

The GREAT Unraveling



ROXIE MAXX

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PINES & NEEDLES CRAFTING COMMUNITY



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A PINES & NEEDLES
CRAFTING COTTAGES STORY

A Roxie Maxx Mystery



CHAPTER 1



The third anonymous note in four days was tucked inside Mert Hawthorne's quilting ruler, folded into a square no bigger than a postage stamp, and it read, in careful block letters: YOU MAKE THIS PLACE BETTER THAN IT DESERVES.

Mert unfolded it at the cutting table in the Community Center, held it at arm's length because her reading glasses were on top of her head where they always were when she couldn't find them, and stared at it like it was a summons.

"Again," she said.

Roxie set down her coffee and crossed the sewing studio. Kenzie, curled on the fleece pad Roxie kept in her tote for exactly this purpose, lifted her head with the minimal effort of a dog who wanted credit for paying attention without actually committing to movement.

"Oh good. Another crisis of kindness. My favorite genre," Kenzie's voice rasped in her head.

Roxie gave her a look. Kenzie put her head back down.

"Same handwriting?" Roxie took the note between two fingers and held it next to the others Mert had brought to

breakfast. Three notes. Three days. Three compliments that would have been perfectly lovely if they hadn't arrived like contraband.

"Same block letters," Mert confirmed. She pushed her glasses up from her forehead to her nose, a journey of approximately two inches that she somehow made look like a full production. "Same kind of paper. Not from the craft supply. This is heavier stock. Somebody brought this from outside."

Mert would know. Mert knew paper the way other women knew wine or weather patterns or the sound of their own children lying. She'd been quilting for fifty years and could identify a fabric's fiber content by rubbing it between her fingers and making a face that communicated either approval or a desire to call someone's mother.

"Maybe somebody's just being nice," Roxie said, though even as the words left her mouth, she knew how they'd land.

Mert looked at her over the glasses. "Roxie. I have lived in communities of women for the better part of my adult life. Nobody is 'just being nice.' Nice has an agenda. Nice has a return address. Nice wants something."

"She's not wrong," Kenzie sent. "Last time someone left me a treat without explanation, it was a vet tech hiding a pill in cheese."

Roxie pressed her lips together to keep from responding out loud. She studied the note instead. The paper was good quality, cream-colored, smooth. The block letters were even and deliberate, the work of someone who didn't want their handwriting recognized, which meant someone whose handwriting would be recognized, which meant a resident.

"Who else got one?" Roxie said.

"Hazel found one in her inventory binder yesterday. Opal had one rolled up inside a skein of wool that she swears she didn't open. And Della Mae found one taped to the inside of a stock pot lid, which frankly is a health code violation, but

the note said her coffee cake could raise the dead, so she's torn."

"Torn between what?"

"Being flattered and being furious that someone touched her pot lids."

Roxie understood this completely. There were certain boundaries a woman drew, and kitchen equipment was one of them.

"I'll look into it," Roxie said.

Mert folded the note back up, slid it into her apron pocket, and patted it once, the way you'd pat a dog that had done something confusing but not entirely unwelcome.

"See that you do," Mert said. "Before Celeste gets hold of this and turns it into a board meeting."

Roxie gathered Kenzie's tote and her coffee and headed for the cafeteria, where trouble always started and rarely finished.

CHAPTER 2



The cafeteria at Pines & Needles smelled like browned butter, strong coffee, and the particular tension that arises when twelve women over the age of sixty have opinions and a captive audience.

"Smells like a tribunal in here," Kenzie sent from the tote. "Is that cinnamon or indictment?"

Della Mae Rourke was behind the serving window, arms crossed over her apron, watching the room the way a general watches a battlefield. She had the look of a woman who had already been up since four, had already baked two pans of coffee cake and a sheet of lemon bars, and had already decided how the day was going to go, regardless of what the day had planned.

Roxie approached the window. "Morning, Della Mae. I hear you received a note."

"I received an intrusion." Della Mae slid a lemon bar across the counter to Roxie without being asked, because Della Mae operated on the principle that food was both greeting and strategy. "Somebody put their hands on my stock pot lid, Roxie. My eight-quart. The one I use for chili

night. The one that has the exact right amount of seasoning built into the patina from eighteen years of service. That lid is not communal property. That lid has a relationship with me."

"I understand."

