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Gather the Ingredients

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Fiction

Gather the Ingredients

BY JEN KNOX

AT ONE TIME THEY BELIEVED in fairy tales. They believed in the burnt sugar-scented, cobblestone dreamland that came to life in their mother's stories. They'd stay up nights discussing life as though it was a soft, sweet thing to sample like the truffles that cooled on wax paper in their kitchen. The perfect, plump chocolates were just waiting to be plucked by tiny fingers. Claire snuck two as Alette drew Pâtisserie Jasmine, a pastel cottage perched on a round, green hill.

At 40 and 39, the sisters waited in long customs lines that ended with exhaustion and petulance. They argued over directions. Claire examined the map on her phone as Alette hailed a cab. The driver eyed their bags, stopped 20 feet ahead of them and popped the trunk. The car smelled of spices and spoiled milk. It weaved through heavy traffic beneath a swollen, pre-storm sky. The sisters shared a tattered seat in silence.

The sisters had been by their mother's side when she passed. By the

time Alette had arrived, Jasmine was already in a medicinal haze, teetering on the edge of life. Claire, who had been there every day since the diagnosis, every possible hour in fact, settled in denial. A doctor had to ask that she remove her hand from her mother's limp wrist. Now, some weeks later, there was no room to deny, and the pain was nestling inside them both. They neared their hotel, sitting rigidly as the cab traversed increasingly bumpy and circuitous roads.

Jasmine, unlike her daughters, had been prepared. She'd known long before any diagnosis or ill feeling. She told Claire that she had dreamed the number 13. It was a marzipan 13, and she'd devoured it — despite her aversion, despite a sickness that ultimately caused her to fall over in the dream.

"I fell to wakefulness and knowing," she'd said. Shortly after the dream, Jasmine began to write to her daughters, leaving detailed instructions and narratives in the form of recipes. She had directed them here with a box of loose notes that were to be compiled and shared.

Claire kept her mother snug in a silver urn swathed in a canvas bag that she now hugged to her chest like a child. She'd defended her mother's presence to TSA, then customs. Jasmine had insisted on coming along in whatever form she could. She'd wrote them asking that her ashes be spread on the flower beds outside her old pastry shop.

A distant cousin, Marque, had struggled to keep the shop afloat. He kept it limping along for a few years, but the neighborhood was changing, he'd explained, and he had to move for the safety of his family. He'd tried to manage from a distance, only to fail miserably. When the sisters told him of Jasmine's request, he said it was impossible. "No natural things live in that neighborhood anymore. Not since the soldiers moved in. I've been trying to get your mother to sell for years."

If the sisters agreed on anything, it was that Jasmine would know if

they didn't carry out her wish. They were hesitant but determined, unable to factor in the social climate. There was a feeling of something thickening the air, making it hard to breathe. It was a pervasive feeling that neither sister could deny, but it wouldn't stop them.

The silence was too much for Alette. She had a habit of filling space. She leaned forward and said to the driver, "How's business here?" When he didn't answer, she continued. "Cabs are almost obsolete in New York, you know. They've been overtaken by Uber."

The driver mumbled something, then began waving his hands at someone cutting him off. "Uber," he said with disgust before turning up his music, something jazzy and soft.

"Yep. Do you have that here?"

When there was no response, Alette looked to her sister. "I guess that means yes." Her gaze wasn't returned. She tilted her head on the glass just before the driver slammed the brakes for the last time that evening. Her head jerked back.

"You shithead!" Claire said, reaching out to her sister. "Are you alright?"

"You know what I think of you?" the cab driver growled.

"I'm fine. Ignore him," Alette said. She handed him the fare as Claire got out of the cab and slammed the door.

The hotel was something from a movie, perhaps dirtier and droopier, but equally grand. It was a building Jasmine had described to them many times, a place where business executives and movie stars used to stay when they visited the French Riviera. It was a block from the theater, two blocks from Jasmine's old

shop.

