still be utterly without skill in the kitchen.

I never really understood the appeal of Prince Charming. Yes, he has that flippy hair and a fancy line in epaulets but for me it was always The Candy Man.

—Laurie Davis

Chapter 1

I look up at my clock. 1:30 P.M. My stomach flips like a pancake. Or should I say PamCake?

In just ninety minutes I am meeting England's most beloved baker, Pamela Lambert-Leigh. Can you believe it's nearly twenty years since Babycakes made her a household name? Those mini fairy cakes were so whisper-light that I used to think of them as dandelion clocks—one puff and you'd send a flurry of vanilla sponge crumbs out into the ether. Her daughter's cherubic face gave the packaging such an innocent, Shirley Temple vibe. Forget those sticky-sickly treats that made you groan and go cross-eyed, a Babycake was just a little kiss on your button nose, a butterfly in your tummy . . .

You could eat six and barely even feel sick.

I know because my mum once spelled out my name—LAURIE—one letter per cake on my birthday. I was rather miffed when she did the same three months later for my sister Jessica, especially since her name garnered an extra cake.

I was wondering about telling Pamela this story, possibly leaving out the fact that my sister and I were teenagers by this point, but I don't want to come off as overly fan-ish. Besides, what if she made a casual inquiry about my nearest and dearest? My response would only make her uncomfortable—"Both women are gone now," I would say. "One to heaven and one to hell."

But no dwelling on that today. I mentally will the avalanche of emotion to retreat and hold off a while longer. I'll get to you soon enough; for now I need to keep things bright and peppy and focus on the interview . . .

Perhaps I'll just make a joke about having a sweet tooth: "The amount of sugar I consumed as a child, it's a miracle I have any teeth left at all!"

Hmmm. That sounds a bit off-putting.

What about, "We used to say that instead of blood running through my veins I had syrup, like a mini maple tree. With legs."

I tut myself. I'm not auditioning for a stand-up show.

I just want to prove to her that I'm Cake's Biggest Fan. Not some pretender who'll toy with the slim end of the wedge, leaving a great bookend of frosting on the plate.

Which reminds me, I'm sure I've got a childhood picture here of me taking a bite out of a cake that's twice the size of my head. I could snap it and have it neatly to hand on my phone.

I rifle through my desk drawer, I saw it just the other day . . .

I hesitate as I locate it. My hair in pigtails, white Peter Pan collar on my red dress. I must have been about seven. Gosh. Thirty-one years ago.

I didn't know about calories then.

I knew the truth about Father Christmas. I knew about divorce and that I couldn't bear to see my mother crying—it would just scrunch me up inside and make me want to cry too—but I didn't know any of those threatening phrases like:

“A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.”

Or “You can never be too rich, or too thin!”

Or, the most insidious of all, “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.”

Whoever said that has clearly never been to Magnolia Bakery.

Drrrrrinnng!

My phone ring startles me. But I smile when I see my best friend’s name on the display. I wouldn’t pick up for anyone else right now.

“Krista!” I squeak.

“I don’t want to hold you up, just wanted to wish you good luck!”

“Oh thank you,” I pip. “I don’t know what to do with myself—this feels almost too good to be true!”

“There is no one better suited to this job than you, Laurie. It’s like your greatest passions colliding!”

It really is. Cake and travel.

The travel aspect is my *actual* line of expertise. Before I met Krista, I was one of those all-but-extinct breeds: a travel agent. (RIP Lunn Poly, Marble Arch.) She’s a former magazine journalist and together we launched a girlie travel-planning website called Va-Va-Vacation!, custom-designing itineraries and offering bonus features such as “What I Packed versus What I Actually Wore” and the popular “Man of the World” eye candy section.

We both firmly believe that life is too short and travel too expensive to waste a single coffee-stop in a strip-lit chain when you could be basking in a secret courtyard with a waiter who’s going to slip you a complimentary macaroon. I’m even picky about which airports I schedule a stopover in, because a cool bar with an innovative menu and a docking station at every table beats the congealed orange chicken and plastic forks at Panda Express every time.

I remember Krista saying that if her magazine hadn’t just cut their travel section in favor of running more weight-loss stories, she would have written a column with all our tried-and-tested tips. I said perhaps she should start her own blog. She said she’d love to create an online travel magazine and she knew a designer who could make it really eye-popping, but she couldn’t figure out how to earn a living from it. Which is when we decided to combine our skills.

We’ve done some pretty fun themes to our custom itineraries over the years—dance-themed, family tree, a Starbucks-free coffee tour of Seattle; I even created an entire schedule from Ryan Gosling movie locations for one superfan. (And who can blame her fixation?)

I think one of the reasons the setup works so well is that we have clearly defined roles: I’m mostly in charge of logistics and wangling the discounts that give us a competitive edge. (I began with my personal travel contacts—“Go on, Yiorgos, give us an extra twenty percent off and we’ll give you the best October occupancy the Elounda Blue has ever had!”—and still today we favor privately owned boutique properties over the big chains.) Danielle the designer holds down the fort in London, where Va-Va-Vacation! was founded, and she does all the beach resort reports (even rating the flirtiness of the local bartenders), whereas Krista, our main writer, travels all over—Tahiti, Costa Rica, Argentina . . . She’s currently based in Quebec

in Canada—she went there to research their epic Winter Carnival and in between ice-skating and snow-sculpting she fell madly in love with a husky-eyed dogsledder named Jacques. (The guy has a French accent, 112 canine children and can seemingly summon the Northern Lights at will, so she really didn't stand a chance.)

