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The Gingerbread Bakery

THE GINGERBREAD BAKERY

Dream Harbor Series

Book 5

LAURIE GILMORE



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Chapter One

Now

Annie Andrews liked most people. She was friendly and outgoing, very involved in Dream Harbor affairs, never missed a town meeting, supported local business with a fierce loyalty, and ran the Dream Harbor High alumni committee. In high school she was voted most school-spirited and most likely to become president. Her bakery was a beloved, town institution and had won 'best window display' three Christmases in a row. She babysat for her nieces and nephews, she dutifully petted every dog she passed on her morning walks, and she'd had the same best friend since kindergarten, which she felt spoke highly of her character. Frankly, she was a freaking delight.

There was one person, however, that her delightfulness simply could not extend to. One human on this planet that she *could not* be nice to. Mostly because she didn't want to. Mostly because she hated him.

And for the next three days, she was stuck with him.

'Annie,' Hazel hissed, nudging her shoulder. 'You're glaring again.'

She *was* glaring again. Right at the stupid face of Macaulay Sullivan. And she would have kept glaring until his head went up in flames if it weren't for the fact that they were at Jeanie and Logan's *rehearsal before the rehearsal* brunch, which was not even a thing but Jeanie wanted a mini-celebration with just the wedding party before the craziness of the wedding weekend really kicked off this evening with the actual rehearsal dinner. And who would deny the bride her wish? Not Annie. Because Annie was a nice person. Unlike some people.

Mac winked at her like he was reading her thoughts.

'I object,' she blurted out, interrupting Logan's very brief, very gruff thank-you speech to his groomsmen. The group was currently crowded around a table at The Strawberry Patch Pancake House. Unfortunately, it was rather dead at 11 a.m. on this particular Friday in December, so the whole table heard the words she hadn't actually been meaning to say out loud.

Logan, Jeanie, Hazel, Noah, Kira and Bennett all turned to look at her. Mac smirked. Annie barely restrained herself from reaching across the table and strangling him.

'I don't think this is the part you get to object to,' Noah pointed out with a grin. Hazel elbowed him in the side, and he yelped.

'You don't think we should get married?' Logan asked, brow scrunched like he was working through a puzzle, because why the hell wouldn't she want her best friend and

his lovely fiancée to promise to love each other in front of the whole town?

'No! Of course, I don't think that! That's not ... I didn't ... that's not what I was talking about.'

'Then what were you talking about, *Annabelle?*' Mac asked, his stupid smirk smirking even harder.

'You! I was talking about you!' She was nearly shouting now and several patrons from other tables were turning in her direction. 'I object to you being part of the wedding party,' she said, lowering her voice and leaning across the table toward him, narrowly avoiding her syrupy plate. 'I don't know how you weaseled your way in here. You were never friends with Logan. You *bullied* him.'

Mac put up his hands in defense. 'First of all,' he said. 'I didn't bully him. Some good-natured teasing, maybe.'

'You called him Old MacDonald all through second grade! You 'e-i, e-i, oed' at him every time you walked by!'

Mac shook his head. 'How do you even remember all this shit, Annie? Do you have a little notebook where you write down every offense I ever committed?'

Annie scoffed. 'Wouldn't you love it if I cared about what you did that much?'

'Well, you seem to.'

'Ha! I couldn't care less about you, *Macaulay*. I just don't understand why you're even here... Ow! Haze, why are you jabbing me with your pointy elbows... Oh.' Annie looked up to find Jeanie looking at her with tears in her eyes. Shit. She'd made the bride cry.

'Is it going to be like this all weekend? I just wanted us all to have a good time.' Jeanie sniffled and Logan looked

like he may actually strangle Annie, if she didn't fix this immediately.

'No, no, no. We'll behave. Right, Mac?'

'Yep. Best behavior. Promise.' He crossed his heart, and Annie had to bite back every word she wanted to say about how Mac's promises were worthless. But her friends still had no idea why she hated Mac so much, and she sure as hell wasn't about to tell them. And besides, she'd just made a promise to Jeanie to behave like the grown adult she was. And *her* promises did mean something.

