

Chapter 1

Chocolate. Is there anything not to like—excuse me, *love*—about chocolate? And it's February, so it's National Chocolate Month, which means I can focus The Cookbook Nook's theme on chocolate. Heaven. I plucked a homemade chocolate-cherry bonbon from a bowl sitting on the sales counter and popped it into my mouth, relishing the burst of flavor. *Yum!* Definitely not poison.

“Back to work, Jenna,” I whispered.

I was alone in The Cookbook Nook. My aunt had yet to arrive, and Bailey, my best friend in the world and the main sales clerk at the shop, had called saying she was running late, too. I enjoyed mornings in the shop by myself. I could take time to scan the wares and appreciate what I'd been able to build in the past few months.

Back in August, I gave up my cushy job at a swank San Francisco advertising firm and returned home to help my aunt Vera open our culinary bookshop. I am so proud that, with my aunt's financial backing and my marketing expertise, we have created this must-visit haven for foodies and lovers of cookbooks. The floors are filled with moveable bookshelves upon which sit hundreds of cookbooks with tasty titles. On the shelves along the walls are colorful arrays of cooking utensils, salt shakers, pepper mills, aprons, and more. We fashioned the rear corner as a young cooks area, where kids and their parents could sit and read or even do crafts. My aunt, who loves to tell fortunes, set up a vintage kitchen table near the front entrance where she offers occasional readings. She isn't a seer; she doesn't have extrasensory powers, but she believes her readings help her friends and clients cope. I'm not a believer, but I would never tell her sharing her passion is out

of the question. Sometimes, her predictions come true.

“Work!” I reminded myself.

I moved to the display table, where I had arranged delicious cozy mysteries with some of my favorites by Krista Davis and Jenn McKinlay. I added a new cozy to the grouping, *Murder of a Chocolate-Covered Cherry* by Denise Swanson. I also added a couple of new books to our permanent supply of food-related fiction: *The Chocolate Lovers’ Club* and *The Loveliest Chocolate Shop in Paris*.

“Perfect.”

Next, I gathered a stack of chocolate-themed cookbooks from the sales counter and skirted around the centermost movable bookshelf, while gazing lustfully at the top book—one I intended to take home with me, written by the renowned chocolatier Michael Recchiuti: *Chocolate Obsession: Confections and Treats to Create and Savor*. Granted, it was not a book for beginners, like me. In fact, one woman who had reviewed the book on Amazon said to do exactly what Recchiuti said *or else*. Um, okay, perhaps she hadn’t written that as a specific threat, but it was implied. Make sure to buy the higher butterfat butter was one of her suggestions. Also, use the expensive chocolate. Forget about baking with Hershey’s. Now, I adore Hershey’s Kisses and those adorable Hershey’s Miniatures, but even I can tell the difference between an everyday chocolate and Scharffen Berger.

I placed the chocolate books on another display table, stood the Recchiuti book upright with its pages fanned open, and set a pile of books behind it. I laid out other titles, like *Crazy About Chocolate: More Than 200 Delicious Recipes to Enjoy and Share*—the cover alone with a dozen mouthwatering mini chocolate éclairs would sell that book in a

heartbeat—and *Absolutely Chocolate: Irresistible Excuses to Indulge*—its sinfully all-chocolate cover was great, as well. I had space for a few more titles and hurried back to the stockroom.

When I returned carrying a stack of books that reached my chin, a forty-something woman with sleek black hair, one of our regulars, rapped on the front door, which I'd propped open—I love crisp, fresh air. She wiggled her fingers. “Jenna, are you ready for a few customers?”

It was almost nine. “Sure.”

“Can you help us?” She and two friends made a beeline for the paleo diet section of books. I followed. “Paleo,” she said matter-of-factly. “Can you explain the regime to us?”

Although it wasn't my preferred way to eat—I savored carbs—I knew the basics. Paleo involved eating the way cavemen did, which meant consuming only things we could hunt, fish, or farm. Sugar-packed cereal and pasta made with white flour were out. P.S. I really like fettuccine Alfredo.

“We're confused, then,” she said when I finished speaking. “How can this be right?” She held up *The Paleo Chocolate Lovers' Cookbook: 80 Gluten-Free Treats for Breakfast and Dessert*. The woman's forehead and eyes were pinched with concern. “I thought you said sweets were out.”

