

Chapter 1

“Help, Cinnamon!” I shouted. “I can’t stop.”

Cinnamon Pritchett skated in front of me, grabbed me by the shoulders, and jammed her toe stops into the ground. “Breathe, Jenna. Toe stops. Remember? Toe stops.”

“Yes,” I said, teeth chattering. It had been ages since I’d skated. Catching a downhill had nearly done me in. “Why did I think it was flat along the coast?”

Cinnamon laughed. “Nothing in the area is flat.”

“The ocean is.”

We lived in Crystal Cove, California, a seaside community consisting of three crescent-shaped bays. A range of modest mountains defined the eastern border and trapped ocean moisture, blessing our sweet community with a temperate Mediterranean climate. The boulevard that ran parallel to the ocean was rife with shops and restaurants. On the southernmost end of town stood the Pier, a boardwalk boasting carny games, a theater, and other fun activities. That was where we’d been going until I nearly took a header.

“Next time you say we need to bond,” I rasped, “let’s go for coffee at the Nook.”

With my aunt, I owned the Cookbook Nook, which was a culinary bookshop, and the adjoining café. The Nook Café was known not only for its fabulous meals but also for its midmorning and afternoon treats. It was a perfect spot for a get-together, sans injuries.

“Doesn’t a scone sound good?” I asked.

“Nope. Now that I’m pregnant,” Cinnamon said, “I need to work doubly hard at keeping my weight down.”

Cinnamon was four months pregnant and didn't show a whit. At the start of our skate, she'd announced she was *with child*. I was thrilled for her. She and her adorable fireman husband had been trying since the day they got married. Pushing forty, she was no spring chicken in baby-bearing years.

"I've been eating like I'm having quadruplets," Cinnamon grouched. "I never used to be hungry. I could go all day on an energy bar. But now?" She released me. "Good to go?"

"Yes. Toe stops. Got it." I adjusted the strap on my helmet and drank a sip of water from the bottle I carried in a bottle holster. "Race you back."

"You'll lose."

Cackling, Cinnamon tore off. I tried to keep pace but failed. I knew I would. I had no delusions about being a speed skater, and she had been skating since she was a girl. When taking midday breaks from her job as our chief of police, Cinnamon would often skate around town. Not many people knew she was off the clock then. Some felt a loop of skating was her way of keeping an eye on the locals.

"Speaking of weight," Cinnamon said, slowing her pace so she could skate beside me as we neared town, "how is—"

"Faster," a woman barked. "Faster, Priscilla. Watch out!"

I whirled around just in time to miss being plowed down by a trim woman in leggings and a black-and-white T-shirt featuring a crossword puzzle. Behind her ran Kylie O, the thirty-something food critic for the *Crystal Cove Courier*. The *O* stood for Obendorfer, which was a mouthful. If my surname had been that instead of Hart, I'd have shortened it to a single letter, too.

“Sorry, Jenna.” Kylie slowed near me. “Got to keep up the pace.” She also wore leggings, but her black-and-white T-shirt featured a raccoon and read *I work out so I can eat garbage*. Her locket bobbed as she jogged in place. So did the timer hanging around her neck. “Keep going, Priscilla. Don’t slow down.” Kylie sprinted off.

Cinnamon rolled her eyes. “Who knew a runner could be dangerous? As I was saying, speaking of weight, how’s Bailey doing with hers?”

“She’s got five pounds to go.”

Bailey, my childhood pal and coworker at the bookshop, had given birth over six months ago, but she hadn’t lost all the weight she’d put on. She was not happy about that, but she was madly in love with her daughter, Brianna, who resembled Bailey with short spiky hair and big eyes and an affinity for brightly colored clothing; the clothing was Bailey’s doing, not Brianna’s, of course.

“Bailey should skate with us,” Cinnamon suggested.

“She will, once she finds a steady babysitter.” The search for someone reliable had been endless. Bailey’s mother, Lola, was pitching in when she could, and Bailey, who had switched to half days, was bringing Brianna to work for her morning shift. I loved having the baby there. She was so easygoing. No tears. No squalling. She lit up whenever Bailey read books to her, cookbooks in particular. Something about the word *teaspoon* made Brianna giggle nonstop. Plus, she adored Tigger, my rescue ginger cat, who nuzzled her whenever he got the chance. Luckily, she wasn’t allergic to him.

“How’s Tito doing?” Cinnamon asked.

“Great.” Tito was Bailey’s husband. “He adores Brianna.”

“No, I mean work-wise. I heard Eugene Tinsdale is having financial difficulties at

the paper and might be retiring. Does that mean the newspaper will fold?”

Eugene Tinsdale owned the *Crystal Cove Courier*.

