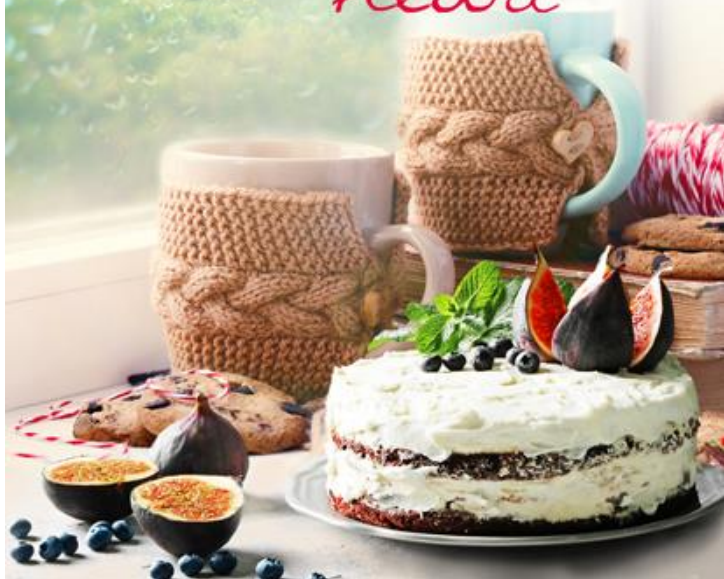


CANDICE SUE PATTERSON

*how to stir a
Baker's
heart*



How to Stir a Baker's Heart

Candice Sue Patterson

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How to Stir a Baker's Heart

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Dedication

To my grandparents, Eddie and Delores Self, who both struggled with dementia. I thought of you while writing nearly every page of this book, cherishing my childhood memories with you, wishing I could know you as an adult. How I wish you could meet my children, for I know they would love you as much as I do.

Thank you, Grandpa, for the postcard you sent me from Florida when I was three. I still have it. And believe it or not, that postcard is what prompted me to begin my writing journey. I look forward to seeing you both again someday. Until then, I will take imaginary journeys with you on your fictional boat on the lighthouse tour mentioned in this story.

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Adam, not only do you provide inspiration for my stories, but you calm me down when I'm freaking out over deadlines, you're patient when the house is a mess and the laundry is overlooked due to said deadlines, and you help me brainstorm plots when I need an idea from an entirely different angle. Thanks for being my real-life hero.

To my little men--Levi, Silas, and Hudson--who aren't so little anymore. You are wonderful boys, and I'm beyond blessed to hold the title "Mom." Even if I sometimes question whether or not I'm going to survive these teenage years. ;)

Above all, I thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I may not always understand the path He puts me on, but I'm glad He's in control. I'm grateful He has let this writing dream of mine come to fruition. All honor and glory is His.

And thank you, dear reader, for taking time out of your busy life to spend it with my characters.

1

For Olivia Hudson, starting over was like trying to bake an award-winning pie out of olives and sauerkraut. No matter what ingredients she added to balance the flavors or how she arranged them, it wouldn't work. Life was not a beach or a box of chocolates. Though chocolate did help.

The delectable, fudgy scent of her triple layer chocolate cake stirred Olivia's senses as she stretched across the bakery counter and placed a fresh slice in front of her favorite customer. In the four months Olivia had lived in Stone Harbor, Maine, she'd formed an attachment to Arianne Anderson. The sugar-craving bridal boutique owner had an honest, down-to-earth personality Olivia found refreshing.

"Thanks." Arianne lifted her fork as though it weighed a hundred pounds.

"Vanilla latte?" Olivia picked up a disposable cup and started the process, already knowing Arianne's answer.

"With a shot of espresso."

"Wow, someone's had a rough day."

Arianne stared at the thick brown frosting in a daze, sighed, and swallowed her first bite. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and her shoulders relaxed.

Olivia chuckled. All would be well in Arianne's world now—at least until the plate was empty.

"It's hot." Olivia placed the latte in front of her friend then leaned her elbows on the counter and clasped her hands, her lower back grateful for the reprieve. "What's got you down?"

Arianne's dark blue eyes pooled with tears. She swallowed and tucked a strand of curly blonde hair behind her ear. "I..." Arianne glanced down at the cake. "I'm cheating on my husband."

Olivia straightened.

A tear dropped onto the granite countertop. Arianne swiped away the dampness on her cheeks and sighed. "Two evenings a week for the past three months, I've had things to catch up on at work,"—she made air quotes over the last word—"when really I've been driving twenty miles to escape my husband and indulge in the sinful ecstasy of your baking."

The tight band around Olivia's throat eased. "There isn't another man?"

Arianne shook her head. "No. But the way I lust after this cake when I'm with Huck is adultery."