"Do you? Because I don't think the note-leaver understands. The note said my coffee cake could raise the dead. Well. That's lovely. That's a beautiful sentiment. But if you want to compliment my coffee cake, you say it to my face at the window like a civilized person and you do not go behind my counter and lift my lids."

"She's magnificent," Kenzie sent. *"Genuinely. The lid speech alone deserves a standing ovation."*

Roxie bit the inside of her cheek and took a bite of the lemon bar instead. It was perfect. Tart enough to make her eyes water slightly, sweet enough to forgive anything, with a shortbread crust that had the structural integrity of a well-built argument.

"Della Mae, do you still have the note?"

"Taped to the refrigerator. As evidence."

"Can I see it?"

Della Mae disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a square of cream paper, same weight and size as Mert's, same careful block letters. YOUR COFFEE CAKE COULD RAISE THE DEAD. SOME OF US AREN'T READY TO GO YET BECAUSE OF IT.

Roxie held it beside the one from Mert. Identical paper. Same pen pressure. Same neat, genderless block print.

"Whoever this is," Roxie said, "they're organized."

"Organized criminals usually are." Della Mae recrossed her arms. "I watch documentaries."

Roxie took her lemon bar and her evidence and found a table near the window where the morning light was good and Kenzie could survey the room from the tote without

having to interact with Princess Maribel, who was being carried across the cafeteria in the arms of her owner like a Pomeranian pharaoh on a very small, very fluffy palanquin.

"If that dog makes eye contact with me, I'm playing dead," Kenzie sent.

"Be nice," Roxie murmured, low enough that only Kenzie could hear.

"I am nice. I'm the nicest one here. I'm nicer than the person leaving secret compliments in people's kitchen equipment, because at least when I insult someone, I do it to their face. Telepathically. But the principle stands."

Roxie spread the notes on the table. Four now. All positive. All anonymous. All hidden in personal spaces where the recipient would find them alone.

That last detail nagged at her. Not a public compliment. Not a card left on a doorstep. These were placed inside private tools, inside personal supplies, inside a woman's own kitchen. The kindness was deliberate, but so was the intimacy of the delivery. Whoever was doing this knew these women well enough to know where they kept their things, what they reached for first, what would stop them mid-task and make them read.

It was either the sweetest gesture she'd encountered in years or the most sophisticated reconnaissance she'd seen outside of Dut Steeplepuss's legal team.

Knowing her luck, it was probably both.

CHAPTER 3



Hazel Pike's inventory binder was the kind of document that would make a forensic accountant weep with admiration. Every tool, every notion, every spool of thread in the Community Center was catalogued, numbered, and accounted for with the precision of someone who believed chaos was a personal failing.

Roxie found Hazel at her usual station in the supply closet, which Hazel had organized with such ferocious logic that it resembled less a closet and more a small, well-curated museum of the fiber arts.

"Show me where you found your note," Roxie said.

Hazel opened the binder to the sewing machine maintenance log, a section that, Roxie noticed, had color-coded tabs. Tucked between the page for Machine #4 (a vintage workhorse with a temperamental bobbin case) and Machine #5 (newer, reliable, boring, according to Hazel's margin notes) was the note.

YOUR RECORDS KEEP US HONEST. THIS PLACE WOULD FALL APART WITHOUT YOU AND MOST PEOPLE DON'T SAY THAT ENOUGH.

Hazel's face did something complicated. It started as annoyance, moved through surprise, detoured briefly through something that looked a lot like gratitude, and landed on suspicion. All in about two seconds. Roxie was impressed.

"It's a nice thing to say," Hazel admitted. "But nobody should be inside this binder. It's not locked because I trusted people, and now I'm rethinking that entire policy."

"Trust but verify. Pretty sure that's in the Bible somewhere. Or a spy novel. Same thing, really," Kenzie sent from the tote.

Roxie examined the note. Same paper. Same letters. Same gentle, anonymous insistence on saying something kind to someone who probably didn't hear it enough.

She thought about that. About how easy it was to stop hearing nice things. How the world could get loud with worry and criticism and breaking news and the low hum of dread that settled in when you weren't paying attention, until the only voices that got through were the ones telling you what was wrong. The ones telling you to be afraid. The ones telling you it was foolish to hope.

She tucked the note back into the binder, exactly where Hazel had found it.

"I'll figure out who's doing this," Roxie said.

"Good." Hazel paused. "But don't throw the notes away. I want mine back when you're done."

