I’d never seen the point of holding a grudge.

As far as I could tell, resentments tended to weigh on a person, like stones sinking slowly through the cold green waters of a northern lake. Too many and you’ve got yourself a wall.

Delia Burns, however, was fueled by indignation. The smallest thing could set her off: a perceived slight at a social event, a greeting returned with less enthusiasm than her own, a lack of credit where she thought some was due. Delia’s perpetual sense of outrage prompted her to dream up blistering revenge schemes that she confided to me daily.

We worked together at the most popular shop in Crocus Lake. She’d opened the Blue Ribbon Bakery twenty years ago and offered me a job after the town had blended two high schools into one, eliminating my principal position. I could have fought to stay, but the other candidate was younger and therefore cheaper, so the die was already cast.

Not much to be said about that.

Delia and I had been best friends since first grade—for six decades, I’d played Ethel to her Lucy. She’d kept me by her side no matter how many accolades she acquired: class president, head cheerleader, valedictorian. Not everyone appreciated her blazing ambition, but it was generally understood that once Delia set her mind on something, you’d better do what she wanted or get out of the way. She’d been bossing us around from the playground to the town board, where she now ruled meetings with an eager gavel.

People occasionally asked how I put up with her.


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I closed the cardboard lid over the cherry pie nestled in the box that would be picked up within the hour. It had turned out perfectly, following my mother’s recipe. Reading her spidery handwriting on the index card made me feel closer to her.

A cloud of spicy perfume announced Delia at my elbow. Her copper hair was a darn near exact match to my own—or at least the color mine used to be. I’d taken the path of least resistance, avoiding the salon and throwing my white hair into a braid every morning. But Delia had gone red so long ago that it was impossible to imagine her any other way.

“Who is that pie for, Ellie?” She slammed a tray of éclairs onto the counter.

I hesitated.

Delia glanced at the top of the box, where I’d written Ellie Sweet in neat cursive, and nodded.

Then she slid open the door to the display case so hard it stuck at the far end.

I moved past her, scooping up a damp cloth to wipe down the bistro tables. As I headed toward the front of the bakery, I noted several items piled haphazardly on the opposite sidewalk and tried to determine what they had in common.

“Annie’s changing the window again,” I said over my shoulder. Usually Delia and I enjoyed
guessing what theme the shopkeeper was going for.

There was no answer—just the sound of a cardboard box closing. I twisted slightly and caught a glimpse of a second white square next to the one I’d left on the counter. Delia was writing with a marker. I didn’t even have to see it to know that her name was in large dark capital letters, or that she’d added underneath, in parentheses, *Reigning Champion*.

I turned my attention to the store across the street. Lakeview Treasures was filled to the brim with souvenirs celebrating upstate New York. Annie earned a good living off of the steady stream of tourists drawn to the lake on one side of town and the mountains on the other. Further enticing visitors were charming festivals and special events advertised in a variety of travel publications.

Like the famous Lake Bake, one of the oldest contests in town.
Which Delia had won for twenty-nine years straight.

Although she was capable of submitting intricate cakes or sophisticated pastries, the Lake Bake required the same item from all competitors: a pie. It was a beloved tradition, and I’d often wondered if Delia hoped that her victories somehow balanced the widespread distaste for her forceful personality. She varied the fruits in her pies every year, and people fell over themselves predicting which one she’d choose, as if it were a matter of great importance.

Her contest triumphs had propelled her to start a bakery when she needed to make a living after her husband died. I was glad about the Blue Ribbon, despite the fact that opening a bakery had been my dream from kindergarten forward. And that her husband had been my own fiancé until Delia decided she wanted him.

Anything Delia did was performed with such excitement and entitlement that I found myself swept along like a tiny pebble caught in the tide.

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Delia had lined up her golden trophies on a high shelf so that customers could see but not touch them. Many was the day I’d admired their glint in the sunlight as I listened to her rejoice in how her secret ingredient had never let her down, and how proud Cal would have been about the winning his wife was doing. And I’d agreed that yes, one more trophy would be terrific, and yes, it really was remarkable that someone could win thirty years in a row, and yes, it probably was a world record.

I had cheered her on.
I had applauded her success.
I had smiled when she showed me her apron, newly embroidered with *Winner* in crimson thread—even if mine, unadorned by any word whatsoever, suddenly seemed to whisper *Loser*.
And then I’d entered the contest, too.
I’d decided to do it the moment I found my mother’s recipe card tucked into the book she’d been reading in the big house that was all too quiet now. The memories rushed over me in relentless waves.
If only I’d taken her back to the doctor earlier. But Delia had said my mother was exaggerating her symptoms for attention. It had happened with her parents, she’d said. Checking out every little complaint was not worth the time and money. Trust her, she’d said.
So I had. Until it was too late.

