

DEVIL'S FOOD CAKE

A CULINARY MYSTERY

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CHAPTER 1



Have you seen Thom yet?” Sadie asked, craning her neck to peer into the corners of the temporary stage set up at the front of the ballroom at the Carmichael Hotel. Thom Mortenson was supposed to have arrived by 6:30, but he’d called to say he was running late. Sadie glanced at her watch: 7:05. So much for starting the program at 7:00 sharp. She was trying not to show her annoyance at men with no concept of time. Detective Pete Cunningham—Sadie’s date for tonight—was late too.

“Not yet,” Gayle answered from where she sat at Sadie’s left. Gayle was Sadie’s best friend—and she was dateless tonight, which was a strange occurrence.

“So, did you two read his book, then?” an increasingly familiar voice asked.

Sadie looked past Gayle to the young woman seated next to her—the date of Frank Argula. The girl was Frank’s junior by at least thirty years, with thick, brown hair piled on top of her delicate little head. Sadie feared a sneeze might snap the girl’s neck completely as her hair had to weigh twenty-five pounds. Sadie didn’t

know the girl's name—Trixie or Bambi or something like that, she was sure.

"Of course we read it," Gayle answered coolly, shooting Sadie a look brimming with annoyance. It was the fourth time Trixie-Bambi had cut into their conversation in the ten minutes since Sadie had finally been able to sit down. Frank was currently involved in an animated discussion with a city councilman and was therefore paying no attention to his date.

"It must be really good," the girl said with a floating kind of smile as she looked around the room. "I mean, look at all these people who want to listen to him talk about it."

"It is good," Gayle said dryly.

Sadie scraped together the last bite of mashed potatoes from her plate. Truth be told, she hadn't loved Thom's book, *Devilish Details*, which had been published a couple years after Thom had moved away from Garrison. While Sadie was very proud of his accomplishment, the book wasn't really her style.

Gayle turned back to Sadie. "I still can't believe he agreed to come," she said.

"Why?" Trixie-Bambi cut in.

Rather than being annoyed by this interruption, Gayle's eyes lit up at the girl's ignorance. Sadie took a sip of her drink to cover her smile as Gayle turned back to the girl with a very different expression. *Here we go*, Sadie thought. It wasn't that Gayle was a gossip, per se, but she, well, liked . . . being informed and sharing that information with others. Of course, any time Sadie pointed that out, Gayle turned the tables and recalled all the times Sadie had been the one to spill a story.

A server leaned in to take away their plates. "Didn't Frank tell you about Thom?" Gayle asked once the server had moved away.

The girl shook her head.

“Well,” Gayle said, wriggling in her seat a little bit and leaning close. “First, his wife, who was mentally ill for most of their marriage, overdosed, leaving him as a single father. Then his son killed himself and his girlfriend after junior prom ten years ago.”

The girl gasped and put a hand to her mouth. Sadie felt her stomach tighten. Hearing the details laid out so bluntly was a bit of a shock. Even from Gayle.

“You’re kidding,” the girl said after lowering her hand. “A murder-suicide? Here?”

Up until last October, when Sadie’s neighbor had been murdered, the Mortenson tragedy had been the most recent homicide in Garrison, Colorado. Damon, Thom’s son, had only been a couple years older than Sadie’s own daughter, so the tragedy had hit close to home. In the weeks following the shooting, the school district brought in grief counselors, and parents no longer hesitated to forbid their daughters from dating the bad-boys. Then Thom Mortenson moved to California, despite the fact that most of Garrison hadn’t blamed him for what happened; Damon had been in and out of trouble since he turned twelve, and everyone knew Thom’s wife had had problems as well. Lost in her own thoughts, Sadie didn’t realize Gayle was still telling the story.

“You can imagine our surprise when a couple years later Thom’s name showed up on the cover of a *New York Times* bestseller—”

“And Thom was on *Oprah* after it won the National Book Award,” Sadie added. A bestselling novel was one thing, and national awards were amazing, but *Oprah*? Yeah. That was big-time.

Gayle nodded her acknowledgment, but continued speaking as though Sadie hadn’t interrupted. “Of course we all knew he’d been a

bit of a closet writer before Damon's death, but no one expected this, especially after what had happened."

"Wow," Trixie-Bambi said. She pulled at the top of her strapless gown and looked toward the stage. "Has he written any other books?"

"No," Gayle said, shrugging her shoulders. "Just the one. He's been saying for years that he has another one in the works, though."

"Maybe he'll be like Harper Lee," the girl said. "A common theory in literary circles regarding the fact that she never wrote another book was because she'd written the perfect novel right out of the gate. How do you compete with your own greatness?"

Sadie and Gayle both looked at the girl in surprise. They hadn't expected her to recite scholarly supposition.

"Maybe," Gayle said slowly, obviously caught off guard. In fact, she seemed a bit disappointed that Trixie-Bambi might not be as superficial as they'd suspected.

"I wonder what it's like for him to come back here," the girl added. "I imagine it's hard."

Sadie was reminded of her own surprise when Thom had accepted the invitation. What was there to come back to Garrison for but to face old ghosts?

Her thoughts were interrupted as a server placed a white dessert plate in front of her. Every thought of Thom or Trixie-Bambi disappeared. In the middle of the plate was a most beautiful sight—a thick, black, gooey piece of devil's food cake. Sadie grabbed her fork.