Relief almost swept Olivia's legs out from under her. She threw a wadded napkin at her friend, satisfied when it made contact with Arianne's nose. "You scared me."

More tears. Now that Arianne's faucet was running, there was no turning it off.

Olivia checked the time on the tea-stained clock with a cupcake from an old Victorian postcard decoupage to the face. Close enough. She locked the front door and flipped the sign to Closed. "What's got you running?"

Olivia joined Arianne on the customer side of the counter and took the next wooden stool beside her. She pressed her fingertips to her lower back.

Through the wall of paned windows, an orange sunset lowered against the icy harbor, giving an ethereal look to the lobster boats and dories coated with frost. Perfect for wall art.

Arianne fidgeted with the napkin, now damp and covered in mascara stains. "I can't get pregnant. We've been trying for almost two years and every time we're...*together* I feel like a complete failure. Sometimes it's so bad I avoid Huck entirely. Like tonight."

This sweet woman wanted a baby more than anything. Meanwhile, other women conceived unwanted children all the time. The world wasn't right.

"I'm sorry." Arianne sniffed. "The hormone therapy to help the fertility wagon along makes me a little emotional. Combined with the stress of expanding the boutique and building a wedding chapel, I'm a mess."

A little emotional? The woman was a basket-case. "How does your husband feel about you *working* late?"

Arianne forked a bite. "He doesn't suspect a thing."

"He will if you don't get rid of that smear of chocolate icing on your upper lip."

Arianne snatched up the napkin, made a face at the black stains, and smiled at Olivia's offer of a fresh one.

Both women giggled.

"I've no right to complain. God has already blessed me with a beautiful daughter from my first marriage. But she keeps asking for a sibling, and I know Huck wants a baby as much as I do, no matter how hard he tries to hide the disappointment in his

eyes month after month.”

Olivia stood and started cleaning the tables with a bleach-soaked rag. “Infertility doesn’t mean failure. Your husband may be disappointed, but I’m sure he’s not disappointed with you.”

The pungent smell filled the room as strongly as the words hit her heart. It was true in Arianne’s case. It didn’t apply to Olivia’s situation. That’s why work was such a great distraction. Her legs and feet ached, and her back complained by closing time every day, but the twelve-hour schedule did her good. She couldn’t dwell on regrets when she was too exhausted to think. Sleep, of late, had been blessedly quick and deep.

“In my head, I know you’re right. But my heart says something different.”

Don’t believe the lies. How many times back home had Olivia said that to patients in her office? Easy for her to say, but harder to believe now that she’d experienced the dark side of the rainbow.

“Hmm...this is divine,” Arianne said around a mouthful of cake. “What’s your secret anyway? I’ve never had frosting this perfect.”

Olivia shook off the black cloud. Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she’d skipped lunch. She paused her cleaning to smooth a knot from her shoulder. “Can you keep a secret?”

Arianne nodded, curls bouncing around her shoulders.

“Cola.”

“The carbonated drink?” Arianne stared at the remaining nugget of cake on her plate in wonder. “You’re a genius.”

Olivia swallowed the bark of laughter that almost escaped. “People have been using it for years.”

A cobweb dangled from one of the nautical lanterns suspended from a hand-hewn beam above Olivia's head. She stood on a chair, reached up, and brushed it away. Though both the building and the menu needed updates, the boat oars, fishing nets, and anchors adorning the whitewashed walls and the glass jars displaying colorful sea glass and shells gave the pastry shop a seaside, magazine-quality feel. Especially after she'd added thin crown molding to the display cases and then distressed them with white chalk paint.

Silence reigned until a ping on the glass caught their attention. The predicted wintry mix had arrived.

Arianne slapped five dollars on the counter and pushed it toward Olivia. "Tip." She winked. "I'll be back for another session on Thursday."

"Session?" The bill crinkled as Olivia slipped it in her apron pocket. How had Arianne found out her secret?

"Your desserts. They work better than any therapy available. I always feel better when I leave here."

Words Olivia had always loved to hear, though she'd never expected to hear them in a bakery. However, rumor had it the shop carried a confection to cure every problem. Like the gingersnaps that had helped ease Mrs. Watson's queasy stomach, or the iced, red velvet brownies that erased local author Maggie Mahonen's writer's block. Of course, the claims were ridiculous. Something for small-town folk to talk about. But the rumors had boosted business all the same. Olivia unlocked the door for her friend. "See you Thursday."

Arianne pointed her finger. "Next time, we talk about you."

"Oh, I don't—"

“You.” Arianne gently squeezed Olivia’s elbow. “Don’t think I can’t see the heartache lurking behind your eyes. I’ve been there myself. There’s a reason you came to Stone Harbor that involves more than caring for your grandma.” After a quick hug, Arianne put up her hood and dashed for her car.