I smiled, having wondered the same thing. With a little research, I'd made sense of the notion. “None of the recipes include gluten, grain, or dairy. The author, a popular cooking blogger, has created many of the recipes using coconut or ground nuts. With the help of the herbal sweetener stevia, she shows you how to keep the honey and coconut sugar—her preferred sugars—to a minimum.”

“Ooh, I get it.”

“By the way,” I added, “I’ve heard the chocolate pie with raw graham cracker crust is to die for.”

Bailey tore into the shop and skidded on her wedged heels, almost taking down our customers and me. “Sorry.”

“Excuse me,” I said to the ladies. Juggling my pile of books, I scooted Bailey around a stand of bookshelves and whispered, “What’s gotten into you?”

“I did it.”

“Did what?”

Bailey fluffed her fringed hair and batted her baby blues. “As head of the Chocolate Cookbook Club, I declared we are going to celebrate the entire month of February by purchasing a new chocolate-themed cookbook each week.” The book club meets on the first Thursday of every month. “I’ve contacted all thirty members, and everybody is on board. Do the math. Ka-ching!” She mimed opening a cash register then grabbed me by the shoulders, her hands barely able to reach me because of the books I held. I forced myself not to laugh. She was, after all, at a disadvantage being shorter than I was by almost a foot. At five foot eight, I stood taller than most women I knew.

Bailey shimmied me. “C’mon, girlfriend, do a happy dance with me.”

My hair bounced around my shoulders. My tower of books teetered. “Cut it out.”

“Not until you dance.”

I shuffled my feet. “Look, Ma. I’m dancing.”

“You call that dancing?”

“Let me go.”

Bailey giggled but obeyed. “Get this, I talked them into buying Coco’s latest cookbook first. *Sweet Sensations: All Things Chocolate, from the Delicious to the Fantabulous.*”

Coco Chastain was one of Bailey’s and my good friends. We had known her since high school, although at the time we didn’t hang out. Bailey was in the popular girl group; I floated between the studios and theater group; Coco was part of the art crowd. Now, she was a local chocolatier who owned Sweet Sensations, a delectable candy store. I couldn’t walk by the place without stopping to inhale. Coco, a lusty woman with a curvaceous figure, had been engaged once, but her fiancé left her for a younger, skinnier woman. *Boring*, as Coco would say. I glanced over my shoulder at my customers. They didn’t seem to mind that Bailey was distracting me.

“Go on,” I said.

“I asked Coco to speak to the group,” Bailey said. “She jumped at the chance. She even offered to invite Alison.”

Alison Foodie, a successful independent publisher in San Francisco who specialized in cookbooks and related nonfiction, was Coco’s publisher. We carried a few of Foodie Publishing’s titles on our shelves. Foodie was Alison’s real surname, Scottish in origin, and not a fictitious name for her business. She originated from Crystal Cove, too. In fact, her family lineage, which was colorful to say the least, dated back to the first settlers. However, up until a couple of years ago, I had never met her. Neither had Coco. Alison was a few years older than we were. Bailey had brought us all together. Bailey and Alison met at a businesswomen’s retreat. When they realized they came from the same town, they became fast friends. Small world.

I said, “Alison will deign to come down from San Francisco?”

“Stop it.” Bailey swatted the air. “You know she’s not a snob.”

Actually, Alison had a wicked sense of humor. She was incredibly smart.

“She doesn’t come back to town often because she’s super busy,” Bailey went on.

“She does visit occasionally to check in on her mother.”

“That’s sweet,” I said, though I had to wonder. Alison’s younger brother lived with their mother. Didn’t Alison trust him to tend to her?

“Coco said Alison will give the club the inside scoop on the publishing world. Isn’t that cool?” Bailey clapped her hands.

“Super cool. Maybe she’ll give me an insight to the next best thing in the cookbook world.”

A swish of fur swiped my ankles. I sidestepped and peered at Tigger, my silly kitten. At least I think he was still considered a kitten. He’d wandered into the shop—and into my life—a few months ago. At the time, I’d pegged him at two months old. I had him neutered in November. *Ouch*, but necessary. As a result, he hadn’t ever sprayed my cottage, and he had retained his kittenish playfulness.

I set the books on a nearby table, scooped him into my arms, and scruffed him under the chin. “What’s up, Tig-Tig?” I’d dubbed him Tigger because, like the Disney character that pounced and trounced, Tigger had done twirls and other fun gyrations that first day to win my heart. “Did silly old Bailey and her loud voice wake you up from your nap?”

