



It happened for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon, a warm spring day in the flatlands near Hollywood, a light breeze moving east from the ocean and stirring the black-eyed pansy petals newly planted in our flower boxes.

My mother was home, baking me a cake. When I tripped up the walkway, she opened the front door before I could knock.

How about a practice round? she said, leaning past the door frame. She pulled me in for a hello hug, pressing me close to my favorite of her aprons, the worn cotton one trimmed in sketches of twinned red cherries.

On the kitchen counter, she'd set out the ingredients: Flour bag, sugar box, two brown eggs nestled in the grooves between tiles. A yellow block of butter blurring at the edges. A shallow glass bowl of lemon peel. I toured the row. This was the week of my ninth birthday, and it had been a long day at school of curative lessons, which I hated, and playground yelling about point scoring, and the sunlit kitchen and my warm-eyed mother were welcome arms, open. I dipped a finger into the wax baggie of brown-sugar crystals, murmured yes, please, yes.

She said there was about an hour to go, so I pulled out my

spelling booklet. Can I help? I asked, spreading out pencils and papers on the vinyl place mats.

Nah, said Mom, whisking the flour and baking soda together.

My birthday is in March, and that year it fell during an especially bright spring week, vivid and clear in the narrow residential streets where we lived just a handful of blocks south of Sunset. The night-blooming jasmine that crawled up our neighbor's front gate released its heady scent at dusk, and to the north, the hills rolled charmingly over the horizon, houses tucked into the brown. Soon, daylight savings time would arrive, and even at nearly nine, I associated my birthday with the first hint of summer, with the feeling in classrooms of open windows and lighter clothing and in a few months no more homework. My hair got lighter in spring, from light brown to nearly blond, almost like my mother's ponytail tassel. In the neighborhood gardens, the agapanthus plants started to push out their long green robot stems to open up to soft purples and blues.

Mom was stirring eggs; she was sifting flour. She had one bowl of chocolate icing set aside, another with rainbow sprinkles.

A cake challenge like this wasn't a usual afternoon activity; my mother didn't bake all that often, but what she enjoyed most was anything tactile, and this cake was just one in a long line of recent varied hands-on experiments. In the last six months, she'd coaxed a strawberry plant into a vine, stitched doilies from vintage lace, and in a burst of motivation installed an oak side door in my brother's bedroom with the help of a hired contractor.

She'd been working as an office administrator, but she didn't like copy machines, or work shoes, or computers, and when my father paid off the last of his law school debt, she asked him if she could take some time off and learn to do more with her hands. My hands, she told him, in the hallway, leaning her hips against his; my hands have had no lessons in anything.

Anything? he'd asked, holding tight to those hands. She laughed, low. Anything *practical*, she said.

They were right in the way, in the middle of the hall, as I was leaping from room to room with a plastic leopard. Excuse me, I said.

He breathed in her hair, the sweet-smelling thickness of it. My father usually agreed with her requests, because stamped in his two-footed stance and jaw was the word Provider, and he loved her the way a bird-watcher's heart leaps when he hears the call of the roseate spoonbill, a fluffy pink wader, calling its lilting coo-coo from the mangroves. Check, says the bird-watcher. Sure, said my father, tapping a handful of mail against her back.

Rah, said the leopard, heading back to its lair.

At the kitchen table, I flipped through my workbook, basking in the clicking sounds of a warming oven. If I felt a hint of anything unsettling, it was like the sun going swiftly behind a cloud only to shine straight seconds later. I knew vaguely that my parents had had an argument the night before, but parents had arguments all the time, at home and on TV. Plus, I was still busily going over the bad point scoring from lunch, called by Eddie Oakley with the freckles, who never called fairly. I read through my spelling booklet: knack, knick, knot; cartwheel, wheelbarrow,

wheelie. At the counter, Mom poured thick yellow batter into a greased cake pan, and smoothed the top with the flat end of a pink plastic spatula. She checked the oven temperature, brushed a sweaty strand of hair off her forehead with the knob of her wrist.

Here we go, she said, slipping the cake pan into the oven.

When I looked up, she was rubbing her eyelids with the pads of her fingertips. She blew me a kiss and said she was going to lie down for a little bit. Okay, I nodded. Two birds bickered outside. In my booklet, I picked the person doing a cartwheel and colored her shoes with red laces, her face a light orange. I made a vow to bounce the ball harder on the playground, and to bounce it right into Eddie Oakley's corner. I added some apples to the wheelbarrow freehand.

The room filled with the smell of warming butter and sugar and lemon and eggs, and at five, the timer buzzed and I pulled out the cake and placed it on the stovetop. The house was quiet. The bowl of icing was right there on the counter, ready to go, and cakes are best when just out of the oven, and I really couldn't possibly wait, so I reached to the side of the cake pan, to the least obvious part, and pulled off a small warm spongy chunk of deep gold. Iced it all over with chocolate. Popped the whole thing into my mouth.