

# The Tea Shop

by Makena Metz

The smell of baking croissants filled the tiny tea shop.

Warm buttery vapors swirled through the wooden tables and worn, mismatched chairs, the smell wafting out from the tiny kitchen on the cool sunrise-kissed breeze.

The fireplace glowed as flames bloomed in the grate to warm the thawing shop, independent of any key or button.

A bell dinged, soft, from the door as it opened, and Anna smiled as her first customers walked inside, past the frosted windows covered with the pale lavender curtains draped with white twinkle lights. The fresh scent of rain clung to the customers as some sat in blue armchairs, some warmed their hands over the crackling fireplace in the corner, and the others lined up in front of the counter.

Anna liked the customers that came in the mornings—ever since her mother had passed last year, she'd craved the smiles that brushed her face like a breath of warm, summer air. It was the only thing that staved off the loneliness and the constant rain from overtaking her completely.

Still, sometimes she wished it would.

Anna doled out coffees and teas, croissants, and muffins, and watched with satisfaction as the early birds sat at their tables or headed out the jingling door, the flavors of joy or peace, amusement, or bliss tingling on their tongues.

Anna had been baking emotions into her pastries since her mother had taught her how to cook. Always the positive ones—to let someone taste sunshine on a rainy day, or to help another find solace from their grueling job. To help people find compassion in heartbreak or absolution from haunting guilt or internalized shame.

Happiness tasted like all kinds of things—bright lemon or soothing mint, spicy chai or velvety chocolate.

Whenever Anna had baked with her darkest emotions—rage or pain or grief, her pastries tasted like bitter licorice or acrid pepper; the kind of flavor that dug deep into your palette, that wouldn't let go. That had you trying to drown the sensation at the end of a bottle or numb it in a cloud of smoke.

Anna doled out warmed pastries and steaming drinks as the sun rose, nodding and chatting with her usuals, and offering a shy smile to the newcomers.

They always found her, somehow, the ones that really needed to. The almost-father with grief haunting his dark eyes, his wife recovering from a miscarriage. The older person with a battered dog tag around their neck, ancient scars crisscrossing their face. The young woman that'd had a port in her chest, tubing sticking out from her t-shirt, her bruised, tired eyes aged beyond her years.

That one had really killed her.

There'd been victims of heartbreak and abuse, people running to or from something or someone, people who had no one to talk to, people who were all but invisible.

They all found their way to Anna's tea shop.

Anna pulled another batch of croissants out of the oven, this time chocolate orange, the smell coating her tongue. She closed the oven with a knee, breathing heavily, and set the tray down on the counter.

Pulling off the oven mitts patterned with tiny black cats, Anna caught her breath, wiping sweat off her brow with a spare lavender tea towel.

It wasn't easy to run this place—but the mouthwatering aroma, and the scent of love, pure and sweet, that emanated from the shop into the pastries and dissolved into the customer's stomachs, made it all worth it.

It didn't matter if she was shaking, fingers cramping from rolling the dough into perfect, twists and arcs. It didn't matter if she was so exhausted at night that she fell into a black, dreamless dark, silence coating her whispering mind, fueled by melatonin and muscle relaxers. It didn't

matter if she was the only one left to run the place—being the sole baker, cashier, and toilet cleaner.

Her family's shop had been there for almost thirty years. This was her mother's store. She'd grown up in this shop. Anna wasn't going to let her body's betrayal take it from her.

Fingertips burning, she gently scooped up each and every croissant from the silicone mat on the baking tray and placed them in her wicker display basket. She'd set them on top of the counter next to the cursive, chalk sign that spelled out "fresh pastries daily" and let the aroma tempt her customers.

She almost always sold out—everyone in town bought their breakfast from her store. And almost everyone in town knew about the special pick-me-up in her baking.

Anna hustled out of the kitchen, carrying the croissants to the counter. She placed them just so and then traded a man a muffin for a crumpled five-dollar bill—he gestured to keep the change.

After he exited into the heavy downpour, the door jingled again, and then a young woman entered.

Her face was washed out, faded, almost grey against the lavender curtains and twinkling lights. The customer looked up at the menu board, her straight, light brown hair damp from the rain, her distant eyes taking in the words. She stuck her hands into the pockets of her oversized men's sweatshirt—the logo of some sports team or other on it, her pale face impassive.

Anna tensed behind the counter, *feeling* an absence—a void, emanating from her.

