

MIRANDA LIASSON

the
SWEETHEART
DEAL

*"An absolute
sweetheart of a book!"*

—USA Today bestselling
author Amy Andrews



CHAPTER ONE

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The moon brings the man. That's what Grandma Sophie would say.

Tessa Montgomery shook her head at the thought. If the moon was supposed to bring her a man, he must have gotten lost along the way.

She wheeled the giant rack full of warm baguettes up next to the scarred wooden front counter of Bonjour! Breads. It was only six p.m. in the middle of May, but the moon was already visible, huge, hanging over Main Street like it was peeking into the windows of her family's hundred-year-old boulangerie. *A romantic moon.*

But for Tessa, there was no romance in sight, and there hadn't been in quite a while. Not since last summer, when her fiancé left her for someone else.

While Tessa didn't believe the moon-man connection, she had to admit that the big round *boule* in the sky sure was beautiful. Although, she thought wistfully, it *was* a shame not to have someone to share it with.

The bell above the door tinkled, and she put on her usual customer-friendly smile. Which was sometimes difficult when she had to endure a lot of sad headshaking and endless questions about being dumped. Yes, still, even after almost a year.

That was the thing about a small town—the first thing you did in your life that was gossip-worthy became the defining trait of your existence.

She breathed a sigh of relief, though, as her favorite customer walked into the empty bakery. “Good evening, Arthur,” she said to the older gentleman who came in every Tuesday like clockwork. At least *he* was a man she could count on.

Tessa leaned over the countertop to address the little Yorkie that had strolled in with him. “Hello to you, too, Millie.”

The dog put her paws up on the glass of the display case and wagged her tail.

“I have just the thing for you.” Tessa handed Arthur the freshly made latte and egg-and-cheese croissant she'd already bagged, his usual Tuesday dinner, and grabbed a dog biscuit for Millie. As Tessa walked around the counter and stooped down, Millie daintily plucked the treat from her palm.

Tessa patted her head. “She's such a lady.”

“So are you, Tessa,” Arthur said, beaming.

She glanced up at him. “Aw, thanks. Where are all the nice guys when you need them?”

Not in Blossom Glen, Indiana, that was for sure, where the biggest attraction was the new scents reveal from the famous candle factory across the street. Although, to be fair, visiting with her regular customers was one of the things she loved the most about their little town. And the rows of crab apple trees that lined Main Street, now in glorious bloom with rich pink flowers, that gave their town its name.

“I don't believe for one second that stuff they're saying about you.”

She held up her hands in mock protest. “I swear I only spent five years in prison,” she said jokingly. “An honest mistake.” But inside, her heart sank. Because she already knew what everyone said behind her back. Phrases like *such a shame*, and even *spinster*, now that she was thirty-two and single. And stuck in Blossom Glen, Indiana, baking bread twenty-four seven.

“You’re not an Ice Queen,” he said. “You just need someone who understands you.”

Ice Queen. She hadn’t heard that one yet. Well, could she help that the few guys in town who were her age were immature and foolish and she didn’t hesitate to let them know that?

Or, a little voice deep inside her seemed to say, was it because shooting one-liners at people was her best defense against being an object of pity?

“If only I were forty years younger,” Arthur said with a wink.

“Eighty *is* the new sixty,” she said with forced cheer. It wasn’t his fault she was stuck. Or that the only happily ever afters she’d be seeing were in romance novels or Hallmark movies.

He left his usual bill with a big tip, which she fought him on every time to no avail. “Okay, doll,” he said with a wink. “See you tomorrow.”

“Hey, Arthur, one more thing,” Tessa called just as he reached the door. She grabbed a flyer off the counter and ran it over to him. “The library’s having a botanical lecture this week about perennials. I was thinking it might be a fun place to meet someone who loves gardening as much as you do.”

“Thanks, honey,” he said. “The last woman I met online was nice, but she just wanted companionship.”

Tessa frowned. “What’s wrong with that?”

