



From Scratch



GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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One

I brushed flour off my apron as I stepped away from the kitchen area and up to the bakery counter to serve Murray. He was a widower a few years older than me, in his early forties. He still dressed like a construction worker even though he owned his own antique business now. He sold old dishes, toys and art online, through his website. “You know what I’m here for,” he said, grinning.

I did. Murray turned up at the end of my morning shift almost every day. He always ordered the same thing. I handed him a cup of coffee and two oatmeal “doilies.” I called these cookies doilies because as they baked, the dough

spread out into crisp circles. They looked like the lace doilies people put under vases to protect their furniture.

“Thanks, Cookie,” Murray said as he took the plate. He was the one who gave me the nickname Cookie. Now every regular at the bakery called me that. My real name is Eva.

“You ever going to give me the recipe so I can make these cookies at home?” he asked me.

I shook my head as I smiled shyly at him. We didn’t use packaged mixes at this bakery. We baked everything from scratch. I made these cookies from my own recipe.

“Probably better if you don’t tell me,” he said. “I want a reason to keep coming in here.” Murray held my gaze just a little too long, as if he liked me. But I wasn’t sure. More to the point, I found it hard to believe he *could* be interested in me. He was such a handsome and accomplished man, with a business of his own.

And me? I just worked here, at this bakery. My hair was tucked in a hairnet because I'd been baking that morning. My apron was covered in flour and butter stains. I never wore makeup to work because it got so hot around the big commercial ovens. I always worked up a sweat. If I did wear mascara, it smudged. What could Murray possibly see in me?

Diana elbowed me as Murray went to his usual table by the window. "Like he needs another reason to come in here," she said. "He's got you."

She grinned at me, but I tried to ignore her. I wiped the counter to hide my embarrassment.

Diana was the owner of the bakery. She was in her sixties now and had owned the bakery-café in this strip mall for more than twenty-five years. The café looked a little dated too. The place could have used some fresh paint and new tables.

But the big windows filled the space with light, and the room always smelled of sweet baked goods. The bakery-café was a favorite hangout, the only place to meet for coffee in this rural area just outside of town.

I had worked at the bakery since my daughter Katie was little. Katie had worked here summers as a teen. Now she took cooking courses at the college in town. But I had never gone to school to learn how to bake. I had learned all that from Diana, on the job. Then I practiced baking at home, making up my own recipes.

“Come on, Eva, when are you going to do something about that?” Diana asked me, nodding at Murray.

“What?” I asked, as if I didn’t know.

“He likes you. And I *know* you like him.”

I felt my face heat up. Were my feelings for Murray that obvious? “Murray is only being kind,” I said.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit,” Diana said. “Your cookies are truly wonderful, but you’re the reason Murray comes in here every morning. I see him watching you when you aren’t looking.”

He glanced up now to see us watching *him*. Caught, he quickly looked away.

“I don’t have time for romance,” I said. “I’ve got a kid, and I’ve got work. That’s more than enough to fill my day.”

“Katie is a grown woman now,” said Diana. “She’s in college. It’s time to start thinking about yourself.”

“Katie is still living at home. On top of paying for rent and food, I have to pay for her tuition now, the cost of her schooling. After I pay the bills on payday, I have hardly anything left over.” I stopped when I saw the look on Diana’s face. “I don’t mean to complain,” I said. “You’ve been good to me, letting me work overtime when I need the cash.”

Diana sighed. “I wish I could give you even more hours, for my sake as well as yours.” She rubbed her sore knee. She was about to have an operation on that knee. Standing on her feet for hours each day year after year had taken its toll on her. She looked tired and often winced in pain. “But with the economy the way it is...” She didn’t finish her sentence.

I knew things had been hard for her and everyone in the community. When the small department store in this rural strip mall had closed down, one business after another had also closed. But, as Diana often said, people had to eat. There were enough regular customers, like Murray, to keep the bakery going. Even so, I knew Diana had been trying to sell the business so she could retire. The For Sale sign had been up outside the bakery for over a year. Diana had told me she would make

sure the new owner kept me on, however. She would make it clear I helped her run the place.

Diana took my hand in hers. “Listen, Eva, since we’re on the subject—” She hesitated.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you, not just about your hours, but about your job.”

“My job?” I felt my stomach knot.

“As you know, I haven’t had any serious offers on the bakery. No one wants to take the place on, not with all these other businesses in the mall shutting down. And I have my knee operation coming up.”