A concierge met the sisters at the trunk, handling their bags with nimble movements and smiling with what seemed pure delight. His energy offset the anger of the driver, and it seemed to settle Claire some. The balconies of the hotel were painted white, and only a young couple stood outside staring out at the Mediterranean with melancholy slouches and fixed gazes. This couple might've been the only other guests, as there was no one without a name tag in the lobby, no rustling sounds or tapping of feet. Only theirs.

Claire's tennis shoes squeaked in the foyer. She caught a few glances from hotel staff. Ever since the split from the husband, she felt out of alignment. Her eyes caught on the thin, untanned line on her finger, even as it seemed almost faded to nothing now. People no longer wanted to look her in the eye because there was something broken there, and when they did catch her gaze, pity wafted her way like a stench. When she reached the counter, she set her mother down gently and offered a forced smile to the woman who checked them in.

Alette's heels tip-tapped as she strode a few paces behind her sister. Jasmine, in her reverie, had convinced Alette that she was on the precipice of a big break, and ever since this drug-induced and late-arriving acceptance, she walked with her head even higher — almost to the point of awkwardness. Jasmine's belief was something special. She had lived in her heels and lifted the world with her smile, had run two businesses for many years and raised two daughters on her own.

Alette looked a lot like her, soft features and tiny shoulders. Claire was boxier, the puzzle piece that fits too many ways and is judged by utility alone, but Claire had inherited the work ethic. Holding her mother with both hands now, as though Jasmine were an offering, Claire and two of the hotel staff led the way to the room, with Alette

lingering behind to appreciate the decor, then check her phone.

“Dear Artist: We thank you for your audition, but” Alette deleted email after email, then moved on to the 14 texts waiting for her. One was from her landlord, a final notice. George Watson, an exceedingly wealthy but impatient man, had been threatening to kick her out the last few months. She’d managed to get by a few months by flirting, but he was no longer responsive to her efforts.

She tried for sympathy in a short instant message, then texted hearts to her girlfriend as Claire tried to hand her the second key. After hitting send, Alette realized her jet lag must’ve gotten the better of her. All of the texts had gone to George and, not knowing what else to do, she shut off her phone hoping that somehow they wouldn’t go through.

Claire cleared her throat in an attempt to get her sister’s attention. When Alette didn’t acknowledge her, Claire reached back and gave Alette’s tiny shoulder a good squeeze. She said, “Come on, sis. We have work to do.”

“Oui,” Alette said, looking up. “Por maman.”

Jasmine’s estate comprised a bakery in Athens, Ga., and a dilapidated building in Nice, the old shop, located in a neighborhood that had been the unfortunate recipient of a bomb threat at the nearby theater not long ago. No one knew why the area was targeted except to believe it was an easy mark, less expected than Paris or London.

Both of Jasmine’s shops, at one time, would have sold for enough to almost cover the sizable mortgage she’d taken out on her home a year before the girls’ father died, leaving only debt. Now, with business

steady but stalled in Athens and halted completely in Nice, there was a lengthy climb, and some tough decisions to make.

The sisters had been left everything equally. Originally, Jasmine had planned to bring her girls to Nice herself, but after the dream, she transferred all her money to a small bond that was to be distributed with a bundle of recipes.

They'd agreed to read them all once they made it to the hotel, before they saw the shop, and despite their previous exhaustion, neither sister felt tired in the least.

"You want to?" Claire asked.

"One or two. I might break down. Claire, I might break down, and if I do, be nice."

"Of course," Claire said with mild irritation lacing her voice.

Girls, I am smiling on you if you are in France. If you are not, please get there. I'll wait. So, listen, the shop is a shell of its old self, and I don't blame you if you sell it, but before you do, try and fix it up. Clean it up, and after you've done so, I'd like you to make something. Macaroons. Sugarcoat the neighborhood, allow people to breathe it in. Just a batch. Try because I asked for so little when I was alive. Try because I will smell your efforts, too. Leave me with the flowers, with the shop where I gained independence. I'll greet people at the door, make them forget about the horrors of the world. Follow my recipe exactly! To a T.

