

Chapter 1

“Ow, ow, ow!” Bailey hopped on one foot. I feared if she bounced any more she would drop the baby then and there. She was five weeks from her due date, but the way her belly was pressing against her denim jumper made me think the baby might pop out at any second. “Paper cut! Jenna, do something.”

I raced across the Nook Café and helped my pal into a chair by the window. For the past hour, I had been filling newly installed bookshelves with cookbooks that our customers could browse while dining, including a couple of terrific selections that were perfect for tea parties, *The Afternoon Tea Collection* and *Afternoon Tea at Home: Deliciously indulgent recipes for sandwiches, savouries, scones, cakes and other fancies*. My aunt insisted that everyone should know how to serve a proper tea.

To keep me company, Bailey had been assembling construction paper cookbooks that children could decorate at the children’s table in the Cookbook Nook.

“Don’t get blood on the tablecloth,” I warned. It was only eight in the morning but fresh white linens had been set out the night before. “Drink in the view while I get a Band-Aid.” I hurried to the café kitchen and retrieved the first aid kit.

“Pain,” Bailey mumbled, sucking on her finger while staring out the window at the ocean. “Pain, pain, pain.”

“If that’s painful, wait until childbirth,” I teased.

“Not. Looking. Forward. To. It.”

“Remember our motto.” I pointed to a sign I’d posted on the café’s entrance yesterday: *We breathe to live. We live to read.*

She stuck out her tongue. “I’m breathing. I’m also anticipating the birth, the terrible twos, high school prom, and college tuition.”

I applied the Band-Aid and rubbed her shoulder. “Why don’t you take the day off?”

“Over a paper cut? Get serious.” She bounded to her feet. “Let’s go. You’re done here, right? We have so much to do.” She trotted along the enclosed breezeway that connected the café to the Cookbook Nook. Over her shoulder she said, “We need to set out all the culinary-themed fiction we just received, plus we have to tweak the book club display. C’mon. Chop-chop.”

“I’m right behind you.”

The mayor had designated the last few days in April as Book Club Bonanza. Starting tomorrow, Saturday, the inns and hotels would be filled to the max with book club members from all over the West Coast. Tomorrow night, the Mystery Mavens, one of Crystal Cove’s local book clubs, of which I was a member, were putting on a progressive dinner event, meaning its more than twenty members would travel from one house to the next dining on appetizers, tea sandwiches, entrées, and desserts while discussing the culinary cozy mystery we’d agreed to read: *The Diva Serves High Tea*. The selection won out over two others: *Death on the Menu* and *Goodbye Cruller World*. I’d purchased a copy of each. I’d almost finished the first, and I couldn’t wait to read the other two.

“Ooh, sugar cookies.” Bailey paused by the table where Chef Katie had set out treats for customers. “How cute. They look like little books. Which one should I choose?”

“The red one.” The cookies were iced in an assortment of primary colors. “Did you read the *Diva* book?” I asked. My neighbor Crusibella Queensberry, whom I’d only recently learned owned Spellbinder Book Shop, had made the selection. For some reason,

whenever I'd gone into her shop, I'd dealt with one of her assistants and not seen her. Each week during spring, Crusibella planned to feature a different mystery genre at the store. This week: culinary cozies. Right up my alley.

"Absolutely," Bailey said. "I'm not missing the event."

"Don't tell me how it ends. I've got three chapters left to read." I'd belonged to a book club when I'd lived and worked in San Francisco, and invariably one or two members wouldn't have completed the assignment. I refused to be that person.

"Don't worry. The ladies agreed no spoilers."

"After a little wine, someone is bound to reveal the end."

"Well, I'm not drinking wine." She chose a cookie and ate it in two bites. Visibly, the little being inside her belly moved. "Is it just me, or does this kid like sugar a lot more than I do?"

"The doctor told you to abstain from eating salt."

"I miss French fries." She petted her tummy and cooed words I couldn't make out.