Around the same time, I got the opportunity to relocate from Maida Vale to Manhattan, and oddly that has worked out really well for our friendship since we are now only a ninety-minute flight apart, as opposed to eight-plus hours had either of us stayed in London.

Not that anything could have persuaded me to miss out on a chance to live in New York; I have been coming here every couple of months for years, on a mission to keep our Va-Va-Vacation! city guide current and comprehensive. I may not have Krista's pro writing skills, but I pride myself on knowing (and loving) the Big Apple pips, core and all.

Which is why Pamela Lambert-Leigh has come to me. Well, technically her agent set up the meeting. And I'm not the only "travel professional" she is meeting with today. I have rivals. Which is why I am so ultra-keen to prove that no one loves cake as much as me.

"So have you made your final selection for the Cheesecake Challenge?" Krista wants to know.

That's our big test—each of us has been charged with presenting Pamela with The Ultimate New York Cheesecake Experience. The winner will get the job. But we won't know exactly what that job entails unless we are the winner. All the more reason to be the best.

I've been really torn over my choice. Junior's gets the popular vote and has all the right credentials: founded in 1950, now with a hub in Times Square offering at least twenty flavors (including Sugar-Free Low Carb!) but the design is a bit orange lino diner and it would mean subjecting her to the tourist crush, so I'm not sure it would be a good fit.

I was fleetingly considering taking Pamela over to Brooklyn for a *Moonstruck* moment but the Cammareri Brothers bakery has since closed and its affiliate F. Monteleone (a bijoux box of old-school treats) has seating as limited as Pamela's time.

So that narrowed it down to two . . .

"Remember Veniero's Pasticceria in the East Village?" I prompt Krista. "The one where we took a snap under the vintage neon sign?"

"Est 1894! It's up on my board here!" she cheers, recalling the ceilings of pressed copper and stained glass. (Personally I was most struck by the never-ending parade of cannolis.)

I had it in my head to wow Pamela with both their traditional New York Cheesecake and the crumblier, less sweet, Sicilian version, which is made using ricotta and looks a bit like a soufflé nestled in a deep-dish pie-crust.

"Double whammy!" Krista enthuses. "And it's just twenty minutes' walk from your place."

"The only thing is . . ." I pause as I call up today's online news stories. "I saw this paparazzi shot of Pamela at the airport . . ."

I press send.

“Oh gosh!” Krista gasps as she opens the image at her end. “I don’t know that I would have recognized her.”

I had the same reaction. The Pamela we know and love from her *Teatime with Pamela* TV show has always had a delightfully mellow look to her, as if she has just emerged from a stroll in her English rose garden, complete with a freshly plucked flower wound into her soft, wavy blonde hair. In fact her whole product line—the cookbooks, the packaged cake ranges, the signature bakeware—makes you feel connected to a more wholesome time, when life was sweet and simple and you might find yourself spending the afternoon reading in an apple orchard, as opposed to sitting in a technology daze in some office cubicle. Though Pamela typically wears crumpled linens or palest, washed-out denim, she always has a lipstick that precisely matches the design on her pinafore and nails to match that, even though she’ll soon be up to her cuticles in flour and pastry. But this snapshot gives the impression that she ran out of the house in the middle of the night and is still trying to figure out where the hell she is going in such a hurry.

“She looks totally frazzled.”

“I know. And it’s sweltering here today and you know how stingy most places are with their air-conditioning.”

“God yes,” Krista cringes. “Remember when we were at The Boat House and they didn’t even have their ceiling fan on the fastest rotation?”

“I know, the passing waiters were generating more of a breeze.”

“So what are you thinking?”

“Lady M.”

“Lady M?” she queries.

“We haven’t been. I only discovered it two weeks ago but everything about the place is cool and pristine and upmarket zen.”

“Really?”

I nod into the phone. “Five minutes in there and I swear your hair starts to de-frizz. The walls are white, the tables, the chairs, the plates—everything is so clean!”

“Sounds like a lab!”

I chuckle. “You know, they actually call it a cake boutique!”

“How very swish!”

I click on the website just to check for the hundredth time that I have the correct address—41 East 78th, Upper East Side.

“You’re not worried it’ll be too posh?”

I know what Krista means, Pamela is more naturally sun-kissed than lacquered sheen.

“I was,” I confess. “But then I tasted the cheesecake . . .”

“Ooooh. Say no more.”

“Plus she’s staying at the Mandarin Oriental,” I add. “So it’s just across the park.”

“For her; you’re all the way down in Little Italy! Shouldn’t you be leaving?”

“I’m getting a cab in five minutes. No subway today. I’ve booked a table and I’m just going to sit there and be all serene and accommodating of her every whim.”