She'd said as much to the girls in her final days. Jasmine wielded guilt like a sword, slicing away her daughters' hesitancy to follow her instruction. She had lived in Nice from age 13 to sometime in her mid-20s, after growing up in Cleveland, where her parents catered to the "fancies" by selling whatever they could at their pop-up shop. She learned business those years, but she never spoke highly of her time in

Cleveland. Or of her parents, who were good at business but had no concept of planting roots and eventually left their daughter with her grandparents. Her years in France, however, were delicate tales that melted on the tongue.

“Mom, loosen up, you should remember you’re from Nice,” the girls used to joke when she was upset, when things seemed impossible for a single mother of two. And she would chase them around their small living room, demanding that she’d show them how neecee she was. They’d giggle and clutch their stomachs, each trying to out-laugh the other, then they’d help with the next batch of pastries by watching, nodding and handing their mother ingredients on cue. Claire was always a little faster to respond, a little more accurate with the measurements; Alette was always more enthusiastic.

Before she was hospitalized, Jasmine had told the girls she still had faith in the revitalization of her shop, the neighborhood she loved, but her faith was waning. “Probably, the terror will be there awhile. The world is headed this way. But things change. Princesses, small nudges do big things.”

She had explained that the pastry shop she owned was the size of a booth at the flea market, but that it was still legally hers. No one had tried to buy it. Her cousin, Marque, had taken over the shop after Jasmine married a man from Georgia who would be too perfect to not love, who would seduce her into returning to the states, who would die in a head-on collision on his way home from work shortly after his second daughter was born.

Marque had tried to manage the business a while but had no

patience for baking and no administration skills whatever. He hired teenagers and treated them poorly. They stole, so he fired them and hired more. Then he moved an hour away. He called one day to admit he couldn't keep it up. He suggested Jasmine sell. He suggested again.

The sisters stood on the balcony, both in blue jeans. The neighborhood did need the smell of macaroons. It smelled of rot and something sour. Three soldiers were patrolling the area on foot, guns lining their hips. Claire was studying the men when she heard the ding of her instant messenger. It was Alex. "You can't not answer," he wrote.

"I'm settling Mom's estate," she texted. She almost added, "Asshole," but deleted the second text for legal reasons alone. Claire had caught her husband with a blonde woman whose round, pink ass bounced in full view on Claire's bed. When she'd found them, she said, "Divorce," then walked for miles. Simple, clean. But then again, it was anything but.

"I didn't know," he wrote. A few seconds later: "If I had known ..."

The sisters read another of their mother's short letters, recipes.

Stop messing with my masterpieces now that I'm gone, Alette. No sugar-free, no fat-free. I'm not there to fix your mistakes. Macaroons: 2/3 cup almond meal, 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar, 3 large egg whites (keep them room temperature), 5 tablespoons granulated sugar and 1 teaspoon vanilla. You need heat, but not too much. 280 degrees. Baking sheets, parchment paper — you know this much, girls. Get the almond meal and powdered sugar in a food processor, mix till fine. Sift it. Sift it again. Medium-high speeds will beat those egg whites (Claire, if you still claim to be allergic, get over it). When the eggs froth, add granulated sugar 1 tablespoon at a time (Alette, you need to be patient, honey, don't just throw it all in there, got it?). Continue to beat the egg white mixture until it grows nipples when you lift the beaters. Gently stir in the vanilla extract. Don't overbeat, Alette!

“She thought I was developmentally challenged. Till the end, that is. She saw something change, she said.”

Claire laughed. “You had a period there.”

“Whatever. Everyone does. I wasn’t asking for your opinion,” Alette said. She paced. “I have to post about this. I feel so overwhelmed.”

“Did you really just say that?” Claire asked, attempting to knock the thing from Alette’s hands as she was telling her Facebook friends that she’d arrived and was feeling down.

“This is how people do. This is how people process now, Claire. Transparency. You act like an old lady.”

