

(Chapter ONE)

Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies

Why am I still in this car?

I blink about a zillion times and then squeeze my eyes shut, both because the sun is right in my face, and because I need time for my slug-a-bug brain to catch up to the now.

I try to remember the last thing I remember but it's slow going. I didn't just sleep, I crash-napped, and now my brain feels sort of like a zombie alien. Everything comes into focus very, very slowly.

The blur of shapes, scrubby bushes, and a wide field full of cows.

The van engine squeaking like hamsters on a wheel.

Dad, patting the steering wheel, urging the van to go faster than the car we're trying to pass.

Mom, scrunched down in her seat, reminding him we're in no hurry so he needs to chill-ax.

Bubby, snoring into his pillow behind me. I'd bet my cupcake shaped measuring cups he's drooling.

Penny, tapping her feet to whatever music's traveling through her ear buds.

Then there's my numb bum and the seatbelt lines etched into my cheek. Proof of what the last forty-eight hours have been like.

I groan and shift, my body feels heavy and as slow as snails in marshmallow creme.

"Are you awake?" Robyn's breath is hot on my cheek.

I squirm away, my face mushing into the cool glass window.

"Cat?"

Poke, poke, poke into my side.

"Cat?"

Poke, poke, poke.

"Cat!!" Robyn shrieks right in my ear this time and shakes my arm like we're in the middle of an earthquake.

I bolt upright, my heart pumping, "I'm awake! I'm awake!"

"*Finalmente!*" Robyn thuds back into her seat, her hands slapping her legs, "You've been asleep forever and a day and a half!!"

I rub my face, trying to smooth out the wrinkles, and look around.

The first thing I see is Robyn, my bestest, most favoritest cousin in the whole wide universe that I want to throw out the window right now.

I send her my best gremlin glare. "Robyn! What the heck?!"

"We're here Bean-up! You're missing everything. Wake up, wake up! This is the Best. Day. Ever!" She bounces all over the place, into the window, bumping me, ramming Mom's seat, hitting the ceiling, bumping my leg again...

She has had WAY too much sugar, I think.

I twist away to check out my own window.

Can it be true, are we really here?

I kind of was thinking I would spend the rest of eternity in this car. We've been driving so long I'm not sure what life was like before I buckled up butter-cup.

"Look! Look! Look!" Robyn smacks my arms and legs in her excitement.

My eyes focus on a bunch of old buildings lined up along the main street. Our car is slowing down so I know the bakery has to be one of them. My heart gets stuck somewhere in my esophagus,

making it hard to swallow. I've waited MONTHS for this moment, months that felt like YEARS.

And now it's here!

I finally get to see the family bakery, I finally get to meet my Great Grammy Ginny and Aunt Jojo! And maybe, just maybe, I can finally figure out why my family is so stinking weird.

Toward the end of the row of shops is a cheerful sign that says **L'Amour Bakin'**. It waves in the breeze like a hand, welcoming us.

"We're here!" A screech bursts out of me, all sleepiness gone. I want to burst into the air like a firecracker and explode in hot pinks and lime greens so the world knows how over-the-top excited I am.

Bubby groans, pulling his pillow over his head.

"Wake up you slug-a-bug!" I wad up my blanket and toss it over the seat.

He snuggles it up to his chin with a sleepy, "Thanks."

Yeah, he's a lost cause.

My fingers fumble with the handle of the door as Dad eases the car into a parking space in front of the bakery.

I overpower the motorized sliding door, yanking until there is a gap large enough for me to slip through, then I fly around to Robyn's side and do the same to her door.

"We're here, we're here, we're here!" I jump into the air, taking Robyn with me. We aren't quite in sync, her up throws off my down and we both crash into the car.

"You guys are so weird." Penny steps out of the van then grabs the arch of her foot and pulls her leg straight up next to her face in a stretch that looks completely unnatural.

And painful.

Despite the fact that he's limp as licorice, Bubby lets Dad pull him out of the back of the car and set his feet on the pavement. Bubby blinks with heavy eyelids, his thumb sneaks to his lips as he leans into Dad's leg.