He grinned. “I may be eighty, but”—he dropped his voice—“my parts are still in working order.”

Okaayyy. That was TMI. “Have a nice night.” She shook her head as he left. “Great,” she said to herself when she was alone. “Even the eighty-year-olds around here have a better sex life than I do.”

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she’d arrived at the bakery at four thirty this morning and had been so busy she’d forgotten to eat lunch. She snuck a chocolate croissant from the case, the one sweet thing her mother would allow in the bakery because it was still bread.

The bell tinkling again caught her mid-chew. Wow, two customers in a row—the busiest they’d been in ages.

Turned out her excitement was unfounded as she looked up to see Sam Donovan, her ex-fiancé, stroll in.

He still wore his shirt and tie, no doubt just finishing his day at the candle factory. He looked a little tired, his thick hair tousled, as if he’d been raking his fingers through it during a stressful day in the accounting department.

In the past, she would have asked him how his day was. And if he was hungry. Listened to him discuss complicated problems in the accounting department as he got them off his chest. And his rumpled overworked-executive look would have made her heart flutter a little.

But not anymore.

“Hey, Tessa.” He flashed what she read as a guilty smile and pushed up his glasses. “How’re you doing?”

“Great,” she said with a forced smile. Could he not see he was the only customer in the shop? Even after a year, she still had to curb the urge to hit him on the head with a stale baguette. But she knew in her heart that even *that* wouldn’t install any sense.

“It’s still busy as ever over there.” He hitched a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the candle factory across the street. “I have at least another hour of work. Mr. Brighton’s cracking down, dumping all kinds of extra projects on me. It really sucks. Can I get a ham and cheese?”

She didn’t know why he came in here multiple times a week, clearly expecting her to soothe his worries, give him reassurance, and sympathize with his grievances. And pretend that they were still friends.

As she assembled the ingredients for his sandwich, she practiced calming breathing. It was easier to serve him and get him out of the bakery as soon as possible, because their town wasn’t big enough for her to handle more than one massive feud.

She’d grown up with her family giving the cold shoulder to the Castorinis next door, and that had been uncomfortable and awkward for as long as she could remember. She’d vowed never to let that happen with anyone in her own life.

“I was wondering if I could ask you something,” he said as she put his perfectly made sandwich in a bag. “Um, do you remember the name of that Italian restaurant in downtown Indy?”

“Which one?” She narrowed her eyes.

“I wanted to take Marcy to that rooftop one, but I couldn’t think of the name.”

“The one where you proposed to me?” She fought to keep her voice even.

Sam had the decency to blush. He should blush, because who would forget the name of the place where you proposed?

Forget about hitting him in the head with the baguette. She was now tempted to shove it somewhere dark and deep. Maybe that would keep him away. Because it was bad enough having to see your ex practically every day in their small town, but having to interact like this...the worst. “Google might know it,” she said, refusing to be hurt.

“Or should I take her to that other place—you know, that one that overlooks the river. With the great sunsets.”

The one where they’d celebrated her thirtieth birthday. “Sam, I think it’s kind of creepy to ask me for that kind of advice when you’re in a new relationship.”

“Well, we were friends for a long time, Tessa. And you always give such good advice.” He looked at her a little sheepishly. “I’m terrible at making these kinds of decisions.”

Tessa reached into the register and pulled out a quarter. “See this?”

“It’s a quarter.”

“Correct.” She reached out her hand and dropped it into his palm.

“How’s this going to help me?”

“You’re going to go home and flip it. That will help you decide.” She handed over his bagged loaf, even though she still felt like clubbing him with it. “Bye, Sam.”

“Thanks, Tessa.” His eyes darted around, indicating he was nervous.

She should’ve paid more attention to that shifty-eyed habit, because it probably would’ve let her know far earlier that he’d cheated on her.

Not to mention he’d been vocal about his dissatisfaction. He’d told her she wasn’t passionate. That she was hard to please, in bed and out. And he’d used those as excuses for his cheating. Which, a year later, still left her angry and hurt.