I don’t think I could be any better prepared. My laptop is primed with multiple open browsers and a list of Favorites linking to everything New York and cake-related. Yesterday I bought a small pink leather-bound notebook and a gold pen. I have a pack of hand-wipes should Pamela want to clean up without trekking to the bathroom, and two small tubes of Fresh’s brown sugar hand cream—one to offer her a squeeze and one to give as a gift if she likes the scent as much as I do. I’ve printed out a pocket-size list of What’s Hot in New York Today, should she perhaps have an hour or two free, and attached my business card: LAURIE DAVIS *Travel In Style*. I’ve even packed a second pair of shoes and a shirtdress in case I fall down a manhole or get knocked over by a bolting horse and carriage on the way.

I have to have every eventuality covered because, if they’ve come to me, my guess is that Pamela needs help planning a detailed itinerary—cramming as much into as few days as is physically and logistically possible, while still maintaining a seemingly effortless flow. And that’s what I do best.

If she’ll just give me the chance to prove myself.

“Trust me, this is your moment!” Krista encourages.

I take a breath. “I really hope so.”

I don’t know when I last wanted anything this much.

Actually I do.

I felt the same way about moving to Manhattan . . .

Chapter 2

Little-Laurie-Worry, my mum used to call me.

But not here. Not in New York City.

One inhalation of yellow cab fumes—mingling with pepperoni pizza, hot trash and Tom Ford’s Café Rose—and I find myself in an Empire state of mind . . .

That’s what I love most about Manhattan: *it brings out a sassy side to me.*

In the concrete jungle it’s sink or swim: you can’t be timid or tentative; you have to forge through, make your mark, enter the fray!

Last week I stepped off the curb and nearly got run over by some smoke-windowed Chrysler, and my instinctive reaction was to bang on the boot and cry, “Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

I'd seen some cool urban chick do it once and now I'd joined the Pedestrians Fight-Back Club. I was on a high for the rest of the day.

Krista was horrified. She finds the whole place too in-er-face. "Who knew walking down the street had become a contact sport?"

She's right, of course. It's crazy. But I love that feeling.

I remember the first time I came here, I returned to my hotel room after a day's sightseeing exhausted, feet throbbing, calves tweaking, head thumping, and I collapsed on the bed for a few minutes and then I thought: I want more! I want another fix! So I stepped back into the insanity, weaving my way through the crush on Fifth Avenue, standing amid all the tourists ogling Bergdorf Goodman and Harry Winston, raising their cameras to try and ensnare the jutting angles of skyscrapers. I felt simultaneously charged and exhausted all over again.

It was just what I needed.

Krista finds peace mushing huskies across plains of pure glistening white, but I need the chaos, the distraction of overstimulation. Back in London, I'd gone through a phase of reading way too many self-help books, gazing deeper and deeper into my navel . . . Sometimes I'd come to a complete halt in the street, questioning my next move—my motives, intentions and every possible consequence. Was it in the best interest of my Higher Self? In NYC you have to keep moving forward, stride with purpose. As you do so your attention is pulled every which way, away from yourself. And, for me at least, that is a source of great relief.

I know I'm not the only British person to feel this way. I see the faces of my fellow countrymen transform in this city. I see their amazement and fascination mingling with a surprising sense of belonging. The most unlikely places can feel like home here. There's this place, the Brooklyn Diner on West 57th, to be precise, and the first time I went there it was tipping down with rain, but they were playing Tony Bennett and had matching Tony Bennett French Toast (thick-cut cinnamon raisin and pecan), and so I sat there, drinking filter coffee from one of those squat cream-colored mugs that hold next to nothing but come with endless refills, observing the mostly older clientele and some bulky Sopranos-looking family, and I felt so *cozy* there. Maybe it's because you feel like you're in a movie half the time you're in New York. Maybe it's because things are happening all around you and, just by standing in the middle of it, you feel like something is happening *to* you. I don't know. And maybe the reasons don't matter. It just feels good.

"Taxi!" I step out into the street, instinctively rising up onto my tippy-toes as if I'm in Carrie-esque stilettos.

Appropriate that I should be heading to the Upper East Side!

Sliding across the collapsed, cracked black leather, I issue the address and then glance back at my redbrick building.

That's the only time I have a little wobble, when I put the key in the lock and I know it's just me and the apartment for the rest of the night. I still have the impulse to call my mum and tell her how my day went. I feel so hollow in that moment, so echoingly, despairingly alone. And then comes the rage, as I think of my sister.

"I don't want you here!" I say it out loud sometimes, trying to banish her from my head. But she's always lurking.

We stall at the lights beside one of the granite-thighed pedi-cabbers. Do you know they actually have credit card machines on board? They need to; they're actually more expensive than regular cabs now. I look beyond the cyclist's khaki shorts and focus on charting our route through Gramercy Park and the Flatiron district, checking off each cross street along the way—23rd becomes 34th and then 42nd, making us level with Times Square, just a few blocks from Rockefeller Center. I take a breath, unable to decide whether to quell my butterflies or embrace them. Talk about the American Dream! Just knowing that my cake-loving tummy is going to be seated across from Pamela Lambert-Leigh within the hour seems fantastical.