“I don’t think so.” Tito was a stalwart reporter for the *Courier*. When we’d first met, he’d been stubborn and mulish and hard to like, but then he’d met Bailey and had turned to mush. “As far as I know, Eugene is looking for a buyer.”

“Is Tito interested?”

“Doubtful. He doesn’t have the funds, and he likes being a reporter.”

Cinnamon swerved into the parking lot of Fisherman’s Village, the quaint two-story shopping mall where the Cookbook Nook and Nook Café were located, and drew to a perfect stop on the cobblestone.

Me? I nearly took another header. I tried my toe stops, but they skidded. To save myself, I grabbed hold of a column. My feet kept going. I slid down the poll and landed on my rump. “Well, that was elegant, don’t you think?” I chuckled. My ego was more bruised than my behind.

Cinnamon bit back laughter and helped me up. “Got to be careful on irregular surfaces.”

“Fair warning.”

“What’s going on up there?” Cinnamon hitched her chin.

A lot of customers were climbing the stairs to the second floor of the mall.

“The Cameo is screening episodes of *Shredding* over the next few days.” The Cameo, a petite movie theater, usually showed classics, but this week it was offering a binge-worthy selection of foodie television shows as well as foodie-themed movies.

“What’s *Shredding*?” Cinnamon asked.

“Where have you been? It’s a popular cooking show featuring Midge Martin. It’s named after her restaurant. Midge tapes the show once a week in San Francisco. You must have eaten at her place. You like salads.”

“My sweet husband is a devotee of steak and barbecue.” Cinnamon winked. “Those are the places we go for dates. For the Food Bowl, we’ll be taking in the All Star Barbecue.”

“Nice,” I said.

Our quirky mayor made it a point to create theme weeks for Crystal Cove, which thrived on tourism. The more themes the merrier. For nearly a week, from Thursday to the following Tuesday, restaurants and independent chefs were celebrating our annual November Food Bowl. It was one of Crystal Cove’s greatest and most attended celebrations. Throughout the event, many of the restaurants in town were offering specialty meals.

“Rhett and I are planning on going to the barbecue event, too,” I added. “Five barbecue chefs dishing it up in one venue sounds like heaven.” Rhett was my fiancé and part owner of a new bistro, Intime.

I’d set a schedule, with and without Rhett. Tomorrow, I would go to Intime, which would be open to the public for the first time and would be offering a seven-course meal with wine pairings. On Friday night, Bailey and I would tour Buena Vista Boulevard, our main drag, which would be open only to pedestrians so people could taste wares from pop-up vendors. On Saturday, Rhett and I would stroll the Pier, which was featuring appetizer vendors, and then we’d return to town to dine on barbecue. On Sunday, restaurants would focus on family meals; my family would skip that night to enjoy our

weekly meal. On Monday, the Nook Café was dishing up six hours of lunch choices. And on Tuesday, the final night, the Pelican Brief Diner, which belonged to Bailey's mother, Lola, was featuring a prix fixe fish fry. Lola had invited chefs from all over the Central Coast to participate. They would serve the event on the restaurant's rooftop.

"I've got to get these skates off before I break my neck," I said.

"I'll give you a hand." Cinnamon steadied me so I could bend down and remove my skates. "Between you and me, I'd prefer attending the More Bubbles Brunch."

The brunch was being held at the Crystal Cove Inn, a charming bed-and-breakfast and one of the original establishments in town. Pairings of champagne with cheese, meats, omelets, and desserts were on the menu.

"Of course I won't be able to imbibe," Cinnamon added. "But I'm sure they'll have mock mimosas."

"Maybe we could do a ladies morning out," I suggested. "On Tuesday. My day off. Think you could swing it?"

"I'm on duty for the next six days straight. I won't have a morning to spare."

"C'mon. Get your deputy to cover you."

"We'll see."

When Cinnamon and I had first met, we were at odds. She thought I was guilty of murder, and I didn't trust her because she was officious. Over the years, thanks to the fact that my father had been her mentor, way back when, we'd bonded and become friends.

"If you can't do the brunch," I said, "see if you can break free on Monday evening. I'll be going to Shredding for its Food Bowl. I promised to take Bailey. They have a blue cheese and bacon salad to die for, and I heard Midge is going to make a shredded

tandoori chicken salad.”

“Sounds good.” Cinnamon glanced at her watch. “Oh, gosh, it’s late. Gotta go.” She blew me a kiss. “This was fun.”