So much for anonymity. There was truth to that women’s intuition thing.

Olivia sucked in a deep breath. The cold air shocked her lungs. Indiana winters had been cold, but Maine felt like the tundra. She needed some heavier gear.

After sweeping the small section of floor she’d missed earlier, she turned out the lights and pushed through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Gleaming stainless steel and the lingering smell of lemon cleaner made her smile. She was grateful for such a hard-working crew. And grateful they’d all left for the day. A quiet kitchen fed her creativity, revived her soul.

She cocked her head. The building was too quiet. Had Grandma fallen asleep while organizing her new desk? Olivia rushed to the office, where she’d left her grandma reading earlier. Other than typical office stuff and a small loveseat, the room was empty. A young adult mystery novel lay bookmarked upside down on a cushion.

Dousing the light, Olivia closed the office door and checked the bathroom. On her way to the other side of the kitchen, her foot hit an object that scraped across the tile floor. Grandma’s glasses. Olivia knelt to pick them up, and her gaze traced an invisible trail to the cracked-open back door. Dread coiled inside Olivia’s stomach and squeezed. “Grandma?”

The rear parking lot was void of cars and people

but was quickly filling with sleet and snow.

“Grandma?” she yelled louder.

Where on earth had she gone?

Panic set in. Olivia grabbed her purse and locked the doors behind her, the display case of treats the last thing she spied through the glass before icy drops pelted her head.

If only her desserts could heal all the messes in her life. A cookie to regenerate her life's purpose. A muffin to rebuild the declining bakery. An olive and sauerkraut pie to find a missing woman with Alzheimer's.

2

Sleet smacked the windshield, pulling Blake Hartford's focus from the Co-Op meeting and back to the road. The weatherman had predicted a warming trend in April with a high chance of heavy frost in early May. Every farmer in New England would spend the next month on their knees. If Blake lost another crop to frozen blossoms or disease it would do him in.

He turned up the defrost and slowed the vehicle. The wipers slapped time with the radio, giving him a glimpse of the pavement before the icy glaze stole his view again. Warm air blasted at full speed. With a swipe, the glass cleared, presenting a ribbon of road in the path of his headlights—and a person walking along the center lane.

Blake swerved and then pumped the break until the truck came to a safe stop along the shoulder. Gut in his throat, he inhaled a deep breath and flipped on the hazard lights. The figure remained an obscure dark blob in his rearview mirror. He scrubbed a hand down his face to rid the images of what had almost happened. Obviously, whoever that was needed help.

Blake left his truck, and his breath caught as icy rain pummeled his face and shoulders. Swaying pines on the opposite side of the road made menacing shadows, while the ocean beyond the guardrail churned waves against the cliff.

The pedestrian walked closer, seemingly unaware of the icy moisture.

"Is everything all right? Can I give you a ride?"

When the figure moved within five feet of his truck, the red glow of the taillights revealed a thin, frozen frame. A woman. With no coat. "Miss, are you hurt?"

The scared gaze that latched onto his didn't belong to a miss at all but to a woman he'd guess to be in her seventies. She opened her mouth to speak but a tremble stole through her body, and she closed her lips.

Sleet coated Blake's hair and eyelashes. He cleared them with a swipe of his fingers. "Ma'am, are you hurt?"

No bleeding or bruises from what little he could see, only a small icicle clinging to the end of her nose. He hadn't passed any stranded vehicles on this stretch of road. Had she wrecked? Been attacked?

"Ma'am?"

Frail, wrinkled hands reached for his arm as another shiver overtook her. He'd been in the elements less than a minute, and he was chilled clear through. No wonder she couldn't speak. The sweatshirt she wore offered no protection. If she'd been walking any length of time at all—and by looks of her stiff clothes she had—hypothermia was probably setting in.

With a firm gentle tug on her hands, Blake led the way back to his truck. "Is there anyone I can call for you?"

The poor woman shook so badly he feared her legs would give out. He needed to get her warmed up, and now. He opened the passenger side door and lifted all of what felt like ninety-eight pounds of her onto the

seat, praying she understood he was trying to help and not harm her.

“My name is Blake,” he said, his foot slipping on the pavement as he backed away. “I’m going to get you warm and safe.” He closed her door and went around the back of the truck, slipping once on the road.

The cab brought instant relief from the cold. He switched the vents to defrost and floor panels and then cranked the temperature as hot as it would go. “Where can I drive you? Do you have family close by?”

The woman stared at the dashboard. Shock? Blake ran his fingers through his hair. Or tried to. The ends had crusted over. What should he do? Hospital or police station? “Can you tell me your name?”