Good thing he did too, the kid looks like he's about to timber into the bushes.

Dad rests a hand on Bubby's head and takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. I copy-cat him to see what that's all about. The air is crisp and clean, like it is in the mountains around Boise. It's the kind of air you want to fill your lungs

with and hold onto. It smells like Fall and love and happiness and home.

In fact, this whole place feels like coming home after a long, tiring trip.

Which, in a way, I guess we are.

Dad smacks the hood with his palm. "Wow. I forgot how much I love this town. Coming Bridge?"

Mom slowly steps out of the car, her face pinched. Her eyes dart around, not stopping on anything for more than a couple seconds. She looks like she wants to run screaming down the street with both hands waving in the air.

That would be funny!

But also, super embarrassing.

I better do something.

I skip over and throw my arms around Mom's waist, squeezing her guts out.

Mom laughs and squeezes me back. I don't think she can help it, I'm kind of irresistible, you know.

"We're here!" Robyn reaches for Mom's hand.

The smile that was just starting to climb, falls fifty stories. Mom's arms go stiff at her sides. Her lips flip upside down, the corners stretching to her chin.

I follow her gaze to the door of the bakery, which just swung open. A tiny lady with snow white hair that curls around her ears, toddles towards us. She clings to the arm of my mom's clone. Except this version's blond hair is cut in an A-line bob with bright blue tips.

Aunt Jojo.

And the lady with her has to be Great Grammy Ginny.

They wave so fast it's like they are trying to bring use to them faster, or vice versa. Great Grammy Ginny takes mincing steps so she seems to walk in slow motion, but she covers the ground in no time. Once she is within reach, she throws her arms around my mom.

"I can't believe my eyes! Oh my Bridget, my love. You've come home!" Her voice is a tinkling bell that slips into my soul and vibrates.

I LOVE her already!

The top of her cutesy patootsie head comes to my shoulder, and I am kind of a shrimp. Next to Robyn, Great Grammy Ginny looks

like a little kid. She's plumpish, in a cozy way, with brown eyes that look almost black. The weird thing is, even though she has old lady hair, her face is young with zero wrinkles. When she pulls me down into a tight hug, I smell vanilla and cinnamon.

"Oh, we are so happy to have you here!"

"Me too," I talk louder, since my voice is muffled into her hair, "Thank you for letting us come visit, Great Grammy Ginny."

"Oh no, no no," She tuts, pulling away, "That is too much of a mouthful. You call me GG. That's easy, no?"

"No, I mean yes, GG."

She takes my face between her palms and stares at me with so much focus I start to wonder if I have a booger or something hairy in my teeth. "You are just like my mother when she was a girl. You are how old?"

"Fourteen."

"So like her." GG's eyes dart across my face a moment longer, then she squishes my cheeks so my lips poof out. "You are the most beautiful girl. I wait my whole life to see you here!"



I try to smile, but my lips won't move upwards with her hands there. They pooch out like I'm eating a lemon. It's okay though, she's not paying attention to my expression, she's too busy smacking big smooches on each side of my face.

GG pats my cheek and turns to Robyn. I watch her squeeze the life out of Robyn for half a second before I disappear into a mess of arms and fringy green kimono.

"Cat, Cat, Cat!" Soft hair tickles my cheek as Jojo gives me an anaconda squeeze. Right when I think she will let go, her arms get tighter. I gulp a breath and disappear into her shoulder again. Even if I could think of something to say right now, there wouldn't be enough air to pull it off.

But that's not a bad thing.

I wouldn't move right now for a whole tray of ooey gooey brownies.

Jojo leans away, keeping her hands on my shoulders. She stares at me the way GG did, like she's trying to find out everything about me at a glance. Tears glisten in the corners of her eyes, but don't fall. When she smiles, cute little wrinkle lines move from her eyes to her hairline.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you." She twirls a lock of my hair around her finger. "I started to write you a letter so many times, but couldn't find the words. I am glad, glad, glad that you guys are here!"

I try to answer, but there's something stuck in my throat. Even when I clear it, the thing stays put. It's having the weirdest effect on my eyes, they like, sting and stuff.