I unlocked the front door of the Cookbook Nook and strolled inside. Tigger, the adorable ginger cat who had introduced himself to me the day my aunt and I were remodeling the shop, charged me. Before heading off for my skating adventure, I’d dropped him at the store. “Yes, I’m back, fella. I didn’t abandon you.” I caressed his head, stowed my skates and paraphernalia in the stockroom, changed into a pair of capris, a pumpkin-colored sweater, and sandals, and returned to the register.

As I was sorting ones and fives, I heard a whimper and searched for the sound. Bailey, in a blue peasant blouse over jeans, was crouched by the display window.

“Whoa. Did you slip in before me?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“What are you doing here so early?”

“Brianna couldn’t sleep.”

The baby was lying on a colorful blanket-style play gym, an arc of animal-shaped toys dangling overhead. She was reaching for the critters and missing—hence the whimper. At six months, she was starting to understand failure.

“Why did you lock the front door?” I asked.

“I didn’t want customers coming in”—Bailey brandished a hand—“especially while I was dressing the display case with unwieldy tools.”

Beside her on the floor lay a dozen items, including an orange rotary cheese grater, a yellow veggie slicer, a red food processor, a stainless steel mandoline, an old-fashioned

potato peeler, and half a dozen sharp knives.

“Wow,” I said.

“Food Bowl week is challenging. I can’t do something that will represent all the tastings in town, so I settled on shredding and chopping gadgets, you know, to go with the binge-watching upstairs and to complement Midge’s upcoming demonstration.”

On Saturday at noon, Midge and Chef Katie, the chef at the Nook, were going to give a class for our customers showing how to shred with confidence. They planned to make a variety of salads, appetizers, vegetarian pizza, and more.

“What else do you think I should add?” Bailey asked.

“How about *The Chopped Cookbook?*” The full title was *The Chopped Cookbook: Use What You’ve Got to Cook Something Great*. It was written by the Food Network chefs and featured some delectable recipes, including salsa-marinated skirt steak soft tacos and chilled peanut chicken noodle salad. Thinking about food made my mouth water. A protein shake for breakfast wasn’t cutting it. “And since we’re nearing Thanksgiving, let’s get in the spirit and add some fall leaves, those beautiful brown paisley oven mitts, the ceramic turkey cookie jar, and the magnetic ceramic turkey salt-and pepper shakers.”

“Don’t you want to save those for next week’s display?”

I frowned. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll add an apron and a few other goodies.”

In the Cookbook Nook, we offered not only cookbooks and fiction about food but also unique culinary and kitchen items. Many of our aprons were one of a kind.

“And let’s ditch the knives,” I said.

“On it.” Bailey bounded to her feet, removed the knives from her assortment, and went in search of other items, allowing me some one-on-one time with Brianna.

I murmured to her and tickled her under her chin. She cooed and offered big smiles.

“How’s it going with wedding planning?” Bailey returned with a handful of decorative porcelain vegetables—eggplant, radishes, red lettuce, and such—and set them alongside the slicing and dicing items before moving off again.

“So far so good.” Rhett and I had found a beautiful bed-and-breakfast with gorgeous gardens in Napa Valley, and we’d set a date for an evening wedding next June. “Not much to do yet. We’re considering a menu, but nothing is written in stone. We’ve browsed invitations online. We’re wondering whether we need to send out *Save the Date* cards.”

“Yes, and don’t think you have all the time in the world. The months will fly by.” Bailey patted her post-pregnancy belly. “Trust me. I have a baby to show for my nine months.”

With my aunt, father, and Bailey giving me advice, I was sure the months would *not* fly by.

“If I were you, I’d take Cinnamon up on using her wedding planner,” Bailey said.

“Good idea.” I gave Brianna a tickle and got to my feet. “Hey, did you see the line heading up the stairs to the *Shredding* screenings?”

“I did.” Bailey set a pair of orange kitchen mitts on the floor. “Can you imagine watching foodie-themed shows every day? I’d be eating everything in sight.”

“I told you I took one of Midge’s classes, didn’t I?” I was a foodie, but I wasn’t a gourmet cook. I didn’t learn how to cook until I’d joined my aunt in this venture. My

mother had been the chef in our family. Now, whenever I had some free time, I watched cooking shows on television, plus Chef Katie, a longtime friend, had made it her mission to teach me one recipe at a time. Rhett, also a gifted chef, was guiding me, too. I loved how patient they both were.

“I want to take a class soon,” Bailey said. “Do you think Katie will do one on making natural baby food?”

“Ask her. You never know.”

Bailey knelt down, gave her baby a kiss, and started creating the display case. Arranging everything took time, but I knew I could trust her. She had a great eye for color and design. When we’d worked at Taylor & Squibb, an advertising agency in San Francisco, she had been the product person, and I had served as a concept person.