I smiled. Bailey had been reluctant to have a child, but her husband had really wanted one. Minutes after she learned she was pregnant, her fear disappeared. She'd been enjoying the experience ever since. Even if she couldn't eat salty foods.

"Speak of the devil. There's Crusibella." I pointed out the picture window toward the parking lot.

Fisherman's Village, the quaint shopping mall where the Cookbook Nook and the Nook Café were located, consisted of a number of shops as well as Cameo, an art house theater, and Vines, a wine bistro. Crusibella, dressed in a silky blue frock that matched the blue streaks in her hair, was chatting with Pepper Pritchett, who owned Beaders of

Paradise, the shop catty-corner from ours.

“Pepper looks peeved,” Bailey whispered.

Pepper was an expert craftswoman who gave lessons and made nearly all of her own clothes.

“What do you bet they’re arguing about what they’re serving at the book club?” I joked. Just the other day, I’d overheard Pepper brag that she was making an exquisite cheese appetizer.

“Uh-oh. Sparks will fly.” Bailey giggled.

As she went ahead of me into the shop, I noticed movement outside, beyond the women. Someone in a tan jacket with shaggy brown hair ducked out of sight. Man or woman, I couldn’t tell.

“Jenna!” Bailey called. “Come here. I need your help.”

I glanced at the parking lot again. I didn’t see anyone besides the two women. Maybe whoever it was had dropped a set of car keys. I put the moment from my mind and joined Bailey, who was moving aside the one-foot Plexiglas wall that bordered the window display. Without the wall, children’s eager fingers could really mess things up.

Tigger, my ginger cat, dashed to us and swatted his tail against Bailey’s leg.

“I don’t need *your* help, cat,” Bailey chided. “Just your mom’s. Go back to sleep.”

Tigger slinked to his favorite spot beneath the children’s table in the rear corner of the shop and curled into a ball.

“Look at the display.” Bailey motioned to it. “What’s missing?”

On top of a beautiful lilac-themed tablecloth, I’d set a pair of white three-tiered

cake stands and filled them with artfully made porcelain candies and cookies. I'd added lavender cocktail napkins as well as a colorful array of cookie cutters, useful to design tea sandwiches. Two fine-boned china cups and saucers finished the display.

"Cookbooks," I said. "Let's add a few dessert cookbooks, like *Afternoon Tea: Delicious Recipes for Scones, Savories & Sweets*. The beautiful purple-and-rose cover will do nicely with the color scheme. And *Teatime Parties: Afternoon Tea to Commemorate the Milestones of Life*."

"Oh, I love that one," Bailey said. "The pictures are gorgeous, and it teaches you how to steep tea properly. I had no idea there was a method. I thought . . . *Oof*." The baby kicked. Bailey flinched. "All right already." She pointed to her stomach. "The little general is telling me to get my rear in gear. Books!" She headed to the storage room.

As I was leafing through the new fiction we'd ordered for the visiting book clubs, I heard a *tap-tap* on the front door. Ivy Beale, a petite forty-something with bobbed platinum blond hair, was peering through the glass, hands framing her elegantly beautiful, aging model's face. Beside her was Oren Michaels, a local fisherman who supplied fish to the Nook Café. Towering over her, he reminded me of the handsome seafarer we'd used in a commercial for Old Spice when I worked as an advertising executive at Taylor & Squibb.

Oren said something to Ivy and grinned. She elbowed him playfully.

"Jenna?" Ivy called. "May I come in? I know it's early. Pretty please?"

Ivy owned Dreamcatcher, a healing stones and crystals store. I'd purchased a few

items there for my brother and sister as well as for a few friends. Invariably whenever I went in, Ivy would share a secret she knew about someone in town, like

who'd had a face-lift or who'd been in rehab or who'd had an affair. *Quirky* was the word my aunt had used to describe her. I liked quirky. Ivy made me laugh.