"Central Park!" the driver motions to his left.

I smile. That vast expanse of greenery always has an appropriately "centering" effect on me. I wonder if Pamela has had the time to look out over the treetops from the Lobby Lounge at the Mandarin Oriental? Thirty-five floors up with panoramic windows, it's one of the best views in the city, utterly justifying the \$7 price tag dangling from your tea bag.

Of course the park is pretty nice at ground level too. Even if half the New Yorkers fit the overachiever profile. Here the word "relax" becomes an active verb—running, cycling, rollerblading, skating, basketballing, boating, bowling, dog-jogging, tai-chi-ing . . .

I generally go there to sit down. Perhaps wiggle my toes in the grass, maybe blink up at the leaf-dappled sunlight. My regular spot is beside a bronze husky called Balto—ears pricked, chest proud, tail curled, he's a beauty. He was part of the relay team of sled dogs that battled the elements to bring life-saving vaccines to a remote Alaskan village, inaccessible by any other means. Now he stands immortalized on a rock in one of the more picturesque nooks of the park. Just being around him makes me feel connected to Krista, which is always reassuring. If tinged with some new emotions these days . . .

I wasn't expecting to feel the way I did when she moved in with Jacques. It's strange how something that makes you so happy—to see your best friend embarking on a wonderful new life with a good man—can also make you so sad. Prior to their romance we were in it together—the relationship bafflement fog. It was oddly comforting—if someone as lovely as Krista couldn't find love, then it proved it wasn't just my shortcomings keeping the right man at bay. We just weren't destined to get lucky in that way. Better we fill up our hearts with other pursuits. As far as I was concerned, Manhattan was all the man I needed! But now . . . Now she has gone and proved that true love does exist, the pressure is back on again.

Even from Krista. She has started having expectations for me whereas before there was just an acceptance that we had such awful taste in men we were best off out of it.

I remember the first day we met—at a mutual friend's wedding reception. I was under one of the dinner tables eating a second slice of the wedding cake, not wanting my enjoyment of the pink champagne icing to be tainted by my boyfriend's look of disapproval. (He had this conspiracy theory that I had hooked him with my feminine wiles, all with a dastardly plan to eat my way to enormity, purely to spite him and shame him in front of his friends. I wasn't even plump then. But just the sight of me eyeing the dessert trolley would give him the heebie-jeebies.)

Anyway, there I was, prom dress all fanned out on the carpet, feeling like I was five years old, having a lovely time shoulder-popping along to "Crazy in Love" when an arguing couple plonked themselves down beside me. Her foot was bleeding from being skewered by a stiletto on the dance floor, and his main gripe seemed to be that she should have been wearing high heels too.

"Why can't you just be like everyone else?"

And then he'd stormed off, telling her she could find her own damn Band-Aid.

That was the point at which I revealed myself and offered to make a little bandage using a torn napkin and a cocktail stick. She told me her big toe now looked like one of those pigs-in-blankets hors d'oeuvres, and her giggle gave me such hope, even when I learned she was married to this guy.

We talked for a while (mostly about that soul-destroying shift when your man switches from admiring to admonishing), but Krista said the moment she knew we were going to be bonded forever was when Andrew (her then husband) returned and I drove my steel-tipped vintage heel into *his* foot. Accidentally, of course. I just lost my balance as I was climbing out from under the table . . .

That seems like a lifetime ago now. By the next time I saw her, I was single. And I've been that way ever since. On purpose.

I was very clear by that point that I couldn't risk hooking up with another controlling calorie-counter (always my calories, not theirs!), because I honestly didn't feel like I had any more escape acts in me.

And my boyfriends have always been so easy to leave, on paper at least. They gave me so many reasons, but I always stayed way too long. Krista thinks it's because my working life is so geared to finding solutions, making the best of any situation, streamlining, honing—I have to try everything in my repertoire before I'll throw in the towel, and by then I've got myself into some kind of habitual behavior that has nothing to do with any genuine feeling toward the other person, but keeps me held there until they ditch me. Urgh! Even thinking about this raises my blood pressure. Switch that thought!

"Do you know there are nine thousand benches in Central Park and if you placed them end to end they would stretch for seven miles?"

The cab driver glances back at me, seemingly deliberating whether or not to let on that he speaks English.

"Oh! This is it—Lady M!" I scooch up in my seat and point ahead.

He peers with curiosity at the jarringly modern, glass-fronted white box tucked into the otherwise historic *grande dame* neighborhood.

"Cakes," he grumps.

"Yes," I cheer as I step onto the pavement.

I pause before I enter, looking around me and wondering what Pamela's impression will be.

A 1920s matriarch out walking her short-legged pooch would not be out of place. But then neither would the *Sex and the City* girls. If they were coming for tea they would all be in jewel-colored dresses and glinting metallic heels. I shift the dragging laptop bag on my shoulder, straighten my cotton frock and reach for the chrome door handle.

Instant cool. I love the frisk of air-conditioning on a sauna day.

"May I help you?" A gamine server with a black head-kerchief greets me.

"Hello, I'm Laurie—I called earlier?"

My heart is palpitating as I go through the arrangements.

