

Callie and the Pumpkin Seed Bonus Epilogue

“Recipe for a Queen”

The setting was foreign, but the pull of Callie's spoon through the thick batter and the comforting smell of warm spices and melted butter was familiar. The castle kitchen—far bigger and less homey than Sweetpea's—was filled with the warm, dying light of the late afternoon that filtered in through the windows. The air outside was as crisp as the apples she had set aside to make into a crumble, but it was cozy and snug inside thanks to the large oven and the crackling fire in the hearth.

Callie lifted her spoon, testing the consistency of the batter as it fell back into the bowl. "This needs a loaf pan, I think," she commented to the ball of fluffy white fur at her feet.

Creampuff's ears perked up at her words, and he cocked his head to the side, watching her with his adoring brown eyes and wagging his tail hopefully.

"No, you will not get a taste. You already have half the kitchen staff sneaking you scraps."

He whined.

"Fine. I'll let you have a lick if you can help me find the pan I need." She set the bowl down on the long counter and looked around the room helplessly. "This isn't Sweetpea's; I don't know where anything is in here."

The motivation behind her late-afternoon baking spree came back to her in a rush, and Callie's shoulders slumped forward. "It seems to be the theme of the day: I don't know what I'm doing—not here, and certainly not in the throne room. I'm not sure whose idea it was to take a baker and give her a tiara."

"Mine, I'm fairly certain." Ever's voice broke through her melancholy as he appeared in the doorway. He looked dashing and proper in his dark, expertly tailored jacket and crisp trousers, with a smooth, shaven face and neatly combed hair. He presented a much different picture as he leaned against the doorframe than the man who had appeared on her step almost a year and a half before. Though her heart still fluttered when he met her eyes, it was also just another reminder of how much her life had changed.

"Yes, well, your decision-making skills aren't to be trusted. You tried to find your wife using a shoe." Callie tried to hide her emotions with the joke as she turned to a row of cabinets and began searching through each one for the elusive loaf pan.

"My *solemate* ran away from me at the ball. Drastic steps had to be taken. I still think it was the best decision I've ever made."

His footsteps approached and a moment later she felt his arms wrapping around her waist from behind. Ever's chin rested comfortably on her shoulder. "What are you looking for?"

Callie's eyes finally landed on the object of her search. She pulled it out, holding it up like a prize. "This."

She walked out of Ever's arms and back to her abandoned bowl. Creampuff's tail thumped wildly on the floor in greeting.

"What are you making?" her husband asked curiously as he knelt on the floor to give the waiting pup his desired affection.

"I don't know." The spoon clinked against the side of the bowl as she scraped the last bit of batter into the pan.

"You don't know?"

"Well, it was going to be pumpkin bread, but I didn't realize until after I started making it that there is an appalling lack of pumpkin in your pantry. I had to improvise."

Ever rose and brushed his hands together before unbuttoning his jacket and tossing it over the top of a nearby stool. "I will personally ensure the hole in our pumpkin supply is patched up." He started rolling his sleeves as he crossed the room to the basin of dishwater.

"No, it's fine, Ever. You don't have to cause anyone extra trouble on my account."

He looked over his shoulder and winked at her. "It's no trouble at all. Now that you're here, I have an excuse to request pumpkin desserts at all times of the year."

Callie could only muster a soft hum in response. They fell into companionable silence as she sprinkled a crumbly mixture of butter, flour, cinnamon, and sugar over the batter and slid the pan into the oven. She collected her dirty dishes and dropped them in the soapy dishwater before grabbing a dishtowel.

"What's wrong?" Ever passed her a mixing bowl.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not at Sweetpea's, which means this wasn't planned baking."

"So?"

"So, you bake when you're stressed. Which, as Niall pointed out, is fitting, since 'stressed' spelled backwards is 'desserts.'"

Callie blinked. "Why does Niall know that? And since when does your brother care about my baking habits?"

Ever shrugged. "Probably because he's so worried about getting everything right that he takes notes and then goes over them backwards and forwards. As to why he cares about your baking, I would imagine it has to do with the fact that he realized the common link between himself and a certain dressmaker is you." He looked at her with a mischievous grin and waggled his eyebrows. "Do you think there's a thread of hope for him?"

Callie chuckled. "Considering the fact that Faye has been nursing a similar infatuation with him since the wedding, I would think so. The real question is whether or not she'll stop riling him up long enough for him to work up the courage to say something."

"Or," Ever stretched the word out dramatically, "Niall could steal one of her gloves and declare that he will only marry the woman—"

"Lots of women have the same size hands, Ever. Don't make your mother put together a princess test again so quickly."

"Of course not! I was going to say, '*who has the other glove.*' I'm not entirely hopeless." He bumped her with his elbow. "And besides, it would be unfair to force Faye to go through a test like that so soon after you. She's lovely, but she wouldn't be able to compare."