She could suck it up for a few days. She could resist her urge to throttle the man across from her for a mere seventy-two hours. For her best friends, she could do it. Logan had been like a brother to her since they were five. With Hazel, they were inseparable. And now Annie loved Jeanie just as much. She would not screw up their wedding weekend.

'Really, Jeanie. I'm sorry. I will keep all Mac-related commentary in my head from now on.'

The entire table, including Mac, looked skeptical.

'I'm serious! I will put all my personal feelings aside for the weekend.'

Bennett leaned toward Kira and whispered, 'Do we know why she has such strong personal feelings?'

Kira shrugged. 'Complicated history?' she whispered back.

'Not complicated,' Annie cut in. 'We don't have any history at all.'

Mac flinched at that, something like sadness or regret flickering in his eyes. But Annie didn't dwell on it. She couldn't. Not if she wanted to keep her sanity. She pushed a smile onto her face and turned back to Jeanie.

'Nothing is complicated. In fact, it's all quite simple. Two of the people we all love most in the world are getting married. And we,' Annie gestured to the table of friends in front of her. 'Are going to make sure it's the best wedding weekend ever.'

'Good,' said Logan. 'Because Mac is here as one of *my* groomsmen. Some of us have put second grade behind us.'

Annie was getting nauseous from all the words she was swallowing, but she did it. For her friends. For the sake of this wedding, she would not say that it went far beyond second grade for her. 'Of course,' she said instead. 'Mac's your friend. I get it.' She raised her glass of orange juice and everyone joined in.

'To Logan and Jeanie.'

'Cheers!'

Everyone clinked their plastic, juice glasses together, and Annie was relieved to see the smile back on Jeanie's face and a slightly less murderous expression on Logan's. Phew. Wedding-crisis number one averted. Sure, she was the one who started it, but at least she'd fixed it.

No thanks to Mac.

Her gaze flicked back across the table to where he sat, laughing with Bennett and Kira. It didn't help matters that he was still as infuriatingly handsome as he had been in high school. Not that she would have admitted it at the time.

She'd never been friends with Mac. They'd never made sense together.

It was exactly what she'd told him eleven years ago.

But Mac had never been good at listening.

Chapter Two

Then

Mac wandered aimlessly through the stalls at the Dream Harbor Christmas market. There was just under a month until Christmas and he needed a gift for his mom. A *good* gift. And this seemed like as good a place to shop as any. They set up the market every year after the tree-lighting festival, but Mac hadn't been since he was a kid.

He was determined to get his mom a real present this year. At nineteen, he figured he could no longer get away with crappy, homemade gifts. Even though his mom still insisted on hanging that wonky reindeer-ornament he made her in kindergarten and would probably do the same if he made her an equally deformed ornament right now. It was time he leveled up his gift-giving game.

Unfortunately, aimless wandering seemed to be all he was doing lately. Six months out of high school and he was

still stuck in this stupid town, still living in his childhood bedroom, still without any plan for his future. Or a plan for next week, even. Mac was adrift.

He stopped at The Pumpkin Spice Café stand and was greeted with a big smile from Dot, the owner.

'Hello there, Macaulay. Merry Christmas.'

There were very few people who could get away with using his full, objectively terrible, name. And Dot was one of them. Dot had always been kind to him even when he didn't deserve it.

'Hey, Dot.'

'What can I get you?' she asked, her enormous jingle-bell earrings tinkling merrily with the movement of her head.

'How about a hot chocolate?'

'Extra marshmallows?'

'Please.'

As soon as she handed him the red to-go cup overflowing with marshmallows and a candy cane hooked on the side, he felt completely absurd. This was a child's drink. And Mac was trying desperately to figure out how to be a grown-ass man.

Unfortunately, it was very hard to feel grown up when your mother was still the one doing your laundry.

He needed to move out. To move away. He was feeling increasingly suffocated by this town and their preconceived notions about him.