“Anything else?”

He took the sandwich and the coffee and left her the exact price, down to the fifty-three cents. Not that she wanted his tip, but his precise nitpickiness extended to...well, everything. “Thanks, Tessa. You make the best sandwiches.”

She fought not to roll her eyes. *Please leave now*, she thought but didn’t say. Instead she smiled.

“Seriously,” he said. “I mean it. I would never pretend with you.”

“Bye.” She opened the door and saw him out. “That’s funny, Sam,” she said to herself, finally letting out her anger as she leaned against the door. “Because I sure got good at faking it with you.”

As she headed to close out the register, she heard a faint chuckle. So faint she thought she’d imagined it. But then a chair scraped on the wood-planked floor as someone rose from the corner table, hidden from view by the bread rack beside the counter.

Oh no...

A man stepped into view, his back to her, but she could see he was tall and well built, jeans wrapping around muscular legs.

How long had he been there? How much had he heard? Surely *everything*. The early evening sun hit his wavy dark hair, making it shimmer with gold highlights until his big shoulders blocked it out.

And then her breath caught. Because as he turned and moved toward her, she recognized his stride, his athletic grace, and his big, warm eyes, the color of a fine espresso. The nose that would seem a little too big on another man but somehow fit his too-handsome face perfectly. And the defiant jaw that the men in his family couldn’t seem to avoid inheriting, right along with their stubborn natures.

Leo Castorini.

The son of the family who ran the Italian restaurant next door. For a flash, she was back in high school, watching him walk down the hall, his easygoing demeanor and good looks drawing her—and every girl—like a magnet.

And he wore that same smirk, like he was laughing at her. *Still*.

She’d had a terrible crush on him. He’d actually asked her out, even though they’d been in neck-and-neck competition for the candle factory scholarship. But stuff had happened, and she’d ended up learning that he’d never really liked her at all. He’d just been fake-pretending to be friendly with the competition, she guessed. And he’d laughed at her. Which had hurt more than losing the scholarship to him.

She could see herself as she was in school—the braces, the flyaway hair, the unruly brows, the ten pounds she wished she could shed. But all that had changed...contacts, a good haircut, the miracle of waxing, and the right clothing to complement her shape, thanks to input from her two sisters.

Leo sauntered up to the counter, which for some reason made her a lot more anxious than when Sam had done it.

“Hi, Tessa. Busy evening?” The deep tone of his voice vibrated clear through her in a way that put her even more on edge. Also, the years had been too kind to him. Little crinkles had formed around his eyes, making it seem like he laughed often, and he had a maturity in his physique that made him even more appealing.

But the place was empty besides the two of them. “You’re hilarious,” she said, deadpan.

Which wasn’t funny. But for some reason, he full-out grinned.

That feeling in her gut was *not* butterflies. She was just getting queasy from him pointing out their obvious lack of customers.

“Did someone die?” she asked.

His wide, big smile faltered a bit. “That’s a bit morbid, even for you.”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I’m sure your dad didn’t send you over for a cup of sugar.” Not when their families had been giving each other the cold shoulder since before she and Leo were born.

“No one died,” he said. That damn smile was back. Did he ever stop smiling? “I was just wondering if we could talk.”

She raised a brow. The last time they’d *talked*, it had been about the fact that their high school GPAs were .0004 points apart—but his was higher. After that, she’d spent the whole night kneading and baking away her frustration. She’d made more brioche than the entire town could have eaten in a year.

Technically, she would have beaten him for the top spot in their class.

But that *technically* was a whole other story. A secret she mostly wanted to forget.

Except it reminded her of his true character. Leo was like an éclair. Pretty and charming on the outside, but with a core that was all fluff and no substance.

As if sensing her apprehension, he threw his hands up, palms out. “Just talk.”

“Talk about what?”

“Business,” he said. “A business proposition.”