Prickles.

And now there's a tear sliding down my cheek.

Yeah,

I have no idea.

Jojo plants a noisy kiss on my forehead. "I can't wait to get to know you. I can't wait to find out everything about everything. I only wish you guys were here longer, a week is not enough time to catch up on a lifetime! Robyn, come here girlfriend!" Jojo stretches one of her arms to enfold Robyn and pull her to us.

Robyn rests her cheek against Jojo's head. "This is, like, my dream come true!"

Jojo laughs, "Seriously Cat, every year Robyn says, 'Cat would love this, I wish I could show this to Cat, I'll have to tell Cat about everything'!"

"Really?"

Jojo and Robyn nod together.

It makes me feel all rosy glowy inside.

Then Bubby interrupts the love fest.

"Jojo!" He tugs her hand, "Jojo, GG Grammy G said you have cookies for me."

"Oh shoot!" Jojo smacks her palm against her forehead so loud Bubby giggles. "I am so silly, come with me Mr. Andy-roo, let's go on a super secret mission to get some cookies!"

Jojo takes Bubby's hand and they disappear into the bakery.

I watch them go, part of me wants to see the inside so bad I can't wait another millisecond, but I stay put.

There are so many feelings I'm feeling, it's a super good thing I'm not trying to bake right now. If I did, the results would be Cat-astrophic, I'm pretty sure.

So I'm just going to just stand here and soak it all in.

GG and Dad stand with Penny between them, pointing at things up and down the street. Knowing my dad, they are probably talking about all the things that have changed in the one hundred and fifty thousand years since he was here last.

Wait, where is my mom?

Oh,

I see her back in the car, rooting through her purse. Why isn't she out here? Maybe she needs help with something?

Before I make my move, Robyn puts her hand on my arm.

"Cat?" She shifts from foot to foot, "I have to talk to you." Her face is so serious, my breath catches.

Did something bad happen while I was taking my car nap? Did Black Gryphon stop making Youtube videos? Or worse! Did they discontinue my favorite shade of nail polish; Bubble Gum Cotton Candy Glitter Happy Dreams?

Robyn takes a deep breath, "GG and Jojo love pumpkin."

"Okay?" I'm still thinking about the nail polish, it's hard to focus on Robyn's words.

"I mean, they love to bake with pumpkin, a lot, especially in the Fall."

I wrinkle my nose.

"Stop that!" Robyn smacks my shoulder, "It's Thanksgiving, there's going to be a lot of things made out of pumpkin. It's practically a rule!"

"A dumb rule," I shake my head, "Vegetables do NOT belong in dessert."

"It's not all bad. Like, pumpkin pie, you know you really only taste the whipped cream."

"Yeah, if you put whipped cream on like you do!" I mime swirling to the sky.

Robyn swats my hand away from her face, "ANYWAY, just please don't hurt their feelings, okay?"

Like I am a complete Neanderthal.

"Okay, I won't. I'll just take a bite and spit it in their faces, rub my tongue and scream."

Robyn rolls her eyes, "Yeah, okay, you do that."

I cross my eyes and stick out my tongue.

"Super mature, Cat. I'm being serious. You have to promise."

Robyn holds out her pinkie.

She really wants me to make a super serious unbreakable pinkie promise,

Over pumpkin?

Why is this such a big deal?

I don't know why, but it obviously is. I mean, Robyn's stubborn face is no joke. I can't remember a single time in my whole life when I got out of doing something after Robyn looked at me like this. So I guess I'm going to have to suffer through eating pumpkin.

Seriously though, why do people put vegetables and raisins in things? It's not as if there aren't any other options. Like, right now I can name three things to use instead, without even straining my brain.

Chocolate chips,

Gummy bears,

And

Sprinkles.

Lots and lots of sprinkles.

Now, I'm hungry.

"Fine," I heave a great sigh, "I promise I won't be a stink brain about the pumpkin. Happy?"

"I guess that will work." Robyn grips my pinkie with hers, then looks over my shoulder, "Hey, what's up with your mom?"