Alette was stretching on the balcony in the morning, finding humor in the catcalls directed at her. She could have just as easily stretched inside. Claire was telling her as much when the hotel staff rang the room to ensure they were awake.

Claire answered and asked that two cappuccinos be brought to the room. She noticed her cell was flashing and checked to find a message from Alex: “Sorry again,” that had come in last night, late.

She glanced out the window, hoping the neighborhood was softer in the light. There were two men yelling up at her sister.

“Alette, doesn’t that bother you?”

“Hey, you have the round ass. I like you,” one of the men said to Claire when she stepped outside.

“Listen,” she yelled down. “You two ass clowns can go harass someone else.” She looked over at Alette, who had her feet positioned comfortably behind her head. “You eat that stuff up, don’t you? You know it isn’t a positive type of attention, right? You do realize they’re just assholes who won’t give you a second look when you turn 40, right?”

“I’m almost 40, you’re 40,” Alette said, “and they still seem dazzled by us.”

“Whatever. Marque said he’d meet us at 8, but that probably meant 9 or 10, right?” The two men were yelling something that the sisters didn’t understand, and two officers appeared as though from nowhere to hurry them off.

“A lot of protection. They must know something we don’t,” Alette said, motioning to the policemen. She waved at them from her twisted position; they waved back, curious expressions on their faces.

Marque wasn’t known for punctuality — another reason he’d given up the business. He called at noon. “I’m on my way. Meet me out front? I wear a red hat now, everywhere, in honor of your mother,” he said. “I’ll meet you at her place. I am not allowed in your hotel.”

The sisters walked past the old shop, which was nestled between a salon and what looked like a condo. Claire dusted off the sign out front. There was a single window, a small sill.

“There could be some potential,” Alette suggested.

“Riiiiight. Let’s try the door.”

The knob had to be jiggled a bit, then the door had to be pressed in to get it to open. Marque had the key, and the locks hadn’t changed in over a decade. But it seemed locks were useless. The door opened with a solid push.

Inside was dust, cobwebs, rust, remnants of squatters and a milk carton upturned with something sticky coating it. Beneath this layer, there was, in fact, potential. There was a strong counter with a small oven behind it that had no dials and a broken door handle. There was the smell of decay and mold and something foul — perhaps something

dead, but there was also a fridge. There was a small square of wood behind the counter that had their mother's initials carved into it. This made the sisters smile.

"I don't think we'll be making macaroons here, Mom," Claire said.

"She must have been on top of the world when she bought this place. It must have been beautiful then," Alette said. "We need to clean up. Can you imagine buying this at a time when women didn't own shit?"

Punch the center of the batter, then scrape more batter from the sides to the center, and punch it down again. Don't be afraid to really force it down. You will need to repeat this to strengthen it. If the batter is too runny, the macaroons will be oily, and the angels will throw spears at you girls. You have to continue on. Don't get ahead of yourselves. Don't try to rush it.

Claire got another text from Alex as they waited to see a red hat. "Let's put everything on hold. I need to talk to you."

Jasmine had liked Alex. She'd defended his infidelity, saying that men were weak and it was up to the women to forgive sometimes. "So long as there are no illegitimate babies, take him back! Easy," she'd said. "Then you have a free pass if you ever get tempted." Claire had been outraged at the suggestion that infidelity was a trading card. She remembered stomping out of the hospital room like a child, only to return with iced green tea and peanut butter sandwiches an hour later, calmed but no less offended.

"She liked you, too," she typed, then powered her phone off.

"I think this place has potential. Look, the oven works," Alette said. "There's electricity. Why is there electricity?"

"Marque must be paying for it. Try the lights."

"Claire, I need to do something different. Maybe we should fix it up and move here. Or I could move here."

“What do you know about running a business?”

“We know the business. It’s in our blood. We can improve it. Macaroons, pies, cakes. I’ve been experimenting with a reduced sugar version of a few things. She added too much sugar,” Alette said. “Maybe some gluten-free.”

“Mom’s listening, Alette. Can you imagine?”