Roxie smiled. "Noted."

"Was that a pun?"

"Absolutely not. I would never."

"You absolutely would."

Roxie left the supply closet and nearly collided with Opal Jensen, who was standing in the hallway holding a skein of wool in one hand and a pair of reading glasses in the other and wearing the expression of a woman who had been waiting for exactly this moment.

"You're investigating," Opal said. It was not a question.

"I'm asking around."

"I have fiber evidence."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Fiber evidence. These women watch too much television," Kenzie's voice rasped in her head.

Opal held up the skein. It was a deep, heathered plum, the kind of rich color that made you want to touch it. "This is merino. My personal merino, from my cottage, not from the community supply. I had it in my project bag. Someone unzipped my bag, unrolled the center pull, slid a note inside, and re-rolled it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Someone re-rolled your center pull."

"Without tangling it." Opal leaned in. "That's not amateur work, Roxie. Whoever did this knows yarn. You can't re-roll a center pull without understanding the tension of the wind. This person has handled fiber."

"Give this woman a badge and a magnifying glass," Kenzie sent. *"She's cracked the yarn-based forensics wide open."*

Roxie kept her face neutral with considerable effort. "What did the note say?"

Opal's expression softened. Just slightly. Just enough that Roxie caught it before the armor came back.

"It said, 'Your hands know things the rest of us are still learning. Thank you for teaching without making us feel small.'"

Silence. The hallway was quiet except for the hum of a sewing machine running in the studio and the distant sound of Della Mae doing something decisive with a metal spoon.

"That's a nice thing to hear," Roxie said gently.

Opal straightened. "It's accurate. But that's beside the point. The point is someone was in my yarn."

She turned and walked back toward the weaving corner, her wool clutched protectively to her chest, and Roxie

watched her go and thought about how fiercely some women guarded the door to the room where they kept anything soft.

"You're thinking deep thoughts," Kenzie sent. "I can always tell because you stop blinking."

"I'm thinking about why it's easier for these women to accept someone rifling through their things than to accept that someone might genuinely admire them."

"Because the first one has a solution. You find the person and you tell them to stop. The second one means sitting with the possibility that you matter, and that's terrifying when you've spent years convincing yourself you don't."

Roxie looked down at the tote. Kenzie's dark eyes looked back, bright and knowing and utterly unbothered by the profundity of what she'd just sent.

"That was surprisingly wise," Roxie murmured.

"I contain multitudes. Also, I'd like a treat. Wisdom is exhausting."

Roxie fished a treat from the side pocket of the tote, broke it in half, and offered it. Kenzie accepted it with the dignity of a queen receiving tribute.

* * *

The outdoor pool was the social epicenter of Pines & Needles in warm weather, and even now, in the tentative warmth of a Michigan spring that could retract its offer at any moment, several residents had pulled lounge chairs into position and were occupying them with the territorial commitment of women who had learned early that if you don't claim your spot, someone else will.

Tanner Lyle was restocking towels at the cabana with the easy, loose-limbed efficiency of a young man who had figured out that the secret to working with older women was to listen more than he talked and to always, always

remember their drink preferences.

"Hey, Roxie." He pulled the note from his apron pocket and handed it to her. "I kept it. Figured you'd come asking."

"What did you think when you found it?"

Tanner considered this. He had the kind of face that processed things slowly and honestly, without the protective layer of cleverness that most people his age used as insulation. "I thought somebody was paying attention. Which was... I don't know. It's a weird thing to say, but it was like somebody turned on a light in a room I didn't know was dark."

"Well. Now I like two people here. The doctor and the towel boy. This is getting crowded," Kenzie sent.

Rico Santos was at the far end of the pool, checking chlorine levels with a test kit and the quiet concentration of a man who took his measurements seriously. Roxie walked over, Kenzie swaying gently in the tote.

"Rico. Your note."

He reached into his back pocket and produced it, folded into a tight square. "I read it four times," he said. He didn't elaborate. He didn't need to. The way he held the paper told Roxie everything: carefully, between his thumb and first two fingers, the way you hold something that might dissolve if you grip too hard.

"Nobody ever says 'reliable' like it's a good thing," Rico said. "It's like calling someone 'fine.' It's what you say when there's nothing better to say. But this note made it sound like it meant something. Like showing up and doing your job and being steady was actually worth noticing."

"It is worth noticing," Roxie said.