“Hey,” Bailey said over her shoulder, “did I tell you about Midge’s set-to with Kylie O yesterday?”

“No.”

Bailey let out a stream of air. “She is such a prima donna.”

“Midge or Kylie?”

“Kylie, of course.” Bailey wrinkled her nose. “I can’t remember the last foodie recommendation she made that I agreed with. Octopus with Brie? Squid ink on avocado toast? Blech. She does like to review the exotic.”

“You mean *weird*.” I giggled. “I don’t know her well, but I’ve seen her around town. Rollerblading, surfing, running. In fact, she and a jogging mate almost knocked me over earlier.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Kylie was yelling, ‘Faster! Faster!’”

“Taskmaster,” Bailey carped. “I think she runs to work off all the calories she takes in tasting food for her reviews.”

I popped to my feet and started tweaking the array of specialty cookbooks on the round table near the entrance. After a day of customers, these displays ended up wrecked. “She’s quite a zealot.”

“You’re telling me.” Bailey whistled. “I took a group pilates class with her before I got pregnant. Alexa Tinsdale was the instructor.”

Alexa owned Your Wellness, a fitness studio in town, and was considered one of the premier pilates instructors in the Central Coast area. Clients came from as far away as San Jose and Carmel. *Be brave, be bold* was her motto.

“Kylie was in Alexa’s face throughout. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’” Bailey imitated a high-pitched nasal voice. “And ‘Why should I take orders from you? You’re a hack.’ It was intense.”

“Poor Alexa.”

“Nah. She dished it right back.” Bailey snickered.

“Alexa loves paleo cookbooks”—I held up a book—“like this one.”

“I know. I delivered *The Big 15 Paleo Cookbook: 15 Fundamental Ingredients, 150 Paleo Diet Recipes, 450 Variation* to her home last week. She was throwing an impromptu party for friends and wanted something new to serve.”

I faced Bailey. “Aren’t you and Tito taking private lessons with Alexa now?”

“Good memory. Yes. Not together. Separately.” Bailey placed a porcelain tomato into the front window display. “Anyway, back to my story about the pilates class. As it

turns out, Kylie and Alexa have been friends since childhood. The in-your-face antics were all for show, but I've got to tell you, everyone in the class was sweating bullets until we found out." Bailey placed a green pepper beside the tomato. "As for the set-to between Kylie and Midge at Shredding, I was there picking up dinner to go, and man, it wasn't pretty."

Brianna rocked and rolled herself onto her belly. Bailey cheered and replaced Brianna on her back. She wasn't crawling yet. *Late bloomer*, her grandmother had said. I happened to know some babies never crawled. They went straight to pulling up on a piece of furniture and cruising. I had been that baby, my father often reminded me. Always on the go and curious to a fault.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Kylie questioned the originality of one of the recipes in Midge's latest cookbook," Bailey said.

"She didn't."

"She *did*. Kylie called Midge a phony. To her face. In front of a restaurant full of people. Knives and mandolines"—Bailey lifted the stainless steel one—"were involved."

"That doesn't sound fun."

"It wasn't."

After finalizing the tweaks to the display table, I crossed to the vintage kitchen table where we always had a jigsaw puzzle set up for customers to toy with. To honor the Food Bowl, I'd found a food-themed, cat-themed jigsaw puzzle in which mischievous kittens were scrambling on a baking counter, messing with cookie preparations. Every time I glimpsed it, I smiled.

“Kylie pushes buttons,” Bailey added. “Tito can’t stomach her.”

Tito loved food and wished that he could write restaurant reviews in addition to his regular reporting. His grandmother had been an exquisite cook and had interested him in all of the world’s cuisines.

“Speaking of Tito,” I said, “how’s it going at the newspaper? I heard Eugene Tinsdale might sell.”

“Tito’s worried. He’s afraid a new owner will ruin everything, or worse, that no one will buy the business. I can’t imagine Crystal Cove not having a newspaper, can you?”

“No.” I liked reading my news via paper, not online. If we didn’t have a newspaper, then the local news would come from as far away as Santa Cruz or even San Jose.

“Needless to say, tension is high at the office, and Kylie O hasn’t made it easier for Tito.”

“How so?” I roamed the store double-checking that all of the moveable bookcases were anchored in place. I didn’t want a customer to lean against one and have the shelf and the customer go sailing.

“Kylie is demanding that she and she alone cover the Food Bowl.”

“But that’s ridiculous. There will be too much going on for one reporter to report it all.”

“That’s what Tito said, but would Kylie listen? No, she would not. She’s deaf. Obstinate. A real piece of work.” Bailey leaned in and lowered her voice. “Between you and me, I think my sweet husband would like to clock her.”