Her long legs in those black jeans walked up to the counter, where she leaned a hip against it, like she couldn't stand up straight without the support.

She cleared her throat, like she hadn't used her voice in some time. It came out rough, crackling. "I'll have a..." Her voice faded as she lost her words. Hazel eyes looked up at the menu, lost.

She looked down at the counter. The rain drummed down on the roof. "I heard you..."

Anna bit her lip, pausing. The fire crackled. The other customers murmured behind them.

“What did you hear?”

The woman stiffened as she paused, her eyes darting around the room. Taking in the few people in the shop—a polished man with dark hair and glasses, typing away on his computer. Two middle aged women in t-shirts and pajama pants, sitting and chatting, their small, fuzzy dogs sitting on their laps.

The sound of cars whooshing through the downpour echoed in through the windows.

The young woman in the hoodie looked down at the “fresh pastries daily” sign by the croissants. She closed her eyes, seeming to hold herself together by willpower alone.

“I don’t want to feel like...”

The corner of Anna’s mouth lifted, offering a tentative smile.

“I have...other pastries in the back, normal ones, if you want one.”

The woman swallowed, shifting, glancing at Anna’s face.

Anna wiped the pristine counter with a rag. Waiting. Listening.

“Do you have...I want to feel—” She took a breath. “I want to feel *angry*.”

A silence spread through Anna’s mind. She opened her mouth, brows sliding together.

The young woman continued, “I want, to— to feel angry, because...”

Her hazel eyes blazed with raw honesty.

Her voice was hoarse as she said, “’Cus it’s better than...than feeling like this.”

Anna looked into those dimming, green-brown eyes and she knew. She knew it as clearly as if she’d heard it spoken, as clear as a bell ringing. She knew.

“Come with me. Let’s— let’s make you some tea.”

\* \* \*

Anna put the “back in 10 minutes” sign on the counter—she trusted the customers in the shop, as well as the wards on the door, to make sure that nothing happened to the register while she was in the back.

She beckoned those eyes to follow her around the counter, but the young woman in the oversize hoodie hesitated by the edge of the counter.

“Come on, I’ll take you to the back uh—”

A small cough, like the words were stuck in her throat. “Emily.”

“Emily.”

Anna nodded and started walking. A few heartbeats later, she heard Emily’s quiet footsteps padding across the wooden floor as she followed.

Emily followed her down the creaking hallway, past paintings Anna’s mother had drawn of tea flowers with faces and bumble bees playing instruments and cats reading books and all sorts of wonderful, odd little paintings.

Anna, already slightly out of breath, led Emily through a doorway. The young woman wafted in behind her, trailing her like a shadow.

Anna inhaled and gestured across the room to a grey weathered, comfortable couch. A worn, light brown coffee table sat in front of it, with books and notebooks and pens dripping off of it and onto a plush, white rug.

Against the wall, which was such a light blue it was almost white, there was a tiny, stone fountain with frogs spitting water, and on the other side of the room, plants sprouted up from their pots—lavender and eucalyptus and sage—next to a crowded bookshelf.

The aroma of the herbs swirled around the room, the burbling fountain creating a muted bubble of silence within the walls. This was Anna’s break room, her safe space.

Emily perched on the couch, on the edge of the cushion, at the edge of the room, as if she was afraid she might fall inside of it if she got any closer.

Anna walked over to the electric tea kettle atop the wooden counter opposite the couch. She pushed the handle down, boiling the water already in the pot.

She caught her breath, willing her heartbeat to slow.

“Do you like tea?”

Emily started, as if she hadn't expected Anna to speak.

She nodded and pulled her sleeves lower, over her hands.

Anna smiled and asked, “Any flavors you like?”

Emily shrugged, such a slight shifting of her shoulders that it was barely noticeable.

Anna knew this girl might be a ghost, a shell of her former self. Whatever that had been or looked like, it wasn't this girl on her couch.

Anna pursed her lips and pulled out a light blue, ceramic mug speckled like an eggshell, from the shelf under the counter.

“You know,” Anna hummed as she set down the mug, “Making tea is its own kind of magic.”

She didn't look back at the young woman—didn't turn her head towards the stare she could feel prickling the back of her neck.

“There's a ritual to it—an order.”

Anna opened the metal tin and lifted out the netted tea bag flush with brown and green leaves, knowing instinctively which flavor to put into the cup.