Rico looked at the pool. The water was still and blue and held the sky in its surface like a mirror. "Yeah," he said. "I think so too. I just needed somebody to write it down."

Roxie thanked him and headed back toward the cottages, Kenzie a warm weight against her hip, the notes collecting in

her jacket pocket like evidence of something she couldn't quite name yet but was beginning to understand.

"You're building a case," Kenzie sent.

"I'm building a picture."

"Same thing, different frame. Who's next?"

"The source."

CHAPTER 4



*B*y lunch, two more notes had surfaced. Tanner Lyle, the cabana boy, found one in the pocket of his pool-deck apron. It read: YOU CARRY MORE FOR THESE WOMEN THAN THEY NOTICE. SOMEBODY NOTICES.

And Dr. Grant Beaumont, making his golf-cart rounds, discovered one tucked into the visor of his cart. It read: THE WAY YOU CHECK ON PEOPLE WHEN THEY HAVEN'T ASKED YOU TO IS THE DEFINITION OF A GOOD MAN.

The doctor read his note at the cafeteria table while Roxie watched. He was a tall man, deliberate in his movements, with a voice that carried the educated warmth of someone raised in the Old South who'd spent a lifetime listening to people more than lecturing them. He read the note twice. He folded it carefully along its original creases and placed it in the breast pocket of his shirt, right over his heart, and he did not comment on it.

"Well now," he said, looking up at Roxie with eyes that were a little brighter than usual. "Seems to me somebody

'round here has decided that gratitude is contagious. And I am not inclined to quarrel with the diagnosis."

"Celeste thinks it's a passive-aggressive campaign," Roxie said.

"Celeste thinks a potluck is a passive-aggressive campaign. That woman could find political motive in a sunset and file a complaint about the colors." He sipped his coffee with the unhurried deliberation of a man who believed rushing was a character flaw. "Let me pose a question to you, Roxie, if I may. What, precisely, is the crime here?"

"Trespassing into personal spaces."

"That is a fair point, and I will grant you the delivery method is irregular. Unconventional, even." He set down his mug and folded his hands around it the way a minister settles into a sermon. "But the message itself is sound. And between you and me, and I say this with all the affection in my heart for every soul in this community, more than a few of these ladies could use a reminder that they are not invisible. That is not a criticism. That is a concern."

"*I like this one,*" Kenzie sent. "*He speaks like a man who's read a book and didn't feel the need to tell you about it.*"

"Do you have any idea who's behind it?" Roxie said.

Dr. Beaumont smiled. Slow, warm, unhurried, the smile of a man raised to believe that patience was not a virtue but a baseline expectation. "I have a suspicion. I will confess to that. But I am going to let you find your way there on your own, because I believe the findin' is part of the point. And I have never been one to spoil a good unfoldin'."

He tipped an invisible hat, climbed back into his golf cart, and hummed something that sounded like an old hymn as he rolled away down the path toward the cottages.

Roxie watched him go.

"*That man knows something,*" Kenzie sent.

"Everybody here knows something. The trick is figuring out which something matters."

"Profound. Can we stop by the cafeteria? I smelled pot roast."

* * *

Celeste Van Alstyne intercepted Roxie outside the Community Center doors at two fifteen, which meant she had been timing her approach, because Celeste timed everything, including, Roxie suspected, her own breathing.

"Roxie." Celeste said her name the way other people said "court date." "I assume you've been made aware of the situation."

"The notes."

"The unauthorized communications." Celeste's hands were clasped in front of her waist, her posture the physical embodiment of a locked suggestion box. "This is a community with bylaws, Roxie. Bylaws that address the distribution of printed materials within common spaces. Section four, subsection twelve."

"She has a subsection for printed materials? That's either impressive or deeply sad. I can't decide," Kenzie sent.

"Celeste," Roxie said carefully. "The notes are compliments. Handwritten. Personal. Positive."

"They're anonymous. Anonymous communications create uncertainty. Uncertainty breeds anxiety. Anxiety undermines community cohesion. It's a pipeline, Roxie."

Roxie considered pointing out that the only anxiety she'd observed so far was coming from Celeste herself, but she had learned years ago that pointing out the source of a fire to someone who was already burning didn't put anything out. It just gave them someone to blame.

"I'm looking into it," Roxie said.

"Good. I want a report by Friday."

"You'll get what I find when I find it."

Celeste studied her for a moment, then nodded once, turned on her heel with the precision of a woman who had never in her life been uncertain about a direction, and walked away.