“I take it all back,” Alette said, looking toward the ceiling.

“She missed you so much. It stressed her out that you weren’t around.”

“Whoa! Where’d that come from?”

Work together, Girls. One of you get a pastry bag, pour it in. On your baking sheets (your prepped baking sheets), go at it. Bring those babies to life! Holding the baking sheet in both hands, smack it down on the counter a few times, so they don’t get saggy. Go have a cigarette or do something. Ten or fifteen minutes, probably fifteen. Let them dry out. Have another cigarette or whatever while they bake, then let them cool, and you’re ready for the ganache.

When they would work summers in their mother’s Athens kitchen, measuring and blending ingredients was torture to them both; Alette with her thick eyeliner and all-black clothes, blue-black hair and bruised attitude. Claire, the overworked victim because she had to take on yet another of her mother’s catering gigs at the cost of band practice. Playing captain during a fancy dinner full of stuffy people instead of charging the stream of sound, banging the drum to sound off a group, a world of music. As a girl, Claire had clocked

a lot of hours feeling sorry for herself.

The sisters had seemed anything but grateful at first. Even as adults, they were hesitant to help their mother with the business, until Claire caught Alex with the hefty blonde and knew she had to do something, to re-evaluate her life. She finally began to help, and ended up running the shop long before she was ready. It was when she took over that she became a hypocrite, resentful of Alette, who was off chasing odd dreams and warped rainbows instead of helping their mother, even though she too had been chasing other things until said things turned on her.

“Look!” Alette said, reaching for a long rectangular flowerpot that was designed for the front. “It’ll fit. We have to find flowers.”

Marque arrived in a red hat, with gifts and flourish, a loud, “Haylooo,” and outspread arms. He had two tiny gift bags that carried scarves that were identical in pattern and varied only in color, handing Alette the one with more purple tones and Claire the one with more greens. “For your eyes.”

They each offered a hug and kiss. His unshaven cheek scraped their lips gently. “You look so distinguished and handsome,” Alette said.

“Distinguished means old, no? Indeed I do,” he said, straightening his coat with the palm of his hand and smiling wryly. “I tried, ladies. I tried so hard with this place. It conspired against me. I keep paying the bills because I kept thinking I’d have time to clean it up.” He grabbed a towel that was kept in a cabinet and began working at the counter tops. “How’d you get in?”

“Wasn’t hard. We need new locks,” Claire said.

“I’ll take care of it.” He dusted off two wooden chairs and took a seat. “You two came here, even with all the travel warnings. I can’t believe you really came.” He traced the wood where Jasmine’s initials were carved.

“Of course. I’m so happy to see you, Marque. How’s Jessie?” Claire

asked.

“Beautiful. I’m a lucky man. You two must come over while you’re here. She bought fish. We would’ve put you up. Our new place is small and pretty far away. You can take the train.”

“I like the hotel,” Alette said.

“You might want to find one a few miles away.”

“Is it that bad? We noticed the soldiers, the police.”

“I don’t know. Who knows. Things seem OK, then they’re not. There are threats of bombs and threats against specific people”

“We need to sell this place,” Claire said, eyeing her sister.

Marque nodded along. “I don’t want this place, but I want it to live. Since you’re here, since you’re here for days and the tourist attractions take hours, we could clean. You can see the potential. Maybe you are better to sell it than I was.”

The three cleaned the counters, listening to Adele from Marque’s iPhone, and singing along sloppily, laughing the way they used to when they were kids. Had Jasmine been here, she’d have told them all to start acting like adults, only to begin dancing and singing along in her too-high heels. She wore heels almost every day of her adult life, even as her posture became a question mark.

After the oven was scrubbed and scoured, they decided to do as Jasmine asked. “Marque, where is this store?” Claire asked, showing him their mother’s letter. He began reading, chuckling.

“I miss her irreverence,” he said. He took some time with the letters, turning off the music as his expression fell. The sisters traded a look and allowed him some time; they knew this look. Marque had been in denial, too, until now.

