

Chapter 1

"I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me."

~ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Clippety-clop-*splat*. My shoes struck the rain-soaked sidewalk at a brisk pace. Clippety-clop-*splat*.

"Careful, Allie," I muttered to myself. The rain had stopped, but the pavement was still slick. "Slow down."

But I couldn't. Why was I rushing to Dream Cuisine, the pristine ghost kitchen that I rented on a month-to-month basis? Because Marigold Markel, one of my favorite people in the whole world, the woman who owned Feast for the Eyes, a darling bookshop, had hired me to make and serve a mid-morning tea tomorrow for the Bramblewood Community Theater Foundation, and I was late getting started. I hated being late for anything.

Clippety-clop-*splat*. Skid!

"Honestly, Allie, get a grip," I said as I veered right onto Main Street. "You'll get it all done."

Would I? Making six dozen mini mince pies, five dozen tea sandwiches, four dozen icebox sugar cookies, and a pound of chocolate caramel fudge would not be a snap.

"Breathe," I said.

Dutifully, I inhaled and exhaled, adjusted the two reusable bags filled with groceries that I was carrying, additional items I'd needed to purchase to complete Marigold's order, and refocused on the sound of the narrator reading my latest foray into Sherlock Holmes' stories, *The Sign of Four*, via my earbuds.

Reading—even audible reading—calmed me. At one time in my life, I was destined to become an English teacher. And why not? I'd spent most of my childhood days reading books while dreaming about any host of heroes and heroines. In high school, my passion for fiction swelled. At Davidson College, it became an obsession. I graduated eager to alter young minds. I also graduated foolishly thinking that getting engaged to a handsome, intriguing banker was a good idea.

At the age of twenty-one, reality hit me hard. Number one: not all prospective English teachers got hired right off the bat . . . or at all. Number two: bankers were not intriguing, and fiancés were not worth the effort. Case in point: when I became aware that my beloved was leaving me for a younger woman, I was devastated. I mean, how much younger could he find without robbing the cradle? Needless to say, a week later, I hawked my engagement ring for a gold Celtic knot necklace. I had Celtic heritage on my mother's side, primarily those that settled in the British Isles who identified more with the talkative Irish nature than the direct and economical English personality.

A month after the breakup, I gave up trying to launch a career as a teacher, moved home to Bramblewood, a serene town in the Blue Ridge mountains northwest of Asheville, North Carolina, and decided to try my hand as a caterer and baker. Why a caterer? Because while waiting for a teaching position to open up in Charlotte, I'd worked as an assistant caterer for a popular diner known as the Eatery and discovered I was good at it. Why wouldn't I be? I'd learned to cook at the tender age of five. I'd had to out of sheer necessity. My mother, a mathematics teacher who was easily distracted in the kitchen, burned everything.

Now, four years after starting my business, thanks to a devoted clientele and a little pluck—pluck that I drummed up by mimicking all my favorite fictional characters—I was still

catering, as well as working as a personal chef and supplying goods to local bakeries. Six clients were demanding twice weekly deliveries of my scones, cupcakes, and cookies. Three others regularly ordered my fruit or chocolate tarts. Could I use more business? Sure. Couldn't everybody? I certainly needed more money in my coffers to buy all the books I wanted to read.

"Allie, stop!" someone yelled and batted my arm.

I glanced over my shoulder at Tegan Potts, my best friend since kindergarten, who was hauling back to assault me again. "Hey. Stop hitting me."

"Haven't you heard me calling you? I've been chasing you for blocks." Her cheeks were pink with exertion.

"Sorry. Can't talk now. I'm running behind."

"Cool your jets. You're your own boss. Time is irrelevant."

"Not to me. Your aunt expects me to deliver the goods." Marigold was Tegan's aunt.

I jammed a key into the lock on the front door of Dream Cuisine, twisted, and pushed the door open. The alarm system started to bleat. I hurried inside and tapped 6-4-6-3 on the keypad, the reciprocal numbers for *M-i-n-e*. The code didn't register correctly. The panel started to bleat faster. "Stop, stop," I grumbled at the idiot box while re-entering the digits. Last week I'd had a techie tweak the darned thing so this wouldn't happen. That worked well. *Not*. Finally, the code took, and the system announced almost gleefully that it was *Off*.

"Bully for you," I snarled at the smug, inanimate object.

I wiped the soles of my shoes on the mat and tossed my keyring on the desk to the right of the door. Then I switched off my audio book, pocketed my cell phone and earbuds, and unloaded the groceries on the granite counter. I slipped my lightweight tote off my shoulder and set it beside the bags. Lightweight was a misnomer. It weighed a ton, mainly because of the

recipe cards, business cards, utility knife, ongoing grocery list, to-do list, paperback book, and Kindle it held. I would be lost without it. My mother told me I wasn't doing my body any favors carrying the entirety of my life around with me, but I rarely heeded what she said.

Tegan entered behind me.

"Whoa! Stop right there!" I pointed at the doormat. She needed to clean her wet shoes, too. I prided myself on keeping the kitchen as clean as a whistle.

She stamped her feet with a grunt.

I shrugged off my pea coat—the air in April could be chilly—and shoved the tails of my white button-down shirt back into my black jeans. Then I started to unpack items: flour, sugar, chocolate, nuts, and more.

Tegan closed the door and jammed her fists into her hips. "Give me your full attention, Allie Catt. Or else." Clad in her puffy, knee-length white parka, all five-feet-three of her looked about as intimidating as the Stay Puft marshmallow guy. The cute one, not the super-sized monster in *Ghostbusters*.

"Or else what?"

"I'll meow!"

"You wouldn't dare."

Don't get me wrong. I liked the name Allie, and I even liked my surname. The earliest reference to Catt was Catford, a name of medieval English origins, which initially meant a ford frequented by wildcats. I considered myself pretty wild, so the name fit. But how many jokes could one girl endure in a lifetime?

What do you get when you cross a baby chick with an alley cat? A peeping Tom.

Why don't alley cats play poker in the jungle? Too many cheetahs.

Kids could be cruel; adults, too.