Callie scoffed as she took a whisk from him and began carefully drying each tine, more as a way to keep her hands busy than from necessity. "Yes, because she would probably be much more qualified. Faye already knows most of the members of the court from her business, and she knows how to dress and how to act around them. She wouldn't need hours of tutoring and etiquette lessons just to ensure she doesn't make a laughingstock of the crown. She wouldn't have to be afraid that she'll never measure up."

Her voice dropped to a whisper as tears pooled in her eyes, hot and stinging, and a hard lump formed in the back of her throat.

"Of course you'll measure up. You measure every day." Ever lifted a measuring cup from the soapy water and held it up. She knew his teasing voice and grin were intended to make her feel better, but instead of laughing, Callie choked down a sob.

Concern and compassion quickly replaced the humor in his eyes. Ever dropped the utensil back into the water and took the whisk and towel from her hands, drying his in the process. He set them to the side and pulled her into his arms. "What's going on, Cal?"

She pressed her forehead into his shoulder and squeezed her eyes shut, valiantly fighting to keep the tears from leaking out and soaking his shirt. "I don't know if I can do this, Ever. It's been a year but there's still so much that I don't know, and it's all overwhelming. I'm just a baker, not a princess. I don't know what in all of Vallens made you and your mother think that I would ever be fit to be a queen."

He said nothing for a long moment, rubbing slow, soothing circles on her back as she worked to bring her emotions back under control. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "I think it's time."

Callie wrinkled her nose in confusion as he stepped away, running his hands down her arms until he reached her hands. "Time for what?"

Ever walked backwards and pulled her towards the center of the kitchen. "Do you remember the morning after the Choosing Ball?"

"You mean the morning that you finally kissed me?" Callie couldn't help the fond smile that formed.

He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “A kiss so memorable that it outranks even the fact that you found out you got to keep your bakery.” He stopped and dropped a quick reminder on her lips, then stood back, keeping an arm’s length of distance between them. “But do you remember what else I said?”

“That you interpret every treat I bake you as an expression of my love?”

“Also true. But I was referring to the fact that I complained about the fact that I prepared a heartfelt proposal to give to you in front of everyone, but you ran away.”

Her heart stuttered, and her eyes filled up with tears again, though not of sadness this time. She gave him a watery smile. “You don’t have to propose, Ever. We’re already married.”

Ever’s eyes were warm with affection. He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “We are. But it was *very* heartfelt, and I put a lot of effort into it.”

A laugh escaped her. “Well, I suppose it would be a shame if I never got to hear it, then. But why wait until now?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I was waiting for the right time.” He dropped her left hand and fished around in his pocket before pulling out a piece of folded paper.

Callie’s jaw dropped. “You just happen to have it with you?”

“You never know when it might be the right time.” Ever winked and unfolded the paper. “I’m sure you might be expecting a long speech, but I know you well enough to confidently say that baking is the way to your heart. However, since my talents lie in taste-testing, I would like to share a recipe with you.”

“A recipe?”

“Step one: combine sparkling, honey eyes with soft hair the color of autumn leaves.” Ever let go of her other hand to twirl the end of a wayward strand around his finger. “Add a dusting of freckles and pink, very kissable lips.” He ran his thumb down the bridge of her nose and let it rest on her mouth.

“That is very specific,” Callie whispered against his finger.

“You’re the one who taught me that baking requires attention to detail. Step two: Mix in a heart that overflows with love for the people around her—even those who are completely undeserving of such affection—and an inability to allow anyone to go hungry.” He reclaimed her hand and pulled her a step closer. “Stir to combine with an unwavering work ethic and an eye to see value in the poor and humble. Add a heaping helping of joy and optimism, and top with a love of all things pumpkin. Bake for approximately twenty-three years.”

Creampuff, feeling left out of their affectionate display, jumped up and put his paws on Ever’s knees. Ever broke eye contact with Callie just long enough to look down at the dog and chuckle. “Serve alongside an adorable ball of fluff and fur.”

The white dog danced with excited paws and wagged his tail.

Callie reached down to scratch the soft fur behind his ears. “That’s an interesting recipe. I’m still not sure what it’s for.”

“Aren’t you?” Ever tugged her back up. He slipped the paper back into his pocket and closed the distance between them, looping his arms around her waist. Her hands rested on his chest, right over the heart that she adored more than anything in the world. “I’m surprised; I would have thought an experienced baker like you would recognize a recipe for a queen when she heard it.”

She started to shake her head. “That’s not—”

He held a finger to her lips. “You can’t argue with the recipe, Cal. You were made to be queen. Your heart for the people of Vallens and your dedication to their well-being are more important than anything else. The etiquette and politics are icing on the cake, extras that can be learned and added later. No one expects you to be perfect right now. You shouldn’t try to judge a cookie before it’s baked.”

“Oh, so I’m a cookie now?”

“You are a princess and the queen of my heart,” he corrected, resting his forehead against hers. “The recipe said so.”

Callie toyed with the buttons on his shirt. “You seem to have become quite the expert baker.”

“No,” he answered with a warmth in his eyes and a roguish smirk that made her toes curl. He leaned in and whispered against her mouth, “I’m still just a taste-tester. You just happen to be my favorite recipe.”