With everything in order, I slide onto one of the molded plastic chairs and try to convince myself that this isn't a big deal. Even though it is.

I just pray I've made the right choice. This place definitely has a snoot factor. And I'd forgotten how bijou the tables are. I hope Pamela doesn't come with a lot of paperwork or anything that needs fanning out.

"Would you like anything while you are waiting?"

"No, no, thank you, I'm fine."

I could actually do with a glass of water but I don't want a half-drunk glass with a lipstick smudge ruining the pristine setting, so instead I focus on my posture and forming an open, welcoming expression. Every now and again my heart loops as a figure passes the window, but so far each person who has entered has been male. And Chinese. I look at my watch. Any minute now . . .

At 3 P.M. I expect a siren to go off and balloons and streamers to drop from the ceiling. But nothing happens. Life goes on as normal. Without Pamela.

A further five minutes pass.

Anticipation turns to anticlimax.

What if she doesn't show? What if she's having such a great time with one of the other itinerary experts she's decided she doesn't need to take any more meetings? I check my messages, no polite let-down from the agent. Just an invitation to try out the new ramen burger craze.

I'm starting to get fidgety. I could catch up on my Words with Friends games but I don't want to look like one of those people always zoned in on their phone, letting the world pass them by. Besides, there are far prettier things to gaze upon in here . . .

"I'm just going to have a little look," I tell the server as I approach the counter.

I feel a mix of serenity and awe as I contemplate their pristine cake selection. It's just so unique. Take the Gâteau aux Marrons—it looks as if a pan of spaghetti has been heaped atop the almond flour cake, when in fact the strands are lavish pipings of chestnut-infused cream, dusted with snow sugar.

Snow sugar!

I'm telling you, this place is in a league of its own. You never saw a glossier ganache finish. The only item I'm not sure about is the Green Tea Mousse Cake on account of its lurid chartreuse coloring. Then again—

"These are the ones I saw in Oprah magazine!" a voice bustles in beside me.

She's pointing to Lady M's Mille Crêpes—twenty paper-thin handmade crêpes layered with light pastry cream to form their signature cake. You can even keep "tiering up" until you create a wedding cake.

"Aren't they incredible?" A quieter, more reverent voice inquires. "Like the most delicate of petticoat layers."

I look up to smile in confirmation and find myself face-to-face with the legendary Pamela Lambert-Leigh.

Chapter 3

It's a strange thing, standing so close to a celebrity. There's an initial jolt of recognition and then a questioning as you review their multifaceted 3-D form—is it really them? You look away and then look back—if you didn't know better, they could almost pass for human . . .

Turns out those paparazzi shots weren't far off. Pamela's formerly radiant face is washed out, her nails polish-free and her casual back-of-a-cab dab of lipstick doesn't match anything that she's wearing, which is probably just as well since today's dominant hue is elephant gray.

"I have to apologize for the state of me," she begins. "My luggage didn't make it to New York and I haven't had time to shop for anything new."

"Oh how awful," I sympathize.

"Well, it's really such a fleeting visit, it's not the end of the world. I'm just aware that I bear more than a passing resemblance to a bag lady."

"Only without any bags!"

She laughs. "Yes—probably just as well they didn't make it!"

I smile fondly back at her. "Would you like to take a seat?"

She nods gratefully, expelling a long breath as she takes in her surroundings.

"This is quite the haven, isn't it?"

I nod. "I know it looks like they could offer you Botox or an acid peel in the back room—"

Pamela hoots and then covers her mouth. "Oh, excuse me!"

"Not at all!" I'm just happy to see her face brighten. "We can do as we please and pass it off as being English Eccentrics."

"Good point," she says, eyes straying back to the cake counter.

That's my cue!

"So, I took the liberty of ordering . . ." I nod to the waitress, who promptly sets down two glossy white plates before us.

"There are two types of cheesecake here: the traditional Gâteau Fromage . . ." I let her take in the simple slice with its subtly burnished edging offering an almost sepia tone. "The thin base layer is crisp shortbread cookie crust and the cheesecake itself has a vanilla accent."

She nods.

"The second," I begin, trying to disguise any favoritism in my voice, "is the Gâteau Nuage—Cloud Cake."

"Oooh." She looks intrigued.

"They describe the base as cinnamon-kissed," I smile. "And then there's the airy whipped middle band of

cheesecake and the top layer—”

“The *pièce de résistance*?” She raises a brow.

I nod. “Sweetened sour cream.”

“I like how cool and silky that looks,” she says, holding the plate up to her eye level. “You know, in comparison to the denser texture of the cheesecake.”

My toes scrunch in expectation. I feel exactly the same way!

It actually puts me in mind of a layer of white gloss paint, but I don’t say that out loud in case it throws off her palate.

“And if I may offer an alternative to tea?” I venture. “I rather like hot water with a slice of lemon and a tiny drip of honey.”

“To counterbalance the creaminess.”

“Exactly.”

“Well then, that’s what I shall have too.”

The waitress arranges the shiny white cups and saucers—Limoges, *naturellement*!—with painstaking precision. Even the lemon slices look perfect—all zesty and juicy as opposed to predominantly pith.