"I don't know, I was just on my way over to check. Wanna come?"

Robyn's eyes move to the van and back again. She shakes her head, "I think I'll wait here."

I shrug and skip over to the van, "Hey Mommy, Mom, Mom," I lean on the open door, resting my cheek against the cool metal.

"Hey, Kitty Cat."

"You okay?"

Mom sighs and looks up at me, "I'm okay."

I nod, like I'm convinced, but I'm not. "Liar."

Mom puts out her arm and scootches over so I can sit on the seat with her. "Yeah, maybe."

"Why?"

Mom sighs, "You know why, we've talked about this, it's just, really hard for me to come back here."

"Because of Jojo?"

"Partly," Mom stares out the windshield at the bakery and shivers, "But also, the whole bakery and baking thing and this place. So many memories."

I'm no Sherlock like Robyn, but based on the grimace, I'm guessing they aren't good memories.

"Yeah, well," I twirl a loose string from my shirt, "Thank you for doing this for me, Mom."

"Oh, Cat," Mom snuggles me closer, "I didn't mean to sound like I don't want to be here or I'm a martyr to your cause or something. This is just hard, but," she takes a deep breath, "I can do hard things, right?"

"Yes," I agree, because it's true. "You can."

"Right," Mom leans back so she can see my face. "And so can you. You know, I have this feeling..."

Uh-oh.

My mom having feelings usually means I have to clean something.

"You and I, we might need to do some adjusting on this trip. I don't know what's going to happen exactly, but I think it would be good for us if we decide to go along with everything. You know what I mean?"



My blank stare says more than words.

"What I mean is I'm going to let all my expectations go, and I think this will be good for you too. What if we decide right now that we will be super flexible?"

I instantly picture Penny and her impossible ballerina stretches. There's no way I can make my legs do those things.

"Flexible?"

"This trip could be uncomfortable, we might have to stretch a little." Mom sounds like she's talking more to herself than to me, but I'm cool with it. "So, what if we made the choice to be good for whatever? I think we could make this trip pretty great if we are just good for whatever. What do you think?"

"I think," I pause to think about what I think. There's a lot of thoughts in there and I haven't had a chance to sort any of them into piles.

My mom smiles and rubs my back, "Let's just try, okay? Will you try with me?"

The fruity smell of her lotion and the rustling breeze quiet my mind so Mom's words work their way into my brain. Like a worm. But not a bad one. More like a caterpillar. If I let it stay for

awhile, it might transmorgify into something butterfly level amazing.

I know this is hard for Mom, she doesn't want to be here, but she is.

Because of me.

So that I can learn how to bake responsibly instead of emotionally. If she can do that for me, then I can for sure be good for whatever with her.

Right?

Right!

I nod so much that some of my hair flies out of my half ponytail. As I brush it back into place, I see Mom's eyes all lit up with zeal.

"That's my girl. We can do this. I am ninety-nine percent sure we are going to survive this week."

"Those are pretty good odds."

"Pretty good indeed, look, there's Jojo, Come on. We can do this." She tickles me until I squirm out of the car, then she stands up and takes my hand. We walk over to Jojo and Bubby, who are handing out cookies.

Horrible, orangey-brown lumps that look like unspeakable things.

I paste a smile on my face and take a cookie from the plate Bubby offers me, but don't eat it, instead I hide it in my hand and lean over to look at the one Robyn has. "What is it?"

"Pumpkin chocolate chip," She takes a huge bite, "My favorite!"

I'm sorry. It does not look good before, or after the chewing.

No one is paying attention to me, so I discreetly dissect the cookie in my hand. I really don't want to eat it, it looks obscene and pumpkin is super gross.

That pact with my mom is the worst timing. I should have made it after the cookies were passed around.

A hand squeezes my shoulder, I look up at my mom. Her eyes widen and then she winks. "Good for whatever." She whispers, then with a deep breath, she slips between Robyn and I, to stand in front of Jojo.

"Hello Jolynn." Her voice is really loud.

Jojo startles, almost toppling the plate from her hands to the asphalt. She turns slowly, "Bridget."