"You know what Celeste needs?" Kenzie sent.

"A hobby?" Roxie muttered.

"A note. In her purse. Telling her she matters. Because I guarantee you, underneath all that bylaw nonsense, she's the one who needs to hear it the most."

Roxie stopped walking.

She stood on the path between the Community Center and the cottages, the late-afternoon light slanting through the pines, Kenzie's tote warm against her hip, and she thought about that. About Celeste, who controlled everything because she was terrified of losing anything. About Opal, who guarded her yarn because it was easier than admitting someone had reached her. About Della Mae, who was furious about her pot lid because the alternative was admitting that a stranger's words about her coffee cake had made her eyes sting. About Hazel, who wanted her note back.

They were all afraid. Not of the notes. Of what the notes implied. That someone was watching them closely enough to see the best parts of them, the parts they kept hidden, the parts they thought nobody noticed, and that someone had decided, in the middle of a world that felt uncertain and heavy and loud, to say it out loud.

That was the unsettling part. Not the trespass. The tenderness.

"You're not blinking again," Kenzie sent.

"I think I know who's doing this."

"Well, hallelujah. Does this mean we can get dinner?"

CHAPTER 5



Dixie Ramey's cottage was the fourth one on the east row, distinguishable from the others by the window box overflowing with herbs that had no business thriving that well in Michigan and a welcome mat that read GO AWAY in cheerful cross-stitch.

Roxie knocked. Kenzie sat in the tote and radiated judgmental patience.

The door opened. Dixie stood in the frame, five foot four, built like a woman who'd spent forty years at a sewing machine and had the posture to prove it, shoulders forward, hands always slightly curled, eyes always slightly narrowed, as if the entire world were a seam she was checking for straightness.

"Roxie Maxx," Dixie said. "I figured you'd show up eventually."

"May I come in?"

"That depends. Are you here to tell me to stop?"

"Called it," Kenzie sent. *"The direct confession. These retired women have no patience for dramatic reveals. I respect it."*

Roxie stepped inside. Dixie's cottage was small, tidy, and

dominated by a cutting table that took up half the living room. On it sat a stack of cream-colored paper, a ruler, a fine-point pen, and a list. The list had every resident's name on it, some checked off, some not.

"You have a system," Roxie said.

"I was a factory seamstress for forty-one years. I have a system for everything including my system." Dixie gestured to the kitchen table, which had two chairs and a teapot that was already warm. She'd been expecting company.

They sat. Dixie poured tea. Kenzie was placed on the floor, where she immediately found a patch of sun and claimed it.

"So," Roxie said.

"So," Dixie said. She wrapped both hands around her mug and looked at Roxie with the steady, unflinching directness of a woman who had never in her life said anything she didn't mean. "I'm seventy-four years old. I've lived here for three years. I know every woman in this community, what they make, how they make it, what they're proud of, and what they're afraid of. And I can tell you this: most of them are running on fumes."

Roxie listened.

"They don't say it. Women our age don't say it. We don't sit around talking about how scared we are or how tired we are or how some mornings it takes everything we've got just to put our feet on the floor and start again. We just do it. We get up. We make the coffee. We pick up the needle. We go to the cafeteria and we eat Della Mae's lemon bars and we pretend everything is fine." Dixie's jaw tightened. "But it's not fine. Not for everyone. Not all the time."

"No," Roxie said. "It's not."

"I started noticing. Little things. Mert hasn't started a new quilt in two months. Mert always has a quilt going. Always. The woman quilts the way other people breathe. And then

she just stopped, and nobody said anything, because we're all so busy pretending we don't notice each other falling apart."

Dixie set her mug down. "Hazel's been triple-checking her inventory. Not because anything is missing. Because the counting calms her down. Because when the world doesn't make sense, at least the bobbin count does. Opal hasn't been sleeping. I can see it in her hands; they shake in the morning, just slightly, just enough that her first row of stitches is always off. She rips them out and starts over and nobody asks why."

"She sees everything," Kenzie sent softly. *"The way a good seamstress sees a dropped stitch across a room."*

"So I decided to say something," Dixie continued. "But I'm not good at saying things to people's faces. I never was. I'm blunt about fabric and seam allowances and whether your rotary blade needs replacing, but I am not equipped for tenderness in person. My face won't cooperate. I try to say something kind and it comes out like I'm issuing a factory safety memo."