I wait nervously for Pamela’s verdict, not knowing if I should speak while she is in taster mode, presuming she needs to focus fully on the—

“Are you not having any?” She looks up at me.

“Oh. Well, I didn’t want to crowd the table but I did order.” I look to the waitress, preparing to give her the sign to bring over the second set of plates.

“Please,” she interrupts me. “Share mine.”

“Really?”

“You can imagine how much cheesecake I’ve had today, and I hardly need the extra pounds.”

“Well, if you’re sure?”

I don’t say anything about her weight but she does seem a little curvier than I recalled. Not that it looks bad on her. She’s one of those womanly women whose exact dimensions are irrelevant. Big boobs are the key. You look at them and the first word that springs to mind is *voluptuous*. And how can that be bad?

I take a bite of my beloved Gâteau Nuage, smearing the textures around my mouth to maximize the bliss. I could even do without the crumbly base; just give me a scoop of the filling and I’d eat it like ice cream. But what does *she* think?

“Sublime!” she pronounces.

My face brightens. “You like it?”

“Oh!” she fans herself. “So soft and smooth . . .”

“How does it compare to the others?” I dare to ask.

Her face changes as she leans in close. “One woman got me eating tofu cheesecake.”

“I’m so sorry.” My brow crumples.

“It’s all right. I stayed on after she left and had the Amaretto.”

“Ooh, I bet that was delicious!”

“It was.” She takes a sip of hot lemon water. “One appointment we had to cancel because it turns out her suggestion was The Cheesecake Factory.”

“Not an entirely illogical suggestion . . .”

“And I’m not opposed to a chain when they serve Pineapple Upside-Down Cheesecake, but the nearest location was Hackensack, New Jersey.”

“Oh.”

“Now where were the others?” she strums her chin and then smiles fondly. “I did like Veniero’s.”

“That was on my list!” I pip. “First runner-up.”

“It’s a classic. But guess what?”

I shake my head.

“The woman I met there didn’t even touch her slice!”

I tut in disgust, assuring her that I’m very much of the no-crumb-left-behind persuasion.

“You’d think she would at least have asked for a box to take it away.”

“She didn’t?” I gasp.

“No!” She hoots. “Just got up and left!”

“That’s not right.”

Pamela sits back in her chair, taking another sweep of our surroundings. “Would you agree this Lady M has a somewhat French flair?”

Much as I’d like to claim the M is for Manhattan, I can’t deny it.

“I just thought—it’s so hot and everyone needs that moment in a New York day when you can just exhale and regain your composure.”

“That’s very considerate of you.”

“Well, these factors matter—the weather, your mood that day, what you are hoping to achieve . . .” I leave

my words hanging.

She smiles. “I suppose I should tell you a little more about this project of mine.”

“Only if you like—”

“I do. I like you, I like this place. I think this will work very well.”

Did she just hire me?

“So. My agent, in her infinite wisdom, has decided that this is the year for me to break America.”

“Gosh!” It hadn’t even occurred to me that she wasn’t known here since she’s such an institution at home.

“It’s certainly the right time for me to take a break from the UK, but she wants to move a lot faster than I had originally intended.”

“Okay . . .”

“Basically she wants to get a cookbook out for Christmas.”

“Christmas recipes?”

“Actually no. What it is . . .” She pauses, waiting for the family standing beside us to be seated before she continues. “Basically, the idea is that I travel around the U.S. trading traditional British cake recipes for American favorites, like New York Cheesecake, Boston Cream Pie—”

“You want to go to Boston?” I wasn’t expecting this.

“I want to go everywhere that a great American cake originated.”

“Oh wow.”

“But!” she takes a breath. “That won’t be possible in the time-frame so we went through the list and it seems that all the best recipes are concentrated here on the East Coast, because of course that’s where the first settlers arrived.”

“Well, not quite the first . . .” I venture.

“Funnily enough we were reading about a Native American tribe based at Plymouth Rock; they have this dish called Indian Pudding . . .”

“So there’s a dessert element to this too?”

“I’m open to anything and everything you could possibly have at teatime.”

“I love teatime,” I sigh.

“Me too. That’s why we’re calling the book *The Traveling Tea Shop*.”

“That’s so sweet!” I enthuse. And then a thought pops into my head. “What about Whoopie Pies? They’re cakes really, are you including them?”

“Are they the ones from Maine?” She rifles through her bag in search of her notebook.

“I think so . . .”

“Yes,” she confirms as she finds the corresponding page. “They actually helped us decide that we want to focus purely on New York and New England.”

“So we’re talking Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts.” I begin mentally working my way along the coast.

“Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont.” Pamela brings us inland. “And then back to New York.”

The only state I’ve actually visited. Not that I’ll be mentioning that.

“So are you including New York’s other edible celeb?” I ask as I clean off the last creamy smear from my fork.

Pamela looks bemused. “And what would that be?”

“Red Velvet Cake.”

“I thought that was from the South.” She returns to her notes.

I shake my head. “Common misconception. In fact, if you turned left out of here,” I say, motioning to the door. “Take the first right onto Park Avenue . . .”

“Yes?”