“There's a reason I serve tea and pastries, instead of any old sandwich. These ingredients, these recipes, these flavors...they cast their own spell. Even without my magic.”

Anna opened a jar of raw honey, scooping it out with a teaspoon and into the mug.

The plastic handle on the teapot pinged upwards.

Anna lifted the kettle and carefully poured the boiling stream of water into the mug. She took the spoon and gently swirled it under the water, inhaling the sweet scent.

Steam wafted upwards, plunging Anna's face into white mist for a moment.

When it cleared, the tea was steeping.

Anna turned around and looked at Emily. Her brown hair fell around her face, but her gaze was on the floor, her shoulders hunched inside that hoodie. Like it was padding. Like it was armor.

Anna took in a deep breath and picked up the cup of tea, wincing as she noticed she was shaking, but managing to keep the liquid steady in the cup.

Anna sat down, not too close to Emily, and held the tea out to her, fingertips straining.

For a moment, there was silence and steam, slight shaking, an invitation. Then, Emily took the mug.

Anna watched her as she held the cup up to her nose, closed her eyes, and inhaled.

“It smells like...”

Anna folded her vibrating hands on her lap.

“Like, the ocean and— and wisteria— in summer, and...”

Anna placed a hand on the fabric of the couch, between their bodies.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. About that. Or about anything.”

Emily wiped a tear off her cheek with her palm.

“The smell reminds me of... what— what made me happy. Before.”

Anna nodded, letting the silence speak for her. The fountain murmured comfort in the way that water whispers lullabies.

Emily sniffled, then said, her voice rough, “I just want to stop feeling this way. This...emptiness inside my chest. Inside my bones.”

Anna nodded, keeping her gaze on the fountain, watching the stone frogs spit water into the basin.

“Do you...” Anna asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

A pause as Emily took in the question. With her pale fingers gripping—clenching—around the mug, she brought it to her lips. Her breathing was jagged, but she took a sip.

“I want to stop feeling like *this*. I want to feel...like, like he didn’t destroy me. Like he didn’t—” Emily took a shuddering breath in. “Like he didn’t break me.”

Emily tensed inside her sweatshirt and set the tea down on the coffee table.

Cautious, Anna turned her gaze to Emily’s eyes, which stared across the space, at nothing, at emptiness, brimming with tears.

The emptiness radiated out of her, creating an aura—Anna didn't need magic to sense it.

The tears trickled down Emily's face, but she kept speaking, clear and calm. She wrapped her arms around her chest.

"Am I still even me?" She whispered, "When my own body has been violated and I want to scratch off my own skin, scratch it all off, because I don't fit in it— I don't fit in it, inside of it, anymore. I wish I was...invisible. Or that I didn't— didn't exist."

Anna's throat welled with emotion as she remembered feeling the same. How sometimes, flickers of that feeling popped up, when her body was at its worst. When she didn't have a confidant, or a friend, or well, anyone really, to help take care of her when she most needed it. When she wished more than anything, that her body could be something it was not. When she wished trading bodies was as easy as making a hollow wish.

She trained her gaze on Emily's downcast face, tears dripping off of her chin.

Anna inhaled. "Soon after my mother died...I got sick."

Emily picked up her tea and took another, small sip. Anna exhaled.

"She had been sick for so long...I couldn't remember what her being healthy looked like. We didn't even consider that it might be hereditary. So after she died, I got diagnosed with the disease that killed her. That took her from me."

Anna's eyes filled with tears as gravel stung her throat. But she kept speaking, swallowing the knot, keeping her eyes on Emily's face, letting her see her pain.

"We were both in the will, but my sister has kids to take care of, so I got the tea shop—this shop. Just after I got diagnosed. It was a hard time."

Anna remembered walking into the store, dust covering all surfaces, no one waiting inside for her, just grief and dust and memories that were once beautiful, now too painful to look at. Picking up the broom and sweeping the dust and grime away, as if she could reset the place, as if making it clean and charming once more would somehow make things right.

Emily took another sip of the tea. Anna cleared her throat, continuing.

“After I reopened the store, I felt...I felt like my illness had taken my body away from me. Suddenly, I was a stranger in my own skin. I’d never felt that way before...so heavy. Like I was a stone, like the air was water, and I was sinking with each step I took. And I’m still sinking. I’m still heavy. Even now, more than a year later, and I still feel like I don’t know my own body. Because it’s different now. Because it’s a trauma that my healthy body was taken away from me. Because I didn’t have a choice.”