Roxie's mouth twitched. She knew the type. She was, on her worst days, the type.

"So I wrote it down. I figured out what each person needed to hear, the true thing that nobody was telling them, and I wrote it on nice paper and I put it where they'd find it alone. Not in front of everyone. Alone. Because some things you need to read in private first, before you can believe them."

"How did you know what to say?" Roxie asked. "The notes aren't generic. They're specific. They're true."

Dixie set her mug down. "Forty-one years at a factory floor teaches you to watch. You learn who's struggling by how they hold their shoulders. You learn who's angry by which machine they choose. You learn who's scared by how early they show up, because scared people need the routine

of arriving first, of being settled before the noise starts." She shrugged, a small, economical movement. "It's the same here. Just replace the machines with sewing stations and the factory whistle with Della Mae's breakfast bell."

"You've been watching since you moved in."

"I've been watching since I was twelve and my mother taught me to mend my father's work shirts. She said, 'Dixie, you fix what you can see. But first you have to see it.' So I see it. I see Mert putting her quilting away early, saying she's tired. She's not tired. She's lost the reason to start the next one. I see Hazel counting things twice, three times, because the counting is the only thing that stays the same when everything else is shifting. I see Della Mae baking at four in the morning, which isn't dedication, it's insomnia wearing an apron."

Roxie looked at her tea. The surface rippled slightly because her hands weren't entirely steady, which was embarrassing, but Dixie didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she had the grace not to mention it.

"What about you?" Roxie said. "Who writes you a note?"

Dixie was quiet for a moment. Then she looked at Roxie with an expression that was not exactly a smile but was in the same neighborhood. "You just did. By showing up at my door and asking me why instead of telling me to stop. That's the note, Roxie. That's the whole note."

"Oh, for crying out loud, now I'm emotional. I'm a dog. I shouldn't have to deal with feelings this advanced. This is above my pay grade," Kenzie sent from her sun patch.

The kitchen was quiet. The teapot ticked softly as it cooled. Through the window, Roxie could see the late afternoon light gilding the rooftops of the other cottages, each one identical in structure and wildly different in personality, just like the women inside them.

"Dixie," Roxie said. "That might be the most thoughtful thing I've heard in a long time."

"Well. Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation." Dixie picked up her tea. "The cross-stitch on the doormat isn't ironic."

"It's absolutely ironic," Kenzie sent. *"But let her have it."*

"There's a problem, though," Roxie said. "You've stirred up the hive. Celeste is drafting bylaws. Della Mae's guarding her pot lids. Opal has declared a fiber-forensics investigation."

"Fiber forensics?"

"She noticed you re-rolled her center pull without tangling it."

Dixie allowed herself a very small, very satisfied smile. "That was my best work. A clean center-pull re-roll on merino is no joke. You have to respect the twist."

"What do you want to do?" Roxie said.

Dixie looked at her list. The names. Some checked, some waiting. "I want to finish. I have eleven more women who need to hear something good. But I can't do it if Celeste turns this into a criminal investigation and I end up at a board meeting defending kindness with a podium and a PowerPoint."

"I would pay real money to see Celeste interrogate someone about unsolicited affirmations. Real money. Bones, treats, cash, whatever currency applies," Kenzie sent.

Roxie thought about it. She thought about the notes, spread across her table that morning. She thought about Hazel, asking for hers back. About Dr. Beaumont, tucking his into his shirt pocket. About Mert, who hadn't started a new quilt in two months, patting her apron pocket where the note lived now. About Della Mae, who taped hers to the refrigerator and called it evidence but hadn't taken it down.

"I have an idea," Roxie said.

CHAPTER 6



The cafeteria at Pines & Needles smelled like browned butter, strong coffee, and the particular tension that arises when twelve women over the age of sixty have opinions and a captive audience.

"Smells like a tribunal in here," Kenzie sent from the tote. "Is that cinnamon or indictment?"

Della Mae Rourke was behind the serving window, arms crossed over her apron, watching the room the way a general watches a battlefield. She had the look of a woman who had already been up since four, had already baked two pans of coffee cake and a sheet of lemon bars, and had already decided how the day was going to go, regardless of what the day had planned.

Roxie approached the window. "Morning, Della Mae. I hear you received a note."

