

Chapter 1

I didn't mean to. It was an accident. But as I swooped past one of The Cookbook Nook's display tables while carrying a stack of cookbooks in my arms, my elbow nicked a spine. That set off an event that would make a domino-chain-reaction physicist proud. Every book that I had carefully placed upright fell. *Smack-smack-smack*.

All the customers in the shop, a few still dressed in their Sunday finest, spun to take a peek. My cheeks burned with embarrassment. *Slick, Jenna, real slick*. Why was I off my game? I had been on edge since I'd awakened this morning. I took a tumble over a log on the beach during my morning walk, and then I burned the toast, broke a glass, and snagged my favorite lacy white sweater on the door latch. Each time I blundered, I felt like I was being watched—judged—by an unknown someone.

"Shoot," I muttered under my breath. I didn't mind the mess. Ever since I'd quit working as an advertising executive in San Francisco and returned to Crystal Cove to help my aunt Vera open a culinary bookshop—nearly a year ago; how time flies—I had arranged and rearranged The Cookbook Nook multiple times. I had assembled books by chefs, by theme, and by difficulty of recipe. Customers seemed to enjoy the rotation. I think they secretly liked the personal attention the staff at the shop provided when they asked for help locating a title.

"Eek!" Bailey Bird, who was my best friend and also my employee, shrieked at the top of her lungs, which sent my already pinging nerves into overdrive. She was at the back of the store near the children's table, trotting in place. Her multicolored bangles jangled; her summery skirt flounced up and down. "Jenna, help!"

I rushed to her, my flip-flops flapping. My hair caught in my mouth; I sputtered it out. “What’s going on?”

“Eek!” she shrieked again.

She wasn’t on fire. I didn’t see a mouse.

“Are you practicing the flamenco?” I asked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Spiders. You know I hate spiders!” She tap-danced, trying to nail her prey with the toes of her espadrille sandals. “Help!”

I pushed up the sleeves of my second-favorite lacy white sweater, hiked up the knee of my trousers, and crouched to inspect. Afternoon sunlight highlighted two spiders: one, including its legs, couldn’t have been the size of a pea; the other wasn’t much larger. They must have materialized from the box of books Bailey had brought from the stockroom. I rose to my full height, nearly a head taller than my pal, and said, “They’re itty-bitty.”

“Jenna Hart, dagnabbit, do something! Or are you too old and feeble?”

“Ha!” I was an official thirty-something now. I had celebrated my birthday a couple of weeks ago, not with a big bash, just a May fling with friends. I didn’t feel older, but I was definitely looking at life differently—in decades rather than in years. Weird. Maybe that was the thing that was bothering me. Age. Life. Zipping by.

“C’mon,” Bailey pleaded.

Tigger, the darling ginger kitten—now *cat*—who rescued me when I first moved back to Crystal Cove, darted from beneath the children’s reading table and pounced at one of the spiders. He didn’t catch it. His quarry fled to safety under a floorboard.

“One flew the coop,” I quipped.

“Get the other one,” Bailey cried.

I wasn’t a fan of spiders, but I would never make such a ruckus about teensy creatures. Wait. I take that back. I might—*might*—squeal if I saw a black widow spider.

“C’mon, Jenna! Pronto. Puh-lease!”

“Okay, hold your horses. Calm down. You’re going to drive away customers,” I quipped, if my antics over by the display table hadn’t already scared them off.

A number of customers, their arms filled with cookbooks to purchase, were backing toward the exit.

“Don’t flee, folks,” I said. “She’s overreacting. Everything is fine.” To Bailey, I said,

“Stop it. You’re yelling so loudly, you’d think we’ve encountered an onslaught of bugs worthy of a Steven Spielberg movie!”

“I’m s-sorry.” Her teeth were chattering, her eyes as wide as saucers. She didn’t like bugs. Any kind. Her fear stemmed from a time, way back in grade school, when a trio of boys dumped her in a woodpile. Her hair at the time, unlike the short hairdo she sported now, had been long and quickly became a nest for a horde of creepy-crawlers. Over the past year, my aunt Vera, who for the past forty of her sixty-something years liked to dabble in alternative methods of coping by telling fortunes or doing hypnosis and aura readings, had tried all sorts of sense therapy with Bailey to help her overcome her dread, but nothing had worked.

Hmm. Maybe I should consult my aunt about the weird vibes I had been experiencing all day.