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The next day was a blur of measuring, mixing, kneading, rolling, and baking. We glazed this, we iced that, we started all over again. I tried to talk to Delia about the contest, but when I opened my mouth, I ended up complimenting her choice of fillings or blurting out ill-conceived
frosting strategies.
What I needed to say remained submerged.
Our exchanges were excruciatingly polite, yet our attempts to avoid one another led to awkward choreography. We were in the same place, but we were no longer in it together.
It was almost a relief when Delia dragged me into the office, gripping my arm tightly enough to bruise it.
“Look!” She pointed at the computer screen with a blood-red talon. “The finalists have been posted.”
My name below hers appeared to glow. I was transfixed by the sight.
Her fingernails drummed expectantly on the desk. When I eventually mustered up the courage to face Delia, she put her hands on her hips and fixed me with a blue glare.
For the first time, I read danger there.
Concentrating on keeping my voice steady, I congratulated her.
“Congratulations?” she hissed. “Why on earth would you do this to me?”
The words emerged slowly, as though they were swimming up through dark water. “It wasn’t about you. For once.”
Her intake of breath was so sharp it could have cut glass.

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The morning after our second round of pies had been picked up for judging, customers flowed into the bakery chirping about the contest and wishing us luck. Delia and I spoke with every last one.
We never said a word to each other.
It was just after closing when the battered black phone on the wall rang. I wiped the flour off of my hands by sliding them across my apron and picked up the receiver.
“Blue Ribbon.”
“Ellie,” said the mayor, who supervised the Lake Bake. “I’m sorry to tell you, but we have a situation. The judges who tasted your pie all took sick.”
I gasped.
His deep voice rolled on. “Like dominoes. One right after the other.”
“What in the world—”
“Couldn’t say, but I wanted to give you a heads up. As a courtesy.”
“I’m so sorry to hear that.” After a beat, I added, “You know I didn’t—”
“Of course not.” He paused. “It’s going to be quite the story around town, I expect. You can kiss your chances of winning the contest goodbye.”
“I don’t care about that,” I told him. “I just want the judges to recover.”
“Good. We’ll provide an update soon.” He cleared his throat. “But this may affect the bakery, too. People could be afraid of eating there for a spell.”
After thanking him for the call, I hung up the phone and gazed around the room as I processed what the mayor had told me. My eyes rose to the trophies spanning the wall like a gilded army poised for battle.
And then I knew.
The door banged against the brick wall as I hurried out into the alley, where Delia was pulling an item from the trunk of her car. I stumbled down the steep concrete stairs, avoiding the patch of ice that lingered on the steps all winter, no matter how many sunny days we had.
She beckoned me over as if I was not already charging in her direction and held out a small plastic bag. “Blue ribbons,” she said, pursing her lips. “One of us is going to win this contest. We
might as well decorate. Play up the name of the bakery.”

I shoved the bag into my apron pocket. “Listen. The judges are sick. The mayor called. The sheriff is probably next.”

She tilted her head. “What happened?”

“What did you do, Delia?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, smiling brightly.

I sighed. “Stop it. What did you put in the pie?”

Her smile faltered just enough to reveal the battle between wanting to sustain her charade and wanting to brag about what she’d done.

I waited.

Delia shrugged. “My secret ingredient, as always.”

“Not your pie. Mine.”

She shook her head.

“Admit it. You owe me that.” I held my breath, craving an explanation but knowing where it would lead us.

Delia looked down for a long while, then lifted her chin defiantly. “Oh, Ellie. No need to be so dramatic. I thought yours could use a dash of secret ingredient, too.” She laughed lightly. “Obviously not the same ingredient I use in mine.”

The words hit hard, as if she had struck me, and I took a step back. “You poisoned them.”

She returned to the items in her trunk. “Relax. It’s not deadly. It’ll just make them a bit nauseated. They’ll be fine.”

I stared at her, registering a distant rumble, like water crashing on sand. “Why would you do that?”

Delia spun around and approached me, a tire iron in hand. “You tell me.”

The roar grew louder in my ears. I moved up the stairs, anxious to put space between us.

“You wanted to win.”

“One good sabotage deserves another,” she snapped, her face distorted by rage. “Don’t you think?”

My arms flew up in an attempt to prevent her from coming any closer. “I wasn’t trying to sabotage you.”

She made a frustrated sound, something akin to a howl. “Then what were you doing? Aren’t we friends? How could you betray me?”

“No!” I cried, painfully aware that the next words wrung out of me would mean far more than she would ever acknowledge. “You betrayed me!”

“You don’t deserve to win!” Delia screamed, raising the tire iron and rushing forward. My skin seemed to burn, reflecting the heat emanating from her.

I scrambled onto the top step as she climbed toward me.

The moment my hand closed on the doorknob, Delia slipped on the ice and went down, hitting her face on the stairs, the tire iron falling onto her head immediately afterwards.

I froze.

“Ellie—” she gurgled, then went limp.

I started to reach out to her but was shrouded by a hazy mist, with ghostly traces of all that she had taken from me.

I lowered my arm.

“Be well, Delia,” I whispered to her back.

Like I always said, there’s no point in holding a grudge.
I went inside, turned off the lights, and left through the front door.
As I slowly walked home, I tied a blue ribbon onto the end of my braid.