I opened the door. "What's up?"

"Oh, bless you." She pressed her hands together in prayer. "I absolutely must find a cookbook so I can make some new goodies for tomorrow. Everything I cook is *passé*. You must have something." She breezed past me toward the dessert aisle, the flaps of her smoky gray cashmere duster batting me in her wake.

Oren stayed outside and scrolled through messages on his cell phone.

"We're not open yet," I said.

"I won't be a moment. You don't mind, do you?" She took a book from an end-

cap display and recited the title, "*Dessert for Two: Small Batch Cookies, Brownies, Pies, and Cakes.*" This looks good."

"Good choice," I said. "The author makes it easy to scale back on tried and true recipes."

She flipped through it. "Mm. Salted caramel macarons, lemon meringue pie cookies, and forgotten cookies. Say, those sound mysterious. You know I love a mystery." She clapped the book closed. "Sold."

"The cash register isn't ready yet."

She whipped two twenty-dollar bills from the pocket of her linen trousers. "Bring me the change tomorrow. I trust you." She blew me an air kiss and left as quickly as she'd arrived. For a moment, I wondered if she'd been the person ducking behind cars when Pepper and Crusibella were going at it. Maybe she had donned a tan jacket and wig as a disguise. Was that how she gleaned so many secrets? Had Oren been hiding with her?

Maybe it was a lark for the two of them.

Shaking my head, I went back to my chore.

Soon after, my aunt Vera waltzed into the shop clad in a silver caftan that I couldn't recall having seen before. She habitually wore the billowy garments because she offered her services as a fortune-teller and felt her clients trusted her readings more if she dressed the part. Plus, she liked comfy. She carried her matching turban under one arm.

"Good morning, dear." She raked her red hair off her face, which made the multiple bracelets she wore clang. "Was that Ivy Beale who just drove off?"

"Yes. She absolutely had to buy a new cookbook this instant." I laughed. "She's a bit bossy, don't you think?"

"Ivy gets what Ivy wants. She always has, ever since she stepped foot in this town. It's an attitude that comes from wealth. Too-ra-loo," she crooned. "Gorgeous day, isn't it?" She focused on me. "I detect a lot of yellow energy around you. That means it's going to be a spiritual yet playful day. Have fun."

Recently, I'd found a website that sold T-shirts featuring book slogans. I figured for Book Club Bonanza, I should wear a few. Today's was, yes, *yellow* and read:

Good things come to those who read.

My aunt sashayed past me toward the storage room. "Don't you look darling and young, by the way. All of twelve."

"Ha!" I was pushing thirty-one, but in jeans and a T-shirt, I looked younger. Maybe twenty-five. Not twelve.

"Have you seen all the tents going up on Buena Vista Boulevard?" she asked after storing her purse.

BVB was the main drag in Crystal Cove. It ran from the north end of town near the lighthouse to the south end, which was marked by a pier that featured a carousel, carney games, shops, and restaurants. The Pacific Ocean lay to the west.

“There are a variety of them,” my aunt went on, “hosted by regional booksellers as well as used booksellers. A few book clubs have put up tents, too, to encourage membership. No cookbook sellers, by the way.”

I grinned. “Good thing.”

“Crystal Cove Library has knocked it out of the park, by the way. Its tent is situated next to the dolphins.” At the center of town where Crystal Cove Road met Buena Vista Boulevard stood a statue of dancing dolphins. “The tent is as colorful as a kaleidoscope. There are all sorts of vendors selling gift items, too. I spotted ornate bookstands, handmade bookmarks, elegant journals, and personalized storybooks for children. And there are bright banners featuring all the books the clubs are reading this week. I noticed some foodie favorites including *Chocolat*, as well as some heavier reading like *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales* for the literary set. It’s so invigorating.” Her enthusiasm was infectious.

I joined her at the sales counter. “You must have had a good sleep. You’re oozing positive vibes.”