Nothing.

Watching to be sure there were no other cars on the deserted highway, he jerked the wheel in a U-turn and headed back toward town. No matter where he ultimately decided to take her, both places lay that direction.

His wet palms kept slipping on the steering wheel, and he swiped them along his damp jeans. “How’d you come to be out in this mess?”

The woman only shivered.

“Again, my name is Blake. I’m here to help you.”

He hoped making polite conversation would put her fears at ease, if she had any. Her face was as placid as a summer lake. Blake talked about everything that popped into his head—what he’d worked on that day, who he predicted would win the World Series, his favorite foods. By the time they reached Stone Harbor, the woman began rallying around.

She studied a rip in her slacks. “I-I don’t know you.”

Streetlights bathed the truck enough for him to witness the confusion in her pale eyes. "No, ma'am." Blake repeated his name and how she'd come to be in his truck.

"I don't know you." She gripped the door panel, raising the thick veins in her hands. Her gaze darted around the cab. Her chest rose and fell in panic. "I don't know you!"

Blake hesitated to move or speak, unsure how to handle the situation. The police station was closest. He'd take her there. They could determine whether or not she required medical care. He eased the truck to a stop at the town's only stoplight, the police station a long two blocks away.

The woman groped for the door handle. "I don't know you," she yelled, over and over.

Blake grabbed her arm, not only to reassure her but to keep her from jumping out. Despite not weighing more than a wet blanket, she managed to best him and opened her door. She jumped off the bench seat and onto the ground with the stealth of someone half her age. Apparently, fear and adrenaline were a powerful combination.

Blake slapped the wheel, threw the truck into park, and followed her. "I won't hurt you. I'm trying to get you home."

She spun and pointed a finger at him, stuttering words he couldn't make out, eyes wild.

Oncoming headlights highlighted them, and a sports car fishtailed to a halt at the curb. The driver's door opened. "Grandma?" A young woman in a hooded coat scrambled out and ran at them. "Oh, thank God, you're safe." She gripped her grandma's arms and pulled her into a hug, pushing the hood off

her hair.

The older woman's face twisted in annoyance but the savage look in her eyes dimmed.

Cold rain spattered around them.

Blake exhaled, glad the woman had family and grateful to exit this scenario. "I found her walking down Highway One just past Rim Road."

The woman released her grandma and turned as if she only just realized he'd been standing there. The bluest eyes he'd ever seen met his. Even with her dark hair mussed, the freezing rain, and the petrified grandmother, his mind declared she was absolutely beautiful.

"That man...that man," the grandma stuttered, jabbing her bony finger at Blake.

Blake took a step back, unsure what he'd done to make the woman angry.

"That man," she repeated.

"Calm down, Grandma, and tell me what happened. Are you hurt?"

"Hurt." The elderly woman put distance between herself and Blake. "That man...hurt...hurt."

The younger woman gazed at her grandma's torn slacks and mud-stained sweatshirt. Those blue eyes bounced from him to her grandma then back again. "Did this man hurt you?"

The grandma jabbed a finger at him again. "Hurt."

Blake threw up his palms. "I didn't—"

"Back off." Those stunning eyes turned to blue fire, and she gripped her grandma's arm, walking them both backwards to the sports car. Blake stepped forward to defend his character, not wanting this woman to think he'd harm anyone.

She thrust out a palm like a traffic cop. "Don't

come any closer or I'll...I'll..." They continued backing away as she glanced around the sidewalk in search of something. She raised her chin. "I'll kick you."

If the circumstances were different, he'd laugh. Unfortunately, nothing about this evening was funny. Why would the grandma lie about something he didn't do? "I found her walking in the storm, unresponsive. I was taking her to the police station."

"That man...hurt...me," the grandma lied again.

Blake kept his response calm. "I didn't."

"Hurt!" The old woman screamed the word over and over.

With every backwards step closer to their car, the granddaughter's gaze darted from him to her grandma. Her forehead crumpled, as if trying to decide whose position was most logical. If her grandma would stop screaming maybe the woman could judge accurately.

Before Blake could regain equilibrium of the situation, he was staring at the sports car's taillights in the distance. Drizzle coated his skin. The town was silent and unmoving, the businesses having closed hours ago. The stoplight reflected green off the slick pavement.

His attempt at Good Samaritan had just exploded.

Blake returned to his truck and waited for the now-red light to turn green. He was soaked, cold, and tired, but what troubled him more than anything was that the granddaughter—and the elderly woman, who'd obviously lost her faculties—thought him a monster. Or a pervert.

With no way to rectify the misunderstanding, Blake went to the police station, reported the incident to the authorities so they'd be aware of what had