Emily rubbed her face again, brushing tears out of her eyes.

Her hazel eyes met Anna’s and she blinked as Anna grabbed her hand.

Emily’s face crumpled as she stared their interwoven fingers. The roots of two different trees, intertwined. Leaning on each other.

Anna squeezed Emily’s hand.

“Like any negative emotion we feel, I cannot make you or bake you anything that will make that feeling vanish completely. Even if you’re angry and magically feel happy...this feeling will be there, under it. Holding you down. Because a piece of you was torn open. You need time to heal.”

Emily hesitated, pausing in her seat.

“But if you let me eat something I—”

Anna shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

Anna let go of Emily’s hand, pulling away.

Emily leaned closer, tea sloshing out of the mug and onto her leg, not caring about the warm dampness.

“Please, I— I don’t have time to feel like this. I need to be able to function, to get a job and— and finish my degree and—”

“You can’t band aid this emotion with another.” Anna leaned forward. “You want to feel something—anything—other than just, numb? You wish you could get angry—to get revenge? To get even? To—”

“To just get out of bed in the morning!” Emily cried, standing up, water sloshing from the mug in her hand. “To be able to function—to go to class, and call my parents, and get my fucking mail from the mailbox without wanting to crawl into the trash chute or jump off a fucking roof!”

To be able to get out of bed in the morning, or take a shower, or just do anything at all that requires effort.”

Emily sniffed and set her cup down on the coffee table to wipe her tears with a sleeve.

The fountain gurgled. Anna swallowed.

“I know. I know. I hear you. I’ve been there too.”

When the grief was so endless she wanted to sleep forever. When her body was so inflamed she would have done anything to switch her skin for another’s. But she had the Tea Shop. And that was enough.

Emily let out a shaking breath, running a hand through her hair, then walking forward on the rug.

“I don’t want to feel...nothing anymore. Anything is better than that. But that’s all I can feel. I’m just...”

Emily paused, looking at Anna, her gaze haunted.

“I’m just...” Emily croaked, her hazel eyes filling with more tears.

Anna stood up, slow and steady, approaching Emily like she was made of glass. Like one wrong breath might blow her over.

And even as her own hands shook, she pulled Emily close to her, tucking her head around her bony shoulder.

“You are *not* broken,” she whispered into Emily’s ear. “And you are allowed—more than allowed—to feel like this.”

Emily’s arms wrapped around her torso, squeezing tightly.

Anna felt Emily’s body heave as she sobbed into her apron.

Gentle, she rubbed the young woman’s back. “It’s okay,” she murmured, “It’s okay.”

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After Emily had blown her nose, finished her cup of tea, and her damp sleeves had dried, Anna shifted on the couch.

“My pastries aren’t a cure all. It’s not a— they’re not something that can magically make things better. They help bring people a— a moment. A moment of a feeling. And a moment—only a moment—is all we really need to change.”

Emily nodded, letting out a deep breath, releasing something intangible, but releasing it nonetheless. Anna noticed something there—the girl Emily once was, and the girl she could be—glimmering under the surface.

Anna smiled and asked, “Have you ever wanted to work in a bakery?”

Emily shrugged, “No but, it sounds fun.” She frowned. “Not– not like this though. I wouldn’t be a great employee. I uh– I wouldn’t be much of a person to be around right now, either.”

Anna nodded, standing up. “I understand.”

Emily cocked her head to the side, blinking, a movement so familiar that Anna paused, an idea so outrageous taking shape in her mind that it momentarily stunned her.

“Wait, I think...I have an idea.”

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After closing the tea shop early and flipping the sign to “closed” on the door, Anna and Emily started baking.

They preheated the oven as they rolled out the dough and Anna helped Emily select the flavors she wanted from the pantry.

Cinnamon and cloves, ginger and nutmeg, star anise and cardamom.

They rolled the sliced apples in sugar and spices and lemon juice and filled the dough, brushing the edges with egg wash.

“It’s this simple?” Emily asked, curious.

“It’s all about intention,” Anna replied, “Not just what you put in the recipe.”

Together, they slid the apple turnover into the oven.

Anna thought Emily might be nervous as they baked, but there was no twitching in her muscles, no eyeing of the kitchen door.