Mom presses her lips together, then relaxes into a smile. "Yes, hello. It's been so long, how have you been?"

It's not the smoothest delivery, but no one can doubt Mom's sincerity.

Tears leak down Jojo's cheeks without warning, not even a lip quiver. It's like when Bubby forgets to turn the nozzle on the bathtub all the way off, and it leaks steadily into the tub. She pushes the plate of cookies into GG's hands and throws her arms around my mom.

"Oh Bridge! Thank you! I thought you hated my guts. I'm so glad you talked first, I don't think I could have done it, I've been so scared! But now, now it's all okay right? We can be friends again?"

My mom bursts into noisy tears that make the rest of us find sudden interest in whatever is on the ground. This is a thousand times more awkward than a middle school dance. I peek at them though, cause I have to look, like when someone has toilet paper stuck to their shoes.

GG clasps her hands at her heart with a smile that could light Batman's cave. Robyn can't stop hopping in place, Dad watches with each arm around Penny and Bubby. Just when I think I'm the only one geeked out by all the feelings, Dad catches my eye, "Walk," he mouths, jabbing his thumb behind him.

I nod as the three of them turn up the street. Should I go with? That might be better than watching this scene.

Before I decide to do it, Mom's arm shoots out and pulls me to her.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am," Jojo wipes her eyes, "Or how many times I thought about flying to Boise and showing up on your doorstep. It's just hard to get away from the bakery and I thought you'd slam the door in my face. I've been so terrified to see you, seriously, I haven't slept at all in a whole entire week!"

Mom gulps, "I'm so sorry, Jo. I'm sorry I haven't called or written or come home, I'm sorry--"

"No!" Jojo grabs Mom's hands, "I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry, about everything!"

It is very obvious they are about to start bawling again, and since I'm trapped in my mom's elbow and can't make a getaway, I have to do something.

Quick.

The only problem is I can't think of a single thing to say to change the subject. I mean, nothing that will work outside my head anyway.

'That was fun, now why don't you tell us all the family secrets?'

Or

'Great, now let's talk about my emotional baking problems.'

Or

'What do you think Chris Pratt eats for breakfast?'

Yeah, none of those things make sense in the current moment. The only thing I have to work with is the cookie in my hand. "These are really good cookies." I say before my brain catches up to remind me I haven't eaten it yet and that, oh yeah, I don't want to.

Thanks a lot slow poke brain!

"Did you try it?" Robyn blinks in surprise.

"No," I shift from side to side, "But everyone really loves them. You've eaten, like, four."

Robyn looks at the cookie in her hand, "This is number six."

GG laughs and pinches Robyn's cheek before she looks at me. "It is okay if you don't like the cookie, my Cat."

I turn the cookie from one palm to the other. The chocolate is starting to melt and leaves pockmarks on my palms. Even though I know GG means what she says, I can't bring myself to throw the cookie away. Mostly because Robyn's stern eyes warn me she will do something heinous if I do. It's obvious whatever it is she's contemplating is a thousand times worse than eating a vegetable cookie. But what really gets me is my mom. She just spoke to Jojo, even though she's been dreading it for weeks.

If she can do that, I can eat a cookie.

"Just try it *Gata*." Robyn gives a tight laugh, "You're being *ridiculouso*. You can't say you don't like something until you've tried it."

"Oh really?" I stand on tippy toes so I'm closer to Robyn's height, "What about Skittle nachos?"

Robyn's face contorts, "That's different Cat, and you know it!"

"Is it?"

"It is! Skittle nachos are an abomination."

"What are Skittle nachos?" Jojo asks.

"Believe me, you don't want to know." I look at the cookie again. Maybe I could try it. Maybe it tastes better than it

looks. Like those no-bake cookies Tobey and I scooped and plopped in Culinary. They looked like dog doo, but they were delicious.

At least, I think they were. I didn't actually try any before Tobey got all infused with depression. But since he ate a bunch of them, I know they weren't disgusting.