Well, this was interesting. But it was absolutely, positively not going to happen. Everyone in Blossom Glen was aware that the Montgomerys and Castorinis did *not* do business together, and Tessa and Leo knew that better than anyone. “Did you have a wine-tasting at your restaurant today? Are you drunk?”

“Sober as a preacher.” He lowered his voice and leaned forward a little. “This can benefit both our businesses. I think it’s worthwhile for you to hear me out.”

What was he up to? He’d made a fortune in New York, or so everyone said. And he’d been in town for a couple months now, helping his dad in their restaurant and managing a local apartment complex. Wasn’t he busy enough? And what did he want with her?

She couldn’t help but notice that he smelled really good. Whatever clovey-spicy shampoo he used to wash those jet-black locks was...practically edible. Though truthfully, she was easily impressed these days. She hadn’t been this close to a man who didn’t smell like yeast in quite a while.

Plus, she reminded herself, women had been falling at his feet for as long as she could remember. Which was why his friends used to call him Leo the Legend.

“Can I get you something?” She waved her hand over the bakery case. To be polite. Because she *was* on the clock.

“I’ll have whatever you just had,” he said.

She frowned. Was he playing games? “How do you know what I just had?”

He tapped the corner of his mouth. “Because you’ve got a tiny little speck of chocolate right there.”

She quickly swiped at both sides of her own mouth, her cheeks lighting on fire. How was it that he could make her feel like an awkward sixteen-year-old again? “Fine. Sit down. I’ll get you something chocolate.” But it wouldn’t be the chocolate croissant she’d had. Because it was amazing, and he didn’t deserve it.

She gestured for Leo to sit down and walked into the back room. Thank goodness her mom usually took Tuesday afternoons off. If she knew Tessa had just invited Leo to stay and sully their bakery with his Castorini DNA, gorgeous though it was, she would fumigate the entire place.

Tessa walked over to a baking tray and decided to change her tactic. She selected a perfectly formed chocolate croissant to put on a plate. Despite the fact that she’d only stayed in this tiny

town to help her mother and grandmother in the bakery after her dad died, while Leo left to attend the best schools on the planet, she wouldn't let that bitter pill ruin her reputation as a quality baker. Life might have waylaid her dream of becoming a real pastry chef, but it hadn't killed it. Until she could actually realize it, she'd studied tirelessly and taught herself as much about baking as she could. And so she was going to hand him the best one of the entire bunch.

Just let him try to find fault with it.

"Aren't you living in New York?" she asked as she walked over to a table by the window where he sat scrolling through his phone. She set the plate in front of him and stepped back.

"Not anymore." He gestured for her to sit down, like they were old friends, not frenemies. "Got my MBA, and now I'm back," he said, eyeing the croissant. "To help my dad."

Between his dad and her mom, it was a complete toss-up who was more obstinate. And she knew for a fact that in Leo's case, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. Whatever brought him here to actually speak to her had to be important.

She looked out the window and scanned the street nervously. "If anyone sees us in here together..."

He casually crossed his arms, which showcased biceps as nicely rounded and perfect as one of her *petits pains*. "Isn't it time for that silly feud to end?"

She tilted her head. "Tell our parents that." She wasn't going to let her guard down with him, no matter how friendly he seemed. Those moony brown eyes might make other women melt, but not her, *no siree*.

"So, about business." He took a bite of the croissant.

"Business," she repeated. *Talking business with a Castorini*. What a weird day this was turning out to be.

"It's no secret that..." His voice suddenly trailed off.

"What is it?" she asked as he went quiet. Was he choking on her croissant? She'd never performed the Heimlich on anyone. What if she did it wrong? How would she explain his dead body when they weren't even supposed to be talking?

He didn't seem to be in distress, though. Now he was holding up the croissant and examining it closely. "You made this yourself?"

"Yes..." she said carefully. If he dared to insult her baking, she was tossing him out. Of course, he would probably just bounce on the sidewalk with that perfectly tight behind.

He devoured another bite and licked his fingers. Which was just the tiniest bit sensual—enough to bring those non-butterflies back. "It's phenomenal," he said.