“Swat it,” Bailey pleaded.

I snatched a piece of construction paper off the children’s table—the table was always set with artistic goodies so kids could have fun while their parents shopped—and I flailed at the teensy spider. I caught it with one blow and glanced at my buddy. “Feeling better?”

“I will if I’m able to nab one of Katie’s delicious barbecue muffins before they’re all gone.”

A half hour ago Katie Casey, my other best friend and the inventive chef of The Nook Café, an adjunct of the bookshop, had set out a tasty display of barbecue muffins for our customers to snack on. People had been flocking into the store ever since to taste the savory delights. Sure, they intended to purchase cookbooks, too, but the cheese-and-ground-beef-stuffed muffins were fast becoming legendary. Katie promised to cook all sorts of yummy ranch-style food throughout the week, like mini cups of baked beans, cornbread, and even a cake decorated to look like a cactus. I’d begged her to include her finger-licking-good, dry-rub ribs, but she said they would be too messy for the shop. I agreed, but I craved them.

Why was she hooked on a barbecue theme? Because this week and on into next week, Crystal Cove was hosting the Wild West Extravaganza. The WWE promoted family-friendly, animal-friendly events all over the West Coast. Sure, there would be rodeo events but no steer wrestling and no bulldogging. There would be horse races, rope jumping, stunt fighting, and more. To get ourselves in the mood, we had rimmed the front door of the shop with the image of an old jail and decorated the shop with all sorts of western doodads.

“Jenna! Bailey!” Ava Judge, one of our regular customers, flew through the front door in her typical designer suit and smart high heels. *Spitfire*. That was how people would describe her. She had a sizzling personality and high-octane energy, all wrapped up in a raring-to-go athletic body. She played tennis two to three times a week—great for a forty-something—and most often won. As she always did, she flourished a real estate flyer. She never missed an opportunity to promote her business.

Ava scooted to a stop and thrust the flyer at me. I accepted it. A million-dollar home in the hills was for sale. “Where’s Vera?” she asked.

“On a date. With the deputy.” I returned the flyer to her. “Why?”

“It’s so sad.” Ava’s voice caught. I took a closer look at her perfectly made-up face.

Tears pressed at the corners of her eyes. She fished in her oversized, crammed-to-the-gills tote; her hand came out empty.

Realizing she was searching for a tissue, I dashed to the sales counter, fetched a tissue from a box, and returned. I handed it to her. “What’s got you so upset?”

“Haven’t you heard?” She dabbed her eyes, then stuffed the tissue in her bag. “The promoter for this week’s event...died.”

“Oh no.”

“Was he murdered?” Bailey asked.

I whacked her. “Not every death is suspicious.”

“Some are.”

“Not this time.” Ava shook her head. Her long, highlighted tresses swayed back and forth.

“He was bucked off a mechanical bull last night. His second-in-command is going to

take his place. Shane..." She snapped her fingers. *Snap, snap, snap.* "His last name is...oh, help me out...what was that TV western called, with the darling gambling brothers?"

"*Maverick?*" I suggested.

"That's the one."

"I know Shane Maverick." He had worked with me at Taylor & Squibb Advertising in San Francisco. "Bailey, you know him. Remember, he worked in sales and had the gift of gab?" Bailey and I had lost touch during college; we had reconnected while working at Taylor & Squibb. She had been in charge of monitoring all the campaigns—on air, in magazines, and on the Internet. However, city life isn't for everyone, and she, like me, had moved home recently to switch up her future.

"Yeah," Bailey said. "Shane. Sort of pudgy and out of shape."

"Not anymore," Ava said. "He's quite a hunk."

I nodded. "He sure is." At one time Shane was a good sixty pounds overweight; now he was ultra fit. I knew because he was the person who had opened my husband's gym locker in San Francisco when I was trying to solve a mystery about his death. My heart snagged at the memory. *David.* Once the love of my life, gone over three years. *Buck up, Jenna. No tears. Not at work.* "I didn't know Shane was involved with the Wild West Extravaganza. The last time I saw him, he was managing a chain of workout centers. One site is located in Santa Cruz, just about thirty minutes from here."

"He's not doing that anymore," Ava said. "He did, while the Wild West Extravaganza group courted him and relocated their headquarters to Crystal Cove. He was in and out of town a lot for interviews and training, but now that they've snatched

him up, he's moving to town."