Ugh, I'm going to eat it. We all know I'm going to eat it. It's just so hard to bring my hand to my mouth. Especially with everyone watching me. This is a thousand times more awkward than my mom and Jojo's reunion. I was young and innocent when I thought that was super uncomfortable. Try eating something disgusting in front of a bunch of people who want you to like it!

I bring the cookie to my lips, holding my breath so I don't have to breathe in the pumpkin smell. Just concentrate on the chocolate.

Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate.

I open my mouth and take a tiny nibble.

"Atta girl." Mom smiles.

Okay, but here's the thing, the cookie is actually super delicious. That tiny nibble is not enough. I avoid looking at



everyone else as I shove the rest of the cookie into my mouth and lick my fingers and palm. My taste buds jump in delight.

I swallow, super sad it's all gone.

Oh yeah, and also I'm super sad because Robyn is going to rub this in until the day I die. Maybe longer. I can totally picture her sitting on my crumbling gravestone with a plate of pumpkin cookies, talking about how I thought I would hate them but I really liked them.

But Robyn has more self control than I thought, she just puts her hand on my shoulder. "Not bad huh?"

Suddenly, I notice a distinct change in how I feel. My spirits are soaring, nothing seems like a problem, everything is awesome!

I fling my hands out to the sides, "Are you kidding? Not bad? More like fantasticalsome!"

This feelings switcheroo is kind of out of nowhere, so I have to wonder, is it the cookies?

Did they bake something into them? I mean, besides pumpkin and chocolate chips? An emotion? What emotion is it? And if they do bake emotion into the stuff they sell, how do they control it?

I sure can't.

If I made these cookies, we wouldn't just be feeling happy, we'd all be laughing our heads off and running around in circles, bouncing off each other. Is this pumpkin chocolate chip cookie proof that it's possible to bake emotions without people going all cuckoo?

My body fills up like a helium balloon. If it is possible, I'm going to do it. I'm going to figure this out and conquer it.

By the end of this trip I will know how to bake without making people go bonkers.

I will.

## Pumpkin Chocolate Chip Cookies

### Ingredients:

2 C. Pumpkin

1 C. Sugar

1 C. Butter, softened

2 tsp Vanilla

2 Eggs

5 C. Flour

1 tsp Baking Powder

1 tsp Baking Soda

1/2 tsp Salt

2 tsp Cinnamon

1 tsp Pumpkin Pie Spice

1 1/2 C. Chocolate Chips

### Instructions:

Preheat the oven to 350, prepare 4-5 cookie sheets with cooking spray cause this recipe makes a butt ton of cookies! That's not

a bad thing, by the way, they freeze super well and are the most deliciousest thing you will ever put in your mouth.

90% sure.

Pro tip for the day, use a stand mixture. This is such a big batch; the dough gets super thick and might burn out your hand mixer. I mean, I assume it might, not that I know that. I mean, I have totally not gone through four hand mixers in the last two years.

That would be ridiculous.

Combine Pumpkin, Sugar, Butter, Vanilla and Eggs in the mixer bowl.

Separately mix together Flour, Baking Powder, Baking Soda, Cinnamon and Pumpkin Pie Spice.

Here's a little tipperoo - I add the chocolate chips here - even though the original recipe says to add them later.

GASP!

It's true. It's true I tell ya! I have a good reason though, hear me out.

The flour coats the chocolate chips, making them mix into the batter more evenly. True story! No more sad, depraved,

chocolate-less cookies because some cookies have all the luck. Now they can all be friends and dwell together in perfect equity.

So now, slowly add the dry stuff to the wet stuff in the mixer bowl while it's on low. Any higher than that and you'll get flour to the face.

Despite what naturalists say, flour doesn't do anything for the complexion.

Mix minimal, just until the wet and dry are combined. It's okay if it's lumpy. You just want to be sure there aren't any rogue dry flour pockets.

Ew.

Use a cookie scoop to measure 15 - 20 cookies per cookie sheet. They usually expand up instead of out so you can probably squish 20 on there.

Bake for 12-15 minutes. Let cool completely on the cookie sheet.

Eat them while they're warm.

Trust me on this one.