'Thanks, Dot,' he muttered, taking his ridiculous drink with him, suddenly grateful that all his friends were away at school and wouldn't see him carrying this sugary confection around.

He took a sip. It was delicious, though. Hard to feel bad about anything with a mug full of cocoa in your hands.

Mac continued his stroll through the market, pausing every now and then at a crafter's table in an attempt to find the perfect gift. It wasn't an entirely selfless act. He was hoping a thoughtful gift would help soften the blow when he told his parents his new plan. Well, it wasn't so much a plan as a general notion. An idea to wander somewhere other than Dream Harbor. His half-baked thought that he could drive cross-country to help him figure out what the hell to do with his life. He figured several months in a car by himself would help with that.

A familiar face snagged his attention.

Annabelle Andrews sat in front of him in fifth-period Economics. Or she did last year, anyway, before they'd both graduated. He'd spent a lot of the year resisting the urge to tug on her sleek ponytail and he only occasionally poked her in the back with the eraser end of his pencil to ask her what assignment they had due that day. She'd always answered with an exasperated sigh, like he was disappointing her in every way.

He'd gone to school with Annie since they were five and she had never liked him, so in fairness, he had never liked her, either. She was a classic over-achiever, the type who practically begged the teacher for extra credit, whereas he preferred to achieve just enough to pass. Unless it was on the lacrosse field. That was where he was more than happy to give it all he had. Not that Annabelle Andrews gave a shit about sports. Or the people that played them.

Not that he cared what she cared about.

And here she was, still in town, just like him. Interesting.

She was set up at a table with a sign on the front reading *Annie's Baked Goods*. An assortment of Christmas cookies wrapped in holiday cellophane were displayed on the table. Mac waited while an older couple picked out some cookies and paid a smiling Annie. The smile dropped when she saw him standing there.

'Annabelle,' he said, dipping his head in acknowledgment.

'It's Annie, and you know it. What are you even doing here?'

He shrugged, wishing he'd tossed his stupid marshmallow-topped drink before this encounter. 'Shopping. What are you doing here? I figured you'd be off at Harvard or something like that.'

Annie scowled. 'This isn't some teen movie where everyone goes to an Ivy League school at the end. My family has six kids. Do you really think they can afford for me to go to Harvard?' She rolled her eyes like he was an idiot—one of the many habits that unsurprisingly made him not like her very much.

'My mistake,' he ground out. 'I just wasn't expecting to see you running a *bake sale* after all that extra homework you did in Econ.'

Annie slapped her hands onto the table and leaned forward. A slight flush had worked its way up her pale cheeks in a way Mac chose not to find appealing.

'This bake sale is the start of my new business venture. I'm taking business classes at the community college and selling cookies from an online shop for now. But give it a few years and you'll see. I'll be a very successful small-business owner.'

He didn't doubt that for a second, but he wasn't about to admit it.

'Wow, I guess you have it all figured out.'

'I do, actually,' she said with a smug smile. 'And what about you? Just hanging around Dream Harbor letting your mom cook and clean for you?'

He scoffed as if that was absurd, even though it was one hundred percent true.

'Actually, I'm outta here after the holidays.'

'Really?'

'Yep. Heading cross-country.' The half-assed plan he'd been brewing in his head was cemented as soon as he spoke the words out loud.

'Heading to what?'

'It's about the journey not the destination,' he said, and instantly regretted how *douchey* that sounded.

Annie raised her eyebrows, but surprisingly didn't call him out on that bullshit answer.

'So, are you going to buy some cookies, or what?'

'Uh ... yeah. I'll take some of the gingerbread ones.'

Annie gave him a genuine smile and, for a second, he felt like he couldn't breathe.

'Those are my specialty,' she said, handing him the small bag. 'Try one.'

She waited while he opened the package and took out a small gingerbread man with icing features and buttons. Mac bit his head off.

It was quite possibly the best cookie he'd ever had. Spicy and sweet with just the right amount of crunch.

'Damn, Annie. This is delicious.'

She beamed and he nearly choked on his cookie. For