There went her cheeks again. Pretty soon she'd need a fire extinguisher. "Oh. Thanks," she said as nonchalantly as possible, considering her face was probably the color of the chair covers.

"It's no secret that neither of our businesses is doing that great," he said.

That caught her attention. Because today they'd just lost their contract with an organic grocery store chain that had been bought out. "I've been telling my mom we need to diversify our inventory," she admitted, finally taking a seat. "But she keeps insisting we're a boulangerie, and that means bread only."

He nodded. "My dad won't accept any menu changes, either. Let alone farm-to-table, organic, new takeout options, or...anything. But he's going to have to agree to do *something*, or our restaurant isn't going to make it." He took the last bite and made a noise in his throat that could only be interpreted as him *really* liking it, which left her strangely pleased. "I was thinking we could contract with you to use your bread. And maybe other things, too. Do you make desserts?"

He'd just said her magic word.

And he'd hit a nerve. "My mother would never go against tradition. It would change the whole business."

But maybe that's what they needed.

Leo's shoulders slumped. "That's a no, then?"

"Not...necessarily..."

The gears in her head churned. She'd page through her many recipe books. Watch some online tutorials. Study the market. And figure out what she could bake that would go with their cuisine—something other than the basic tiramisu every other Italian restaurant in the country served.

It would have to be French to feel unique; that's all there was to it. Because who would expect a French pastry in an Italian restaurant? Would they even care if they weren't told it was French? All the customers would know was that they were getting something they'd never had there before. Let people assume what they wanted, if it kept her mother from struggling.

And if her mother were no longer struggling, then Tessa could seek out her own dreams without worry.

Her head whirled with the possibilities.

"We could really use a contract," she said. They were past desperate for business, and doing a dessert or two would be...so much fun.

Fun. A word she hadn't used for a long time. *Excited*, that was another one. Maybe her life hadn't turned out as she'd expected, but she was hungry to try something new. *Starving* for it, honestly.

"Okay, great," Leo said. "So, you'll present the idea to her?"

Tessa hesitated. In her desperation, she'd been about to trust the enemy. "Wait a minute," she said. "What's in it for you?"

"The couple who bakes for us just retired. But to be honest, their bread is just so-so. And we have to pay transportation costs from Evanston. That and the fact that my dad's been serving only crème brûlée and tiramisu for thirty years. Plus, the old theater remodel is done, and people will be wanting later dinners, so that's an opportunity to give both of us more business, even though it'll be after hours for you. Maybe it's time for our businesses to combine forces so they can both survive."

He'd clearly thought it out carefully. Still, it seemed too good to be true.

"You've been successful in New York," she said. "At least, that's what everyone says. Why don't you just use your money to reinvigorate the restaurant?"

"My dad refuses to accept my help. Plus, pouring all the money in the world into it won't help if there are no customers. The menu is outdated, and there's nothing fresh to appeal to younger people as well as keep the older regulars. It needs rebranding, and I have great ideas. But I need to come up with some way for my dad to trust me enough to use them."

As if sensing her doubt, he said, "Our parents wouldn't even have to get near each other. I could be the go-between. Something to help both businesses survive."

"This insanity is a long shot," she said. But it was intriguing; she'd give him that.

His dark brows knit down. "How much of a long shot?"

"Um, as unlikely as a snowball in hell. Or when pigs fly." She waved her hands in the air to emphasize the point. "Castorinis and Montgomerys don't even talk, let alone do business together."

He leaned in, looking way too sexy. "*We're* talking."

"No," she said. "You're talking to me. I'm just...answering."

"At least you're not *fake* answering," he said pointedly.

She blushed—again—which showed him he'd gotten to her. And reminded her that he'd overheard her entire conversation with Sam. Even worse, he'd somehow managed to wipe all the snappy retorts out of her, which almost no one was capable of doing. For a second, she was thrown. "Fine," she conceded. "I'll mention it, but don't expect much."