“Positive is as positive does,” she chirped. “What’s on the schedule?”

I ticked off the items on my to-do list. Finish displays. Restock shelves. Set up the children’s table for a cookbook-making session. Each child would be able to create a little book of recipes woven together with ribbon. Bailey was leading it. We were providing the recipes.

“Where’s Tina?” my aunt asked.

Tina Gump was the twenty-something clerk we’d hired last year. She dreamed of becoming a chef and was taking culinary classes at night school. She hoped to do well enough to apply to a full-fledged culinary school within two years.

“I gave her the day off. She has midterms.”

“All righty then. What would you like me to do, boss?” Aunt Vera asked.

She was teasing, of course. Tina called me *boss*, but I wasn’t my aunt’s boss. She

and I owned the shop together. That hadn’t been our arrangement at first, when I’d given up my advertising job in the city, a local term for San Francisco, and moved home to help her open the store and café. However, after a year or so when she realized she couldn’t have made a success of the shop without my help, she decided to spread the wealth and made me part owner. She’d made a ton of money during the seventies, having invested well in the stock market. Recently, she’d added Bailey and Chef Katie as limited partners. Both were my lifelong friends, and I was thrilled that she’d thought to include them.

“How about straightening up the aprons and kitchen items?” I suggested.

The Cookbook Nook was a culinary bookshop. Primarily, we sold cookbooks and food-related fiction, but we also sold a variety of fun kitchen items, including saltshakers and peppermills, aprons, cookie jars, and more. For this week, I’d ordered things I thought book club members might like: literary-themed serving trays and literary coffee mugs. My favorite saying engraved on a tray was: *There is no friend as loyal as a book*. And on one of the mugs: *I’m a book dragon, not a worm*. Too cute. Before I’d even pulled them from the storage room, Bailey had set aside one of the trays for her mother,

who was an avid reader.

“Jenna?” Pepper pushed through the front door. “Too early to come in?”

“No, it’s fine,” I replied. Ivy had already descended upon us. What was one more? Besides, a fellow shopkeeper was always welcome. “New haircut?” Her silver hair was feathered around her face. She usually wore it in a boxier cut.

She primped. “Do you like it?”

“It takes years off.”

She blushed crimson with delight.

“I like your knit dress, too. Very slimming.” It was blue and white with vertical

stripes. As ever, she’d added extensive beading around the neckline. “Did you make it?”

She adjusted her teensy cross-body purse. “Of course.” I had expected her to say as much. She was a whiz at every craft. “Do you have any coffee? My machine is on the fritz. I’m desperately in need of caffeine.”

“In the breezeway.”

“Lifesaver!” She ran off to fetch a cup of coffee.

When Pepper and I had first met, she’d assailed me. At the time, I had no idea that she’d held a long-standing beef against my father. Years earlier, she’d been in love with him. When she lost him to my mother, she was heartbroken. Soon after, she met someone else and bore a daughter, Cinnamon—our current chief of police—but she’d held a grudge.

Pepper returned with a to-go cup in hand. “I can’t wait for tomorrow,” she said.

“Four houses. Four meals. Four delicious chats about the mystery. I loved the book, by

the way. Did you?”

I nodded. Far be it from me to tell her I hadn't quite finished. I would tonight. No *ifs*, *ands*, or *buts*. “Pepper, what were you and Crusibella, um, *talking* about a bit ago?”

“It was nothing.” She took a sip of her coffee. “We were coordinating tomorrow's events. You know the order we're going in, right? We're starting at Flora's, then on to Z.Z.'s.”

Flora Fairchild owned Home Sweet Home. Zoey Zeller, whom everyone called Z.Z., was our mayor.

“Then we're moving on to Gran's.”

Gran—a.k.a. Gracie Goldsmith—was one of our best customers. She owned an extensive set of cookbooks that any collector would covet.

“Last up will be Ivy Beale's place.”