"I received an intrusion." Della Mae slid a lemon bar across the counter to Roxie without being asked, because Della Mae operated on the principle that food was both greeting and strategy. "Somebody put their hands on my stock pot lid, Roxie. My eight-quart. The one I use for chili

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"I understand."

"Do you? Because I don't think the note-leaver understands. The note said my coffee cake could raise the dead. Well. That's lovely. That's a beautiful sentiment. But if you want to compliment my coffee cake, you say it to my face at the window like a civilized person and you do not go behind my counter and lift my lids."

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"Can I see it?"

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"Be nice," Roxie murmured, low enough that only Kenzie could hear.

"I am nice. I'm the nicest one here. I'm nicer than the person leaving secret compliments in people's kitchen equipment, because at least when I insult someone, I do it to their face. Telepathically. But the principle stands."

Roxie spread the notes on the table. Four now. All positive. All anonymous. All hidden in personal spaces where the recipient would find them alone.

That last detail nagged at her. Not a public compliment. Not a card left on a doorstep. These were placed inside private tools, inside personal supplies, inside a woman's own kitchen. The kindness was deliberate, but so was the intimacy of the delivery. Whoever was doing this knew these women well enough to know where they kept their things, what they reached for first, what would stop them mid-task and make them read.

It was either the sweetest gesture she'd encountered in years or the most sophisticated reconnaissance she'd seen outside of Dut Steeplepuss's legal team.

Knowing her luck, it was probably both.

CHAPTER 7



Roxie found a bench outside the cafeteria, in the last of the afternoon light. The pines were doing that thing they did when the day was easing into evening, casting long shadows that smelled like resin and looked like lace on the gravel paths. Kenzie sat on the bench beside her, not in the tote, just beside her, small and warm, her chin resting on Roxie's thigh.

The cafeteria sounds drifted through the screen door. Voices. Laughter. The particular pitch of Della Mae's voice when she was telling someone they hadn't taken enough food.

"*You did a good thing today,*" Kenzie sent.

"Dixie did the good thing. I just made sure nobody got a citation for it."

"That's what you always say. 'I just did the small part.' Honey, the small part is the whole part. The small part is showing up. The small part is paying attention when everyone else is too tired or too scared or too busy being fine to notice that someone in the next room hasn't started a new quilt in two months."

Roxie scratched behind Kenzie's ears. The dog leaned into it with the full-body commitment of a creature who understood that comfort, when offered, should be accepted completely and without apology.

"You think they'll be okay?" Roxie said, low enough that only Kenzie could hear.

"No. I think they'll be something better than okay. I think they'll be together, which is harder and messier and louder and infinitely more useful than okay."

Roxie looked at the cottages. Each one identical in structure, each one different in the details. A window box of herbs. A painted door. A wind chime. A cross-stitch doormat that said GO AWAY but didn't mean it, not really, not when it mattered. Each cottage was a woman's answer to the question nobody asked out loud: what does safety look like when the world won't stop being frightening?

It looks like this, Roxie thought. It looks like a cutting table in a living room and a warm teapot and a list of names and a stack of cream-colored paper. It looks like a woman who can't say kind things to your face writing them down in block letters and hiding them where you'll find them alone. It looks like a cafeteria that smells like coffee cake at seven in the morning. It looks like a doctor who checks on you when you haven't asked. It looks like a pot of chicken and dumplings at any hour because soup doesn't follow rules.

It looks like women, showing up. Day after day. Scared and stubborn and armed with craft scissors and strong opinions about seam allowances, showing up.

"You're going to make yourself cry," Kenzie sent. "And I don't have tissues. I don't have pockets. I don't have thumbs. I am not equipped for this."

Roxie laughed. A real laugh, the kind that starts in the chest and doesn't ask permission.

"Come on," she said, standing up and settling Kenzie into the tote. "Let's go back in. I think there's coffee cake left."

"If Della Mae saved me a lemon bar, I'll write her a note myself. I'll dictate. You write. 'Dear Della Mae, your lemon bars are the only reason I haven't bitten anyone today. Warmest regards, Kenzie.'"

"I'm not writing a note from my dog."

"Your loss. It was very moving."

They went back inside. The cafeteria was bright. The tables were full. Della Mae was cutting a second pan of coffee cake with the precision of a woman who understood that equal portions were the foundation of a civil society. Mert had her quilting bag open and was showing Dixie a fabric she'd been saving, a deep blue cotton with tiny silver stars, and Dixie was touching it between her fingers and nodding with the quiet authority of someone who knew exactly what that fabric should become.