"My dad doesn't know I'm doing this," he said. "Maybe I'll wait to hear how your mom responds first."

She laughed. "You're assuming that my mom is less set in her ways than your dad."

"I really hope so." He stood. "Thanks for the croissant."

She watched him scan the bakery cases—taking in the baguettes, the ancient industrial espresso machine, the faded Impressionist-like panels on the walls her mom had painted years ago to look like Monet's water lilies. "Things haven't changed much around here," he said.

"Yeah," she agreed. This time her blush belied embarrassment at the shabby surroundings. "Bet you can't wait to get back to the city." She suddenly saw herself as he must see her, in the middle of this run-down old bakery, well on her way to becoming the town spinster—minus her cat, Cosette, whose tiny head in the window of her apartment greeted her without fail every afternoon as she pulled up. And with chocolate blobs on her face to boot.

"No, I—" He swung his gaze to hers, brows furrowed. "I meant it in a nice way, Tessa. There's some comfort in the familiar."

That threw her. That and the way he'd said her name, low and soft.

"Tessa?"

Her blood froze, because this *Tessa* did not originate from the body of a male with a rich, gravelly baritone. It was the distinct voice of her mother, who almost never showed up on her afternoon off, calling from the back room. Had she somehow known Leo was here?

"My mom," she whispered, like she was sneaking around in high school, then scrambled out of her chair. "You've got to go." She herded him toward the door. At least she tried to, but his arm was solid steel, and all that muscle mass did *not* move easily. "You should leave."

He looked about as alarmed as a squirrel who'd just stuffed himself full of nuts, in no rush to scurry away.

"I'm glad to be back in Blossom Glen," he said, as if he had an hour to stop and chat. "The croissants are better here."

Better than in New York City? He had to be teasing.

Then he gave her a little wink and left.

A *wink*.

What was up with that? Was it friendly, condescending, or flirty? Or all three? Good thing she didn't have time to think on it too long.

"Honey, is that you?" her mom called a moment later, entering the room.

Tessa clutched her chest, swearing she was having a heart attack. How could she explain why she was standing by the door? *I was just waiting for the paramedics, Mom.* "Just me," she said cheerily, then took a long, calming breath.

Her mom walked over and scanned up and down their familiar Main Street. The few outdoor tables. The banner draped across the ever-popular Blossom Glen candle factory across the street that read: *We light up your life.* "I thought I heard voices," she said. "And the door."

"Yes, I was out... looking at the moon." She peered through the window. There it was again, big and round, looking down on all her secrets. "Have you seen it?"

"It's going to be a lovers' moon tonight," her mom said, looking up. She gave Tessa a squeeze. "That's what your dad would've called it. One that sees but never tells."

Let's certainly hope so.

"What are you doing here?" Tessa asked.

"Just restless. I wanted to go over the numbers again. And I see you've been baking."

Her mom was looking at the chocolate croissants she'd left out. She loved all of Tessa's pastries—she just wouldn't sell them. Still, she hated to see her mother stressed. "Don't worry, Mom. I'm working on some new ideas for us that might bring in more business." She thought about mentioning Leo's proposition but chickened out. "Um...have a croissant," she said. "They're fresh."

"Those do look really good."

That simple compliment gave Tessa the boost of confidence she needed. "They *are* really good," she said. "I think people would—"

Her mother started to turn around, talking over her. "Maybe I'll make us some coffee to go with— Oh, look at that. Someone left their phone."

Tessa's stomach dropped. Not just someone. *Leo*.

She scurried over and slipped the phone into her apron pocket. "There were a couple of teenagers sitting there earlier," she said. "I'll keep this safe until they come back for it."

Thankfully, her mother shrugged and went to the coffee machine. Tessa let out a long sigh. She was going to get struck dead by lightning for lying.

But despite the fear, something inside her felt different. Like a part of her that had been loaded with dust had suddenly been shaken—a part that had been preventing her from taking risks for a long time.

Because she knew that if she didn't take any soon, she'd be stuck in this bread shop forever.