As they began putting the cleaning supplies away, Claire heard the faint ring of her phone. The Skype call was from Alex. She stepped outside to answer.

“I’m so sorry,” Alex said.

“I don’t have time,” she said.

Claire stood outside, half-listening, imagining violets the texture of felt out front. Her mother had loved those flowers, absorbing the slight moisture of the petals with her thumb, then dragging her thumb along her daughters’ cheeks as though casting a spell.

“Your mother still spoke to me,” he said, as though hearing her thoughts. “She was working on a plan to get us back together. I thought I’d try to carry it out on my own when she passed, but you can be a tough cookie.”

“A tough cookie. You can be a lying asshole.”

“I know, Claire. I know. But not anymore. Can we not stop this?”

“No, Alex. We cannot stop it.” Alex and Claire had met at the grocery. Nothing special, no fun, romantic story, simply two people looking at pears. Claire for a warm dessert her mother wanted to try with heavy whipping cream and cinnamon, and Alex because he loved pears — or so he’d said. It turned out to be another lie. He was a liar from the start, a manipulator.

“Who are you talking to?” Alette asked.

When Claire mouthed Alex, Alette smiled. “What a mess that guy is. Make him pay, sis. Tell him he has to pay you for his infidelities. If Sandy ever cheated on me, I’d replace her shampoo with glue. I’d rig her office chair so that it sounded like she was farting every time she got up.”

“I miss your sister,” Alex said with a sigh. “Please don’t do those things. Unless you are willing to forgive. Then you can do those things. Well, the glue would be bad because I’d look horrible bald. It’s

unfortunate because I think my hair is thinning. Claire, what will I do without you?”

She laughed a little, despite herself. He always rambled on. Nonsense that made her smile. She didn't answer. Looking up, distracted by her confused emotions, she saw three men with handguns running down the street, followed by a cluster soldiers with rifles, then armored vehicles. It was a war parade, and one of the men yelled at Claire to stay indoors when he saw her. “Get inside now!”

When she went back inside, she was gasping for breath as though she'd just run. “Where's Marque? There's men outside,” she began. There was a loud noise, like a hammer against the sky. Alette said Marque had gone to the store to get some ingredients.

Wispy light gray smoke entered the shop, and the sisters hardly noticed. It was coming from elsewhere, mostly held out by the building. Another loud sound, an explosion, rattled their hearts.

It soon became clear that the smoke was gaining momentum. A thick black mass soon covered the ceiling, and it began descending — far more violent than the person who awakened it. Claire reached around for her sister, as she used to when they were children. “Come on,” she said, inhaling tiny knives.

There was a time when the sisters felt almost a single entity, each of them content in matching over-worn, over-sized sweaters on those few cold Georgia winter days. Claire's was purple with pink hearts, and Alette's was the inverse. Back then, people often asked Jasmine if they were twins, and the girls would nod yes, giggling conspiratorially as their mother explained that although they

were close in age, they were far from twins. They used to reach for the other's hand any time life became too big.

Alette coughed, reached out. The sisters' fingers found each other, and when they gripped hands, Claire led Alette to the back door with eyes narrowed. The smoke was outside as well, but uncontained. People were running toward the water as though they were on fire. Buildings for half a block down smoked like giant chimneys. Soldiers were running in bird-like formations. Fire trucks drove in, and firemen got to work.

They ran. Alette's shoes did not slow her down. Marque's red hat was seen first near the grocer's, and when he turned around, the sisters ran faster still. He was looking dazed but standing in a clearing, where the smoke began to lose its grip. They ran through the gradations as he ran toward them. They made their way toward the hotel, passing glazed doormen and a few security guards who were looking down the street as though trying to decide if they could help. The air was clear here.

"A suicide bomber," the concierge from the other night said. He looked as though he was wearing a drama mask. Claire reached around to find her phone, but it was gone. Alette had hers in her back pocket, and the girls hunched over it to get the news. The power was flickering in the hotel. The staff was debating whether to lock the doors. One of them said the only two not here were Americans, a couple, so it might be best to lock up and watch out for them.