"The WWE relocated here?"

"Sure did. I sold Shane a place in your dad's and my neighborhood."

I laughed. "And you couldn't remember his last name?"

"We haven't closed escrow yet."

"Ava, give me a break. You're toying with me." I gave her a long, knowing look; she obviously liked Shane. "Are you two—"

"No," Ava cut me off. "He's engaged and living with the piano teacher. The very *pregnant* piano teacher."

We only had one piano teacher in town: Emily Hawthorne. She was a regular in the store. She preferred organic food cookbooks, although, come to think of it, she hadn't visited for quite a while. How could she be *very* pregnant? I wondered, then blushed. She and Shane must have hooked up months ago on one of his many trips to town.

"By the way—" Ava snapped three times again; I got the feeling she was a habitual snapper. I had seen her snap at service people, like a gardener or a housepainter, and I'd caught her snapping at her clients, too. Nobody seemed to mind. She got things done. On time. A rarity in the real estate business. "Shane is an animal safety buff, so no horses or animals will be hurt this week. Also, he has some new ideas how to drum up tourist interest, and the mayor is on board. She thinks Shane is wonderful. I think she wants him to run for city council in the future."

"Wow," Bailey said, "talk about jumping into a new town with both feet. Are you sure he didn't kill the other guy to get the job?"

"Stop it," I said.

“Murder happens.” Bailey plucked at her coppery hair and threw me a pert look. “You and I know that all too well.” She was referring to the fact that we had been acquainted with a few people who had died under suspicious circumstances. All that sadness was behind us now. A few months had passed without a single incident. To a former advertiser like me who understood flow charts, Crystal Cove was on an upswing statistically.

“Shane is a good guy,” Ava went on. “Promise.” She hoisted her tote higher on her shoulder. “Mind if I browse the shelves?”

“Be our guest.” I made a sweeping gesture and then remembered I hadn’t fixed the arrangement I’d destroyed on the display table. I hurried ahead of her to reset the dozens of barbecue- and grill-themed cookbooks.

Without asking, Ava placed a stack of flyers on the sales counter and then moved to our display of Wild West-style aprons. I’d ordered a half dozen fashioned out of bandana material and another half dozen made out of cute cow-print fabric with red-checked borders. “Are any of you partaking in the festivities this week?” she asked while holding a cow-print apron in front of her and inspecting its length on her body.

“Tito and I are going to the pole-bending event,” Bailey said. Tito Martinez, a reporter for the *Crystal Cove Crier*, is Bailey’s fiancé. “Have you ever seen that? It’s sort of like slalom racing for skiing. One horse, one rider, weaving around poles. I hear it’s exciting.”

“What about you, Jenna?” Ava asked.

“I plan to take in the horse race.”

“Down Buena Vista Boulevard?”

“Is there going to be another?”

Our fair city, which was set on the coast of California below Santa Cruz and above Monterey, was one long stretch of gorgeous territory, marked by an age-old lighthouse at the north end and a public pier filled with shops and fun things to do at the south end. The weather was beautiful year-round, with the occasional splash of rain or drift of fog. The hills to the east boasted wondrous vegetation and beautiful homes. The crests of the mountains sparkled as the waning sun cast its rays on them at sunset. Buena Vista Boulevard, which is what we called the section of the Pacific Coast Highway that cut through town, was populated with shops and restaurants. A main portion of the street would be closed off and traffic detoured for the horse race.

“Don’t miss the rope twirling,” Ava said, “or the chuck wagon race.”

The rope twirling would take place on The Pier. The chuck wagon race would be held on the beach. In addition, in the parking lots joining the community college and the aquarium, there were going to be live bands and food trucks. The Cookbook Nook had lots of activities planned over the course of the next ten days, too. For our first specialty event, Katie would lead an adult gingerbread-making session where customers could learn how to construct an old western town.

“I nearly forgot,” Ava said. “I came in looking for a Steve Raichlen cookbook. You know who I mean, the TV host. It’s about grilling. I think it came out around 2001.” She raised her fingers to snap.

Before she could, I grabbed her hand and guided her toward our celebrity chef section. Luckily Hurricane Jenna hadn’t demolished that area. The shelves were tidy and alphabetically arranged.