“Then just keep going until you hit the Waldorf Astoria.”

She looks amazed. “That’s where Red Velvet Cake was created?”

I nod emphatically. “I know the executive pastry chef there—Charlie.”

“Could you arrange an interview?”

“Of course.”

“I’d like to stay there as well, when I come back.”

“No problem!” I note down her request.

I think I’ve got it! I think this is my job. It’s a lot bigger than I was expecting but that’s okay. I can rise to the occasion—’scuse the baking pun.

“I’ll ask my agent to e-mail you over the notes from our conversation, so you have a starting point for the itinerary.”

“That would be really helpful,” I concede. “So you’re basically looking to try out a cake recipe that’s native to each state we visit?”

“Yes, or at least celebrating an ingredient that is specific to the area. Like maple syrup and Vermont.”

“Cranberries and Cape Cod?”

“Ooh, I could do with a Cape Cod cocktail about now.”

Her whole body loosens up, suddenly looking in urgent need of being horizontal and fanned.

“Um, I’ve actually drawn up a list for you of bars that have a great atmosphere.”

She sits up and takes my micro-guide to NYC but skips over my secret speakeasy suggestions.

“Ricky Martin is in *Evita*?”

“Oh. Well, I didn’t know if you were the musicals type—”

“I am, I don’t have time on this visit but . . . Have you seen him?”

“Actually, yes. He was good.”

“Good enough or really good?”

“Really good. A proper leading man. His voice was flawless, his stage presence commanding,” I take a breath. “I just wanted him to dance more—”

“Knowing what he’s capable of?” She gets a glint in her eye.

“Exactly!” I grin. “He was wearing this white granddad shirt and braces the whole time. I just wanted him to do a *Dancing with the Stars* turn and whip off his baggy trousers—”

“And the glitterball comes down from the ceiling . . .”

“And he unleashes his Latin shimmy!”

We take a moment to picture the scene and then Pamela sighs, “He seems a good chap, you know, decent.”

“He does,” I agree.

Both of us look a little wistful.

For a second I think I might ask after Pamela’s husband, but seeing as I only know him from the press pictures of him tasting her latest bakery goodie, I realize I would just come across as nosey.

“So.” I clasp my hands together, ready to seal the deal. “Is there anything else I should know before I start planning?”

“Oh, there is one thing I forgot to mention!”

I blink expectantly.

“We’ll be traveling in a double-decker bus.”

I blink some more.

“You know, one of those classic red London busses.”

“You want me to source a London bus here in New York?” I gulp.

“Oh no. It’s already arranged. You don’t have to worry about that. Just the route. And the hotels. And the cake shops. And the cafés. And the bakers. And the recipes. And the ingredients. And the history. And the general logistics.”

“Yes, yes, that’s fine. But, back to the bus. Where exactly is it?”

“Newport, Rhode Island.”

I take out my laptop and go straight to Google Maps. Approximately four hours’ drive. Mostly along the coast of Connecticut.

“So would you be happy to be in another kind of vehicle until we get there, or will you need it to be in New York itself?”

“Oh no. It’s fine to collect it there. I’m sure it would be a liability here. Besides, it’s not like we need it for continuity. No TV crew to please.”

“Well, that certainly makes it easier. Though now you mention it, this would make a great TV series . . .”

“I know. I just didn’t fancy being in front of the camera at the moment.”

“Oh.” I nod understanding.

“And it’s not just my weight, it requires a lot of energy when you’re filming. You’ve always got to be ‘on.’”

“Yes.”

“It’s not the right time for me to do that kind of project.” Her voice sounds a little tremulous.

“That’s okay,” I quickly assure her. “We’ll focus on making this the best book it can be.” I give her an encouraging smile. “I think it’s going to be a wonderful trip.”

“Really?” Her eyes search mine.

“Yes,” I confirm, telling her what she most wants to hear. “A real tonic.” I look down at my list. “So. We just need a driver. For the bus.”

“Oh no, that’s covered too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My mum’s going to do it.”

My jaw gapes. “Your mother?”

I do a quick calculation in my head. Her mother has to be in her seventies, maybe even eighties . . . Gearing up to drive a thousand or so miles of unfamiliar terrain. On the wrong side of the road.

“She’s got new glasses and everything.”

“Oh good,” I quell a splutter.

Surely she must know this is madness? Should I speak up? She seems so blasé about it, like her mother is the obvious choice, the latest road-tester on *Top Gear*. I'm still trying to word my concern while Pamela is already on to the next:

"So we can share a room and then get one for you, obviously."

"Same location?" I check that she's not expecting me to be down the road in the local Motel 6.

"Of course. I'll need you on hand round the clock."

Why does that concern me more?

"Everything else, we'll e-mail to you—the budget, the contract, all the business side of things. If that's all right?"

I nod dumbly.

"Well." She looks at her watch. "I have to get going but it was lovely to meet you, Laurie!" she reaches to shake my hand. "And I'll see you in a little under two weeks."

"Excuse me?" I balk.

"Oh. We didn't even discuss dates, did we?" She gives a "silly me!" tinkle.

"No, we didn't get to that."

