

# Chapter Twelve



That night, I dreamed of pumpkin pie.

And when the alarm went off and Luau head-bumped my face, I smelled pumpkin pie. Only when I got up did I realize it was no dream. My room really did smell like pumpkin pie.

So did the hallway. So did the bathroom.

Brushed, dressed, and ready to face the day, I walked into the kitchen a few minutes later. The table, the counters, and the stovetop were all piled with pumpkin pie.

Dad, wearing the same clothes he had on yesterday, was dozing in his chair. The oven timer was dinging.

“Dad, wake up!” I said.

Without opening his eyes, Dad shifted and mumbled, “Pepper flakes?”

I grabbed a couple of potholders, opened the oven door, and pulled out the latest pie. The timer must have been dinging for a while, because the crust was coffee-colored and the filling looked dried out and sad. I couldn’t find spare surface space in the kitchen, so

I carried the pie to the family room to cool. There were already two on the coffee table.

Mom was in the kitchen when I returned. “*Oh, my gravy!*” she said. “How am I supposed to make coffee?!”

Her voice woke Dad, who almost jumped out of his chair. “*What?*” He looked at the clock. “The pie!”

“In the family room,” I said.

Dad’s face was anxious, like someone waiting for a doctor’s diagnosis. “And?”

I shook my head. “One for the squirrels.”

Breakfast was—guess what?—pumpkin pie. Dad said he was going to do a formal taste test later, but for now Mom and I could each take a piece of whatever looked good and give a report.

I took a bite and thought of cookies.

“Well?” Dad said.

“Are there chocolate chips in this pie?”

Dad nodded. “Melted into the custard.”

“*Chocolate?*” Mom said. “I want some of that!”

“Trade you.” I handed it over. “How’s this one?”

“Well,” Mom said, “I wouldn’t say exactly *bad*.”

I tried it and—*yuck!* “I would! What is it?”

“Orange marmalade,” Dad said. “Not a hit, huh?”

“Bitter!” I tried to steal the chocolate one back, but Mom held on tight.

“What else you got?” I asked.

By the time Yasmeen rang our doorbell, I had sampled four pies, which made for a queasy bus ride to school. And it didn't help that Yasmeen thought we should try to work out the mystery ingredient for ourselves.

"We know it's two words, and from what you tried this morning, we can eliminate orange marmalade, chocolate chips, marshmallow fluff, and coconut milk," she said. "What about ginger ale?"

"Or cream cheese?" I tried.

"Ice cream!" she said.

"Apple juice!"

"Tomato soup!"

"Tomato soup?"

"There's a chocolate cake recipe with tomato soup. Honest," she said.

We came up with more ideas: cranberry sauce, Jell-O pudding, maple syrup. And then we kind of got carried away: frosted flakes, mashed potatoes, spaghetti sauce!

"Ranch dressing!" Yasmeen shouted as the bus pulled up to the school.

"Bubblegum!" I replied.

"Bubblegum is one word, bud."

"Sugarless bubblegum!" I said.

Yasmeen nodded. "That works."

By now, it was time to grab my backpack. We made a plan to meet at lunch. We still had to work out the details of our after-school visit to the Knightly Tiger Inn.

By lunchtime, my tummy had settled down, so I loaded up my tray with pizza, french fries, and applesauce. Then Yasmeen and I found a table. The second we sat, I started eating and Yasmeen started talking. “The way I see it, we still need a way to get to the Knightly Tiger Inn this afternoon. We can’t exactly ask our parents for a ride.”

“Not with Luau,” I said. “And that’s another problem. How do we sneak him into the hotel? They don’t allow pets.”

“We can borrow my mom’s old tote bag,” Yasmeen said. “People in hotels always have luggage.”

“What if he meows?” I asked.

“Tell him not to! What’s the point of all this cat conversation if it only goes one way?”

I said I’d try. “But just because I understand Luau, it doesn’t mean I can tell him what to do.”

“*What a couple of lame babies!*” The familiar voice came from over my right shoulder. “All we gotta do is stuff Luau in the tote bag and take him in a back door. But why are we taking a cat to the Knightly Tiger Inn, anyway? What are we detecting? What did I miss?”

Yasmeen and I had the same thought at the same time: *It can't be.*

But actually it was.

Behind us, Sofie Sikora was sitting at a table by herself. "I'm gonna come sit with you guys," she said. "It's not so comfortable twisting my neck around to hear everything you say."

A moment later, she slapped her tray down across from mine, and for the next few minutes proceeded to tell us everything going on in the life of Sofie Sikora.

It was almost time for the bell when she leaned toward me. "Alex?" She looked me in the eye. "You smell."

I blushed down to my toenails.

Yasmeen said, "Sofie, even if it's true, it's not a very nice thing to say."

"I didn't say he smelled *disgusting*. I just said he smelled. Actually," she sniffed me, "it's a *good* smell. Kind of like—"

"Pumpkin pie?" Yasmeen said.

Sofie said, "*Yeah!*" just as the first bell rang. We were just about to escape to fifth period when Sofie said, "Okay, so we all meet at my house at three thirty. Alex brings the cat. Yazzie brings the tote bag."

Yasmeen and I looked at each other. "*What?*"

Sofie shrugged. "My mom'll take us to the Knightly

Tiger Inn. I'll think of some story to tell her. I'm glad to be investigating again. My life was a little boring—not to mention I liked having my picture in the paper and being on TV when we solved the Uncle Sam case, even if those other girls' pictures were bigger than mine, everybody said so. My mom—”

“*Sofie!*” I interrupted. “We’re gonna be tardy. Bye!”

Maybe you noticed that neither Yasmeen nor I exactly agreed to meet Sofie after school. But we both knew we’d be there. Sofie Sikora is the most annoying person ever. But she always comes through when we need her.