“Is this it?” I pulled a book from its slot. “Raichlen’s *How to Grill: The Complete Illustrated Book of Barbecue Techniques* or *A Barbecue Bible! Cookbook*.” Raichlen offered a lot of show-and-tell and step-by-step instructions.

“That’s the one.”

“We also have *Bobby Flay’s Grill It!* and *Smokin’ with Myron Mixon: Recipes Made Simple, from the Winningest Man in Barbecue*.” I had stocked up on a few basic books from the Weber grill company, as well, and made sure we had Guy Fieri’s *Guy on Fire: 130 Recipes for Adventures in Outdoor Cooking*. Reviewers said his book really appealed to male customers, of which we had many. It wasn’t your typically pretty tabletop cookbook; it was filled with humor. I loved the fact that Guy called his outdoor tools his *arsenal*.

I nabbed a few more books from the shelf and handed them to Ava. Snapping waylaid, she continued to browse, so I ventured to the display table and did a quick makeover without standing the books up. Call me foolish once, not twice.

Next, I shifted to the display window to tweak our latest exhibit. Bailey and I had spent all day yesterday putting items in place. We had laid out a crisp checkered tablecloth and built levels beneath it, and then we’d added colorful barbecue tools with a variety of handles, a mini hibachi, some grill lights for late-night grilling, long tubes of matches, and candles. We included a corny-looking chuck wagon cookie jar—I had stumbled across an assortment of kooky cookie jars online and had purchased twenty of them—plus a huge wicker picnic basket, red plastic cups, and a red pitcher. As a finishing touch, we set out mason jars packed with retro cinnamon candy sticks or gumballs.

Staring at the display now, I felt something was missing, but what? A split second later, I snapped like Ava. Books. *Duh!* Yes, we sold lots of unique cooking items in our store, but mostly we sold books, and the display had none.

I roamed the shop and plucked a few titles that would appeal to passersby. Two children's books: *The Gingerbread Cowboy* and *Little Red Cowboy Hat*. As a savvy marketer, I realized that children often pulled their parents into stores. "Mommy, buy me that!" they would cry. Deep in the recesses of my mind, I expected to get paid back in spades when I had children—if I had children. They would tug me this way and that, and I would have to comply. *Too-ra-loo*, as my aunt would say.

I added a fun adult book called *The Cowboy Hat Book*, a coffee table-style book that contained the history of the hat, and I placed a used edition of *The All-American Cowboy Cookbook: Over 300 Recipes From the World's Greatest Cowboys* next to that, used because it was out of print, which was too bad. Inside there were colorful stories about a few old-time western stars like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. I had purchased the book for a song at a garage sale. I vowed I would never sell it, but I probably would. For the right price.

"Jenna!" Ava beckoned me with a finger. "Help me with these." She had collected a dozen books.

I hurried to her—see how she gets people to obey?—and I carried her haul to the checkout counter. "What a lot of books. Are you having a party?"

"Between you and me, shh"—she winked twice—"yes, I'm having a private party.

Private because a certain somebody will not be invited to attend. I've asked a few of my neighbors, including your father, to come for cocktails and heavy hors d'oeuvres

tomorrow night. I think your father has invited his beloved. That's entirely all right."

My father, a former FBI man, is a widower and retired and currently dating Bailey's mother Lola, who is like my second mother. I adore her. Seeing them together always makes me smile. Dad was lost after my mother died.

"Why the secrecy?" I asked as I packed her books into one of our specialty shop bags and tied the handle with rattan ribbon.

"It's a community gathering, if you will, but that certain someone is not, I repeat *not*, to hear of it. Do you understand?"

I nodded, but how could I tell that *someone* if I didn't know who it was?

Ava peered over her shoulder and back at me with a triumphant—or was it malicious?—gleam in her eye. "See you."

As she left, a chill ran down my spine. At the same time a door slammed. Outside the shop.

I glanced through the window at the parking lot and saw the rear lights of a dark blue Prius flare. Something else flickered, too, inside the car, like sunlight bouncing off a lens of a camera or binoculars. Was someone spying on the store? On Ava? No. Of course not. I was being silly. The driver of the car—I couldn't tell whether it was a man or woman—was probably doing business on a cell phone or using the utility mirror on the visor.

In spite of that logical explanation, another chill cut through me. *Sheesh, Jenna. Lighten up!* I flicked my fingers at the air to rid myself of bad vibes, as my aunt had taught me, but it didn't work. A third shudder jolted me to my core.