The mention of Christmas seemed reassuringly far off, but of course books typically have to go to press way in advance and it is already June.

"We're arriving on the fifteenth of this month," she taps my calendar. "Is that enough time for you to make all the arrangements?"

No.

"Yes, yes, of course."

No sooner is she out the door than I call Krista.

"I'm freaking out!"

Chapter 4

Realizing that high-pitched panic is neither appropriate nor welcome at Lady M, I cross over to Central Park and bring Krista up to speed while hurtling toward the turtle pond.

"Okay. Breathe," she counsels me. "You're a pro."

"You do realize that, in European terms, that's like researching six different countries in a matter of days?"

"Well, I can at least do two."

“What do you mean?” I frown.

“Why don’t you let me sort Vermont and New Hampshire for you—they’re just across the border from here. If I have to, I can drive there to check out the cake scene.”

“Really?”

“I’ve got a map right in front of me. It can’t be more than five hours.”

“You’d do that?”

“You know I would, and I’d love it too.”

“Oh Krista, you’re an angel.” I close my eyes and let the dizzying hysteria subside.

“Anything in particular I should know?” she asks, already raring to go. “Tastes? Preferences?”

“Well.” I locate a bench and flick back through my notes. “She mentioned having something maple syrup-themed for Vermont.”

“I know a thing or two about that.”

“Of course!” I laugh happily, recalling that her fella Jacques switches to maple syrup tapping when the snow season ends.

“Oh my god!” Krista blurts. “I’ve just thought of somewhere I’ve been dying to go!”

“Where?”

“In Vermont—the Trapp Family Lodge.”

“Sounds like something from *The Sound of Music*.”

“It is! After they escaped the Nazis, this is where they set up home.”

“Right . . .” I frown. “Where’s the cake connection?”

“Maria’s Linzertorte. They make it there from her original recipe.”

“It’s supposed to be American recipes.”

“Well, it’s the American *dream*, isn’t it? Come on!”

“I’ll think about it. What about New Hampshire? I don’t really know what that state is famous for—except for Mitt Romney.” I pull a face.

Krista gives a little chuckle. “Did you hear about the bakery that makes the presidential cookies? They do a red border for Republican, blue for Democrat and then stencil on the face of the respective candidate in the middle.”

“Really?”

“They’ve been doing it for the past seven elections and every time they correctly predict who will win based

on the number of cookies sold—the percentages even match up!”

“And they’re in New Hampshire?” This could be fun.

“Ohio.”

“Oh.”

“Hold on, Jacques just got in. *Chéri!*” She calls to him.

Their voices are muffled across the room. I look around me, wondering how loudly I’ve been talking and what on earth an eavesdropper would make of our conversation. One of the turtles does look particularly bemused. I’m becoming transfixed by his beaky-gummy mouth when Krista rejoins me.

“Well, this sounds promising—a year or two ago, Jacques went to a friend’s wedding at the Mount Washington Resort. Can you check it out on your phone?”

“Wow,” I say as the pictures come into view. “Talk about presidential! This place is stunning.”

“Kind of like a mountain version of the Hotel del Coronado,” Krista notes, comparing the grand white building and distinctive red roofing. “I’m betting they do a lovely afternoon tea there.” I hear a rattling of keys. “Oh my god! They do three: The Victorian, The Royal and The Mad Hatter.”

“Mad Hatter for sure,” I cheer, picturing Pamela seated between the White Rabbit and the Red Queen.

“Wait. That’s just for kids under ten: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“Oh.”

“You want The Royal, that’s the one with the champagne. And it’s served in the Princess Room. How divine!”

“You’re brilliant!” I whoop. “I feel so much better already.”

“I’m here for you, kiddo.”

“Thank you,” I sigh.

“Seriously, don’t worry about a thing. It’s going to be a piece of cake!”

I give a little snort. “Did I mention that we’re traveling in a London bus, driven by her half-blind, aging mother?”

Silence.

“Krista?”

“You might want to double up on the travel insurance.”

And so begins an all-consuming blur of Googling, cross-referencing, route-planning, hotel-pricing, negotiating, scheduling and salivating. All those online images of cakes with their glistening richness and perfectly piped fondant swirls! There was one Ice Cream Sundae Cupcake that was drizzled with chocolate sauce, scattered with sprinkles and topped with a glacé cherry! I could barely keep from licking my laptop screen.

By day three I find my cupboards to be bare (I work from home), so I part with my pajamas and hole up in a back-room nook at Bread (my favorite local Little Italy café) and enjoy the convenience of having a steady stream of lattes and nibbles delivered to my table, literally from breakfast till close at midnight. (Highly recommend an apple-pie Martini to revive one's flagging fingertips around 7 P.M.) Every now and again I find something so cool I can barely keep from grabbing the waitress—"Look at this! We're going to the place where the doughnut hole was invented!"

At least Krista is always good for a squeal. I do my due diligence and check out her suggestions for New Hampshire and Vermont and I have to say they can't be bettered! She's even going to meet up with us at the Trapp Family Lodge as it's the last destination on the itinerary.

"I have to be there to see Pamela's face when she checks out the view from the on-site bakery. The hills are alive, I'm telling you!"

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