The couple Alette had watched as they watched the sea, so awestruck and knowing, might have been killed. Forty-eight killed, said the American news app. How could they know? There was live footage of the smoke, and there were close-ups of a man in all black entering the theater. "Why did they get this footage? How did they get this footage and not intervene?"

Jasmine would not be spread on flowers because nothing alive grew

on that street anymore, but she would know they tried. The sisters announced their status by way of phone call and email to the American Embassy. Claire texted Alex to let him know she was alive from Alette's phone, and he texted back right away. "Love you, C. Love you more than ever." Alette fumbled to text a few of her friends and girlfriend, but before she could get a response, her phone powered off.

"Shit! My charger was in my purse."

The sisters heard a loudspeaker announcement that asked no one go out onto the balconies. Every building in a two-mile radius was to be locked down. They suspected another suicide bomber on the run. Hotels were a prime target, as were anywhere large groups of people gathered. Claire began to cry. "Mom was in her shop. I left the bag there."

Alette sat next to her sister and eased her ear on her sister's shoulder, crying softly. "I'm not afraid," she said. "I know we'll need to leave, but I'm not giving up."

"Me either."

When they returned to the states, Alette was evicted, with nothing but a note on the door and a few of her things left in the hall. Most of her possessions had been swiped by passersby. She called her girlfriend, who didn't answer. She called a friend next, asking to stay the night.

"I'm going back, and I'm staying," she told Claire.

"Come home first," Claire said.

Claire had reopened the Athens shop with new determination. She stopped trying to get Alex to sign the divorce papers and instead began

to have coffee with him on occasion. She'd settle into his familiar arms and kiss his familiar lips. She'd hide in his admiring gaze until a sort of sobering up occurred and she realized that it couldn't move like this. Jasmine had been right that he had a place in her life, but it would take some time to figure out what that place was anymore.

They'd receive a settlement from the shop in France, but it would be some time. Jasmine's childhood neighborhood was healing, Marque told them; the city's slow heartbeat kept rhythmic with donations and global assurances, the brilliant spirit of its citizens. The shop was salvageable, and donations would likely cover repairs.

When Alette, unhinged from her day-to-day, offered to return, no one objected. "Good. I'll help revive the shop," she said, imagining no dreamland. She imagined a tough road. Her voice was more fixed than her sister had ever heard. Their mother's hometown was not ravaged but bruised and healing, and the shop stood sturdier than before, with Marque having already overseen some of the rebuilding.

A month before leaving, Alette helped her sister on a busy Sunday. They prepared for the small crowd, an increasing number of regulars who would collect outside the door before open. Their mother's instructions lined the walls in framed print, her letters a collage of prints that would be replicated in Nice. They cleaned and set up the tables and counter. They shared visions of the sister shop in Nice, which would no longer be a scorched or injured thing. The Grand Hotel had offered to put Alette up for a few weeks as repairs were completed.

"People are beginning to feel this is a community again," Marque would tell her when she'd arrive. He'd be wearing a red scarf.

At one time, the sisters played a game that drove Jasmine crazy. They'd close their eyes and begin at the front door, feeling their way around the small home until they'd ventured to all rooms without a peek. The game would sometimes scare one or the other, a misstep

would send electricity through their bellies, but they never cheated. Alette would reach out for her sister's hand.

They folded doughs and lined wax paper with their homemade truffles, prepared to instruction. They baked cookies and scones, mixed batters and blasted French pop music as customers, one by one, began to line up in anticipation of a flipped sign. The sweet smells of breads and sweet creams, of chocolate eclairs and almond macaroons, enveloped the sisters. They tied their aprons. Claire flipped the sign and unlocked the door. ■



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Jen Knox is the author of “After the Gazebo” (Rain Mountain Press, 2015). She is at work on a second collection, “The Glass City,” and she recently completed her first novel. Jen is a freelance writing coach and directs Gemini Ink’s Writers in Communities program. www.jenknox.com.