She looked around the small bakery-café. The glass counter was full of baked goods. A row of small tables lined the windows. The place smelled of the cinnamon buns baking in the big oven in

the kitchen behind us. “I’ve decided to close the bakery at the end of next month.”

I covered my mouth. “Oh no!” I said.

“The tourists will be gone by then,” she said. “Labor Day weekend is coming up. Summer is already just about over. I can’t keep the place open any longer. I’ll have to stay off this knee for several months after the operation.”

“I understand,” I said. I was sad for Diana—and for our customers. Without this bakery, there would be no place for people in the community to meet. They would have to drive into town just to go out for a cup of coffee. But I was most worried about myself and my daughter. What was I going to do without this job? How was I going to help Katie get through college? She still had another year of schooling in her cooking course.

Diana didn’t catch on to my panic right away. “So you’d better do something about

Murray now,” she said. “Ask the poor man out. You’ve been dancing around each other for years. After we close, you won’t have an excuse to see him.”

I stole a glance at him. He was watching me again, and his face was red. Could he hear our conversation? “Shush,” I told Diana. I lowered my voice further. “If he likes me so much, why hasn’t he asked *me* out?”

“He’s as shy as you are.”

“Murray doesn’t strike me as shy. He talks up a storm with the other regulars.”

“You do too.”

“That’s part of my job,” I said. “And I know everyone here.”

“Look, I’m just saying you’ve both been through a lot when it comes to love.”

That much was true. Katie’s dad had disappeared from our lives when Katie was a toddler. He didn’t even provide child support. The few men I had dated after him didn’t want to take on my little family.

In recent years I had given up on the idea of dating altogether.

Murray, on the other hand, had lost his wife to cancer. In the years since, I had never seen him with another woman. I liked that about him. He seemed to be saving himself for someone special. I couldn't believe the someone special might be me.

"Maybe it's time to give Murray that recipe for your doily cookies?" Diana suggested. "Or offer to make some for him at his place?"

"I could never do that." My heart raced at the thought. What if he said no?

"Maybe I should put a bug in his ear." Diana grinned. "Tell him to ask you out."

"You wouldn't do that!" I paused. "Would you?"

"Somebody has to help you two fools get it together."

"I don't have time to think about Murray right now," I said, hoping she'd

take the hint. “I’ve got to focus on finding other work. Katie goes back to college next week. I have enough saved up to cover her tuition, the cost of her course. Other than that, I don’t have much money. If I don’t find another job right away, I might have to cash in my retirement fund. It’s only three or four thousand dollars. That won’t last long.”

Diana wrapped an arm around me as she finally realized how hard I was taking the news. “I’m so sorry, Eva. I wish I could keep the bakery running. But I’m getting too old. It’s taking too much out of me.”

“I know,” I said. I looked up at her. “But I only know how to bake. I don’t have any other skills. What am I going to do?”

Diana didn’t have an answer. And I didn’t have much time to figure out how I was going to make a living. I had worked in this bakery for nearly fifteen years. Now I would have to start all over again.

I looked around the place and at the customers I knew so well. At the end of the next month I'd be out of a job. I would no longer come here every day. I would visit my old friend Diana, but I might not see Murray again. I wouldn't have my daily excuse to talk to him. I doubted I would ever work up the courage to go visit him. All of a sudden, I felt like my familiar world was crumbling all around me.

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While the oatmeal doily cookie recipe at the end of the novel is my own, based on cookies my mother made, I also found inspiration from the lacy oatmeal cookie recipe found in *The New Basics Cookbook* by Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins (Workman Publishing, New York) and from Maria Gray's YouTube video titled "Oatmeal Lace Cookies." I hope you enjoy making your own.

Author's Note

This short novel is intended to give the adult literacy learner a general sense of the steps involved in starting a small business. For specifics, a good starting place is the Canada Business Network (www.canadabusiness.ca) and the Community Futures Network of Canada (www.communityfuturescanada.ca). Also useful to me as I wrote this book was the guide *Start & Run A Home-Based Food Business*, by Mimi Shotland Fix (Self-Counsel Press, Vancouver). If this fiction writer can start a small business, you can too.

By the age of eighteen, **GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ** knew she wanted to write about women in rural settings. Today Gail is the author of several bestselling novels: *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, *A Recipe for Bees*, *A Rhinestone Button*, *Turtle Valley* and *The Spawning Grounds*. She has also written several short novels, like this one. Gail teaches other authors how to write fiction and divides her time between the Shuswap region of British Columbia and Manitoulin Island in Ontario. For more information, visit www.gailanderson-dargatz.ca or follow @AndersonDargatz.