Opal was teaching Tanner a basic knit stitch at the corner table, and his enormous pool-deck hands were fumbling the needles with the endearing clumsiness of a man who had never once considered that two sticks and a string could produce anything, and Opal was not once making him feel stupid about it, which was, Roxie thought, its own kind of love note.

Rico was at the next table, watching Tanner's progress with the quiet amusement of a man who had already decided he would never attempt knitting but respected the courage of someone who would. He had his note in his hand. He was reading it again. He didn't seem to care who noticed.

Hazel had her inventory binder open and was showing Dixie her system, page by page, and Dixie was nodding with the genuine interest of a woman who understood that organizing was its own kind of craft, its own kind of art, its own

kind of love letter to the idea that things could be in order even when the world insisted they couldn't.

Boob had somehow materialized from wherever Boob materialized from (Roxie had long ago stopped asking, because the answer was always complicated, involved someone else's garage, and ended with a tool that needed returning) and was eating his third biscuit while explaining to Dr. Beaumont a theory he had about the notes that involved, improbably, a retired mail carrier and a personal vendetta against the postal service. Dr. Beaumont was listening with the patient grace of a man who had long ago accepted that Boob was a force of nature, like weather, and could not be redirected, only endured.

Juniper the cat appeared from behind the serving counter, which should have been impossible, carrying something small and shiny in her mouth that turned out to be a thimble she had stolen from the sewing studio. She deposited it at Dixie's feet like an offering, or possibly an accusation, and walked away with the supreme indifference of a creature who had never once in her life needed a note to know she mattered.

"Show-off," Kenzie sent, watching Juniper leave. *"Cats think everything is a gift. Dogs know it's just stealing with better PR."*

Celeste was sitting at her usual table. Her purse was beside her, clasp shut, note inside. She was eating a biscuit. She was not presiding over anything. She was just eating a biscuit and watching the room with an expression Roxie had never seen on her before, something unguarded and almost peaceful, the look of a woman who had set down a very heavy clipboard and discovered her hands could hold other things.

Roxie sat down with her coffee cake and her dog and her people and she let the room hold her, the same way the notes held the truth, the same way the pines held the evening, the

same way these women held each other: without making a fuss about it, without asking for credit, without needing it to be anything other than what it was.

Which was enough.

Which was, if she was being honest, everything.

THE END

FROM DELLA MAE'S CAFETERIA WINDOW

"You think I put recipes in the back of books because I'm sentimental? I put them here because if you've made it this far, you deserve to eat something that didn't come out of a box. Clip these out. Tape them to your refrigerator. And for the love of all that is holy, use real butter."

DELLA MAE'S COFFEE CAKE

Best served when somebody needs to hear a kind word and you don't know how to say it.

Cream together one cup of softened butter and two cups of sugar until light. Add two eggs, one at a time. Mix in one cup of sour cream and one teaspoon of vanilla. In a separate bowl, whisk together two cups of flour, one teaspoon of baking powder, and a quarter teaspoon of salt. Fold the dry into the wet. Do not overmix. Pour half the batter into a greased nine-by-thirteen pan. For the crumb topping: combine one cup of brown sugar, one cup of flour, one tablespoon of cinnamon, and half a cup of cold butter, cut in with

a fork until it looks like rough sand. Spread half the crumb over the first layer of batter. Add the remaining batter. Top with the rest of the crumb. Bake at 350 degrees for forty to forty-five minutes, until a toothpick comes out with just a few moist crumbs. Let it cool ten minutes, if you can stand it.

Della Mae's tip: "If the crumb topping is smooth, you've worked it too hard. Like people, the best crumb has some rough edges."

* * *

DELLA MAE'S LEMON BARS

Best served when the world feels sour and you need something to balance it out.

For the crust: mix two cups of flour, half a cup of powdered sugar, and a pinch of salt. Cut in one cup of cold butter until crumbly. Press into a greased nine-by-thirteen pan and bake at 350 for fifteen minutes. For the filling: whisk together four eggs, one and a half cups of sugar, a quarter cup of flour, and two-thirds cup of fresh lemon juice. Pour over the hot crust and bake twenty more minutes, until set. Dust with powdered sugar when cool. Cut into squares. Try to share.

Della Mae's tip: "Use fresh lemons. If it comes out of a bottle shaped like a lemon, it's lying to you."