Invariably, when we arrived at the shop, Tigger moseyed into his spot beneath the children’s table for a lengthy snooze.

Tigger meowed.

“I am not loud,” Bailey said.

He yowled again, disagreeing with her.

“Are you hungry? Let me check your bowl.” I signaled the three ladies by the paleo section. “I’ll be right back, if you need me.”

Bailey trailed me through the shop to the stockroom. She propped the drape open with a hip and continued her conversation while I refreshed Tigger’s goodies. “I was thinking we should hold tomorrow’s book club meeting in the Nook Café since we’ll have special guests.”

The eatery, an adjunct to The Cookbook Nook and connected by a breezeway, had become a wonderfully profitable side business, thanks to the budding reputation of our inspired chef, Katie Casey, another high school buddy of Bailey’s and mine.

“Katie agreed to close the café,” Bailey went on.

“You already cleared it with her?”

“Yep. She’ll make a tasting from Coco’s latest cookbook,” Bailey went on. “Not just the sweets, but the savory things, too, like the chicken with the luscious chocolate mole sauce.”

“Yum.”

“Or the mixed salad with orange slices dipped in chocolate. And, of course, an assortment of desserts. C’mon. This’ll be fun.” Bailey rapped me on the arm. “Girls’ night out. We’ll help Katie with the cooking.”

“We?” I gulped. “For thirty?”

“With Katie’s supervision.”

Remember, earlier, when I mentioned that Michael Recchiuti’s *Chocolate Obsession*

might be beyond my ability? That is because I'm not a cook. I'm trying to learn. I've graduated from making five-ingredient recipes to multiple-ingredient ones. I've even tried my hand at cooking entrées as well as desserts. The chocolate cherries on the sales counter? Mine. But creating an entire meal for what could be a possibly hypercritical crowd? My heart started to chug until I channeled Sophie Winston, the event planner from the Domestic Diva mysteries. She made cooking sound so easy; she always had things prepared way in advance, much of it stored in the freezer. I could do this. I could. Yes, indeed, with a battalion of cooks and Katie's supervision, a soiree was going to be a snap.

Tigger butted my ankle with his head. He opened his eyes wide, as if offering reassurance.

"Please, pretty please," Bailey said.

"Okay. We'll do it."

"Yeah!"

I fastened a pearl button on my cardigan sweater and moved past Bailey into the shop. More customers had arrived. Many were ogling the aprons. A few were admiring the selection of chocolate-themed fiction. One, a darling older woman, had nestled at the vintage kitchen table to tackle the latest food-themed jigsaw puzzle. We always had one going. Customers loved to piece them together. I think it made them feel like family. I tucked in behind the sales counter.

Bailey joined me. "Do you have a favorite dessert recipe in Coco's latest?"

"The chocolate-cherry bonbons, which I've already made." I gestured to the batch on the counter. "Try one."

“Before lunch?”

“Chocolate is good at any time of the day.”

Bailey bit into one. “You made these?”

“Yep.” I polished my fingernails on my sweater.

“Girlfriend, I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” I opened the cash register drawer and counted ones and fives. “Do me a favor and check again with Katie. Make sure she knew what you were asking.”

Sometimes Katie, distracted by the many duties of running a restaurant, would bob her head in answer to any question.

“Will do.” Bailey whooped as she hurried to the café.

At the same time, a shaggy-haired pirate—kid you not, *pirate*—darted into the shop. He was wearing pantaloons and a red waistcoat. Sword drawn, he crept stealthily behind one of the bookcases at the center of the store.

The customers, including my paleo cookbook hunters, gasped.

Tigger poked his head through the split in the drapes from the stockroom. I waved at him to retreat. He didn’t. He stared bug-eyed at the man.

Seconds after the red pirate hid, a pirate in a blue waistcoat and pantaloons entered, followed by a pair of robust women dressed in ecru blouses topped with lace-up vests and gathered skirts. All of the intruders wore boots; the men wore feathered tricorne hats.

The blue pirate yanked his sword from its scabbard and yelled, “Where are ye, ye whining, yellow-bellied landlubber?”

The red pirate bolted from his hiding spot, sword raised.

The blue pirate lunged. Metal clanged. The red pirate hopped backward onto one of

the chairs by the vintage kitchen table. The blue pirate ducked, pivoted, and came up on the other side of his enemy. He thrust the tip of his sword at the red pirate's throat.

The red pirate dropped his sword and raised his hands.