Anna almost wanted to laugh—it was ludicrous, what they’d concocted, but sometimes the universe gave you ideas for a reason. Anna didn’t need to be a witch to know that.

As the dough rose in the oven, Anna’s spell held firm. No burning, no leaking.

They watched the timer tick down the seconds as they waited.

Finally, it rang. The pastry was ready.

The smell of appley warmth, smelling like home, like reading a book by the fire on a cold, rainy day, filled the air of the kitchen as they pulled the tray from the oven.

Anna set it down on the granite countertop, then transferred the fritter to a plate, and then scooted the pastry down the counter to her right.

Emily considered the pastry.

Anna looked at Emily from the corner of her eye. “Are you sure about this?”

“So, you’ll pay me part time?”

“Plus free room and board.” Anna laughed, “But we’d share the tip jar.”

“And I wouldn’t have to—”

“Nothing you aren’t comfortable with.”

Anna turned, peering at Emily’s face.

Emily nodded and brought the pastry to her lips.

Her face filled with something close to home—something Anna could almost name, something familiar.

Emily bit into the pastry, her eyes closing as she tasted the flavors she’d chosen.

As Emily swallowed the pastry, Anna noticed the young woman’s first, faint smile.

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Anna opened the tea shop like always, blustering into the warmth of the room from the cool morning air.

The bell jingled as she set down her bags of fresh produce.

Her stomach knotted as she glanced around the empty shop.

The fire crackled, eternal in its hearth.

“Mrrw!” A cat demanded.

Anna beamed as a tiny, bony tabby cat ran up to her, tail twitching with delight as she butted her head against Anna's leg.

Anna reached down and picked up the cat, saying good morning to the stretchy creature, then cuddling her close to her chest.

The cat purred as she held her, like she was generating electricity—like she was a supernova waiting to burst out and transform, the light of a new star about to shine out, thousands of years in the making.

Anna walked them to the kitchen, already imagining the pastries they would make today, how they might sell them with one tiny paw print pressed into the surface of each one.

Anna set the feline down on the ground, sensing her presence below her.

As the cat's paws touched the ground, she stood up on her hind legs, then stretched up and up, transforming, until Emily was once again standing in Anna's kitchen.

She grinned, actually grinned, at Anna, her face looking several years younger—more open, filled with light.

“Come on, assistant,” Anna joked, “Let's get baking.”

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Hiring Emily had been the best decision Anna had made in a long time. When customers needed help, but she had to finish prepping or cleaning or frosting, Emily dealt with the line of customers, a line that seemed to be ever growing.

The tiny cat paw prints in the pastries had indeed worked like a charm—drawing not only her usuals, but people from all over the city.

There were bad days, like when Emily ran into an old roommate from the dorms on her way home from class, or when she'd been flirted with by a young customer who wouldn't back off. Then, Anna heard the pitter-pattering of paws on the kitchen floor, before Emily appeared in her sleek brown tabby form, her tiny body shaking, ears folded back, then tucked into herself, curled up in a ball in front of the warm oven.

Anna would reach down and give her a scratch on the head, murmuring that it was okay to want to hide, that she was safe in this shop

and in this body—and that everyone had ups and downs and that healing isn't linear.

And on the good days—Emily was a blessed help, especially when Anna's shaking, burning limbs needed time in her break room to cool down and rest.

These days, Emily wandered through the coffee shop in her jeans and a lavender shirt with the shop's new logo stenciled on it—a cat perched on a coffee cup, batting at the foam on the top of a latté.

She would play music from the new speakers they'd installed by the counter, dancing around the shop while passing people their drinks and pastries.

Sometimes, Emily would run through the store in her cat form, getting pets and cuddles from customers, chasing dust motes in the air, and leaping high up on the mantel or falling asleep in front of the ever-burning fireplace.

Anna continued pressing joy and happiness and healing into her pastries—seasoning them with love and comfort and companionship and peace.

Helping people who needed it—even when they didn't ask.

At the end of the day, after Anna had finished washing the dishes, and Emily had swept and mopped the floors, they always sat down at a table together, a perfectly ordinary pastry on a plate in the space between them.

The white lights twinkled above the lavender curtains and soft music played from the speakers as they discussed the day and what needed to be done tomorrow, what recipes needed to be prepped and baked, what the seasonal special was—while Anna's shaking hands ripped the delicate dough in half, holding it out to Emily.

And as the sun set on the tea shop, they both took a bite.

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