Aunt Vera joined us, a couple of very wrinkled aprons featuring a stack of library books in hand. “I can't wait to see Ivy's house. I hear it's quite something.”

Pepper said, “Just between us, Ivy isn't much of a cook, so we're crossing our fingers.”

“She buys a lot of cookbooks,” I countered.

“To read.” Pepper sniggered. “Hopefully, she'll purchase everything for the dessert leg of the evening from the local bakery.”

We had a number of great candy stores and bakeries in town.

I said, “I'm baking my contribution tonight. Chocolate coffee cupcakes.”

“Those sound yummy,” Aunt Vera said. “I love coffee in anything.”

“Pepper, back to you and Crusibella . . .” I signaled for her to continue. I didn't

believe for a second her story about them coordinating the event.

“Honestly, it was nothing,” she said. “I’d agreed to bring a cheese appetizer, and guess what she wanted to bring? A cheese platter.” She grumbled. “How much cheese can we eat? Flora approved my offering.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “Everyone loves cheese.”

Pepper grumbled. “Crusibella can be so stubborn. She thinks that chakra thing she has going always makes her right.”

Crusibella was very spiritual. She could talk nonstop about inner peace and keeping oneself in balance. Nothing horrible ever went into or *onto* her body. Foods or body products had to be pure and organic.

“These are pretty.” Pepper moved to one of the displays of tiered cake servers and picked up a pair of scrolled tongs. “They’re perfect for a tea party. Wherever did you find them, Jenna?”

“Through our distributor. I thought it would be nice to have a few party items in stock.”

“Wish I’d seen them before Cinnamon tied the knot.”

Her daughter married an adorable fireman on Valentine’s Day. In a barn. On the top of a hill with a 360-degree view. I’d been her matron of honor. The event was magical.

Pepper’s cell phone jangled. She pulled it from her purse and stared at the screen.

“Are you kidding me?” Her voice skated upward. “Are. You. Kidding. Me!”

“What’s wrong?” my aunt asked.

“Ivy Beale, how dare you!” Pepper tapped what appeared to be a text message. “What’d she do?” I asked. “Bow out of the progressive dinner?”

Pepper wagged her cell phone. “According to Flora, Ivy was flirting with my fiancé.”

I gasped. “Hank asked you to marry him?”

“Not yet. But he will.” More text tapping.

Trying to ease the tension, I said, “Pepper, c’mon. You know Flora can be quite the gossip and often mistaken. Besides, flirting is harmless. And Hank is quite charming.”

Hank Hemmings owned Great Threads, a haberdashery shop. He always had a twinkle in his eye, and he could tell the greatest stories, the kind that reeled you in.

“I’m sure lots of women flirt with him,” Aunt Vera agreed. “Young and old.”

Like my aunt, Pepper and Hank were in their sixties.

“Even if flirting is harmless, that’s not the point,” Pepper said, nostrils flared.

“Ivy has her own boyfriend. That fisherman. You know him.” “Oren Michaels.”

“That’s the one. Your fiancé equips him, even though he’s the competition.”

My fiancé, Rhett Jackson, owned Bait and Switch Fishing Supply and Sport Store on the Pier. When not running his shop, he often fished and sold whatever he caught to local restaurants. Selling fish wasn’t his primary business; he did it because he enjoyed it.

“Plus,” Pepper went on, “the guy who works for Ivy is head over heels for her. He’s an Adonis and very young.”

“He’s almost my age,” I said.

“I rest my case.” Pepper flapped a hand. “She’s got *two* men in love with her. Both are gorgeous. Why does she need to flirt with my guy?”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “Relax. Hank is head over heels for you, too. He won’t

abandon you.”

Pepper winced, making me immediately regret my choice of words. Her first husband, Cinnamon’s father, had split the day Cinnamon was born.

“Ivy always gets what she wants. Always. Ooh!” Pepper wielded the tongs and lunged as if in a duel. “How I’d like to run her through.”