"I thought you were on a diet," Gayle said.

Sadie looked up, fork poised inches from her open mouth, and did her best to feign a scowl at her best friend. Gayle didn't take back the question. In fact she continued to look pointedly at the

rich chocolate goodness on Sadie's fork. The rich chocolate goodness that was going straight to Sadie's already ample hips.

Trixie-Bambi turned to say something to Frank, and the clinking of silverware and mingling murmurs of a hundred conversations filled the room. Sadie paid no heed to any of it. Instead, she looked at Gayle and, with emphasized movements, put the bite of cake in her mouth and closed her lips around the fork. Sadie shut her eyes and tried not to groan aloud as the decadent chocolate melted on her tongue.

Gayle snickered, and Sadie feared she'd failed at her attempts to silently appreciate the deliciousness now coursing down her throat. It was just wrong that such an amazing culinary creation should have any calories at all.

"You should really attempt a little more self-restraint," Gayle said when Sadie recovered from her chocolate-induced swoon and opened her eyes. "Everyone knows you made the cake, so you look a little arrogant right now."

No one but Gayle, and maybe Sadie's children, could get away with talking to Sadie like that. However, after twenty years of friendship, there wasn't much they could do to offend each other.

Sadie used the edge of her fork to cut off another bite. "I have no problem with appearing arrogant when I've done something this magnificent."

In truth, it *was* a little embarrassing to lose control like that—especially in public. Sadie prided herself on her humility, and yet she had no control when it came to dessert. She'd returned from England almost six weeks ago and had been existing on salads, fruit smoothies, and baked chicken ever since, hoping to lose not the *seven* pounds she'd thought she'd gained on vacation, but the

twelve pounds she'd brought home with her. Twelve pounds in two weeks—Sadie didn't know that was even possible.

Unfortunately, the diet hadn't been as effective as she'd hoped—possibly due to the fact that despite her strict meal regimen of protein and leafy greens, she'd been baking scones and crumpets a few times a week. She didn't count that as breaking her diet because perfecting the recipes was actually research. Gayle, of course, knew this.

But then Sadie had been asked to supply the dessert of her choice for the library fund-raiser. Before she'd even hung up the phone, she'd known what she wanted to make—devil's food cake. Since it was commonly understood that diets were left at the door of events like this, she knew it was a perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—she'd make a fabulous contribution to the dinner *and* she'd get a piece of cake otherwise forbidden.

"I swear this is the best cake I have ever made in my life," Sadie said reverently after taking her second bite.

Gayle chuckled, and Sadie couldn't help but join her, knowing that she was being a little ridiculous. She put a hand on Gayle's arm and leaned in toward her friend. "It's a good thing you're sitting next to me," she said, giving Gayle's arm a squeeze. "I'd be liable to embarrass myself otherwise."

Gayle laughed again and cut a bite from her own piece of cake. She paused for a moment after putting it in her mouth and then turned to Sadie. "This is incredible."

Trixie-Bambi turned toward them both and nodded, her jaw rhythmically moving as she also chewed her cake. They were now bonded in the devotion to chocolate.

Sadie smiled at them both, glad to be sharing the moment with people who could appreciate it. She took yet another bite and was able to keep from moaning this time—but just barely.

DEVIL'S FOOD CAKE

“How many did you end up making?” Gayle asked, pulling her plate closer as if the cake might disappear at any moment.

“Eighteen,” Sadie said. “Thank goodness Shawn arrived last night so he could help me finish up today.”

Gayle nodded, but Sadie noted the distracted look in her friend's eyes. Eyes that were green tonight. Gayle's real eye color was mud—Gayle's word, not Sadie's—so she usually wore colored contacts. Green was Gayle's favorite since it went so well with her curly red hair, and her eyes looked particularly good tonight with the green evening gown Gayle had chosen.

“Shawn didn't want to come?” Gayle asked once she swallowed yet another bite.

Sadie shook her head. “He thought spending a Saturday night with his mom at a library fund-raising dinner sounded boring. In fact, I think his exact words were ‘dead boring.’”

Gayle huffed in feigned offense.

Sadie chuckled and lifted another morsel to her lips.

The rich chocolate was threatening to make her swoon when her eyes caught movement on the stage. Thom had finally arrived and was fiddling with his wireless microphone, trying to clip it to the lapel of his suit jacket. Another man, shorter and balding, was trying to help. Sadie, however, was intoxicated by chocolate to the point of no longer feeling annoyed by Thom's tardiness.

“Oh, there he is,” Gayle said, pointing at the stage with her fork. “I'm guessing the other man is Thom's manager? Mr. Ogreski?”

“I assume so,” Sadie said, watching the men with an air of distraction as she cut another bite.

“Thom looks good,” Gayle continued in an appraising tone. “He's still single, you know.”

Sadie rolled her eyes but couldn't help but smile at the same

time. After Gayle's divorce five years ago, the merest hint that she might want to date again had been met with thinly veiled malevolence directed at whoever dared suggest it. And then, about a year ago, Gayle accepted a neighbor's invitation to attend a singles dance at her church. That night, Gayle was officially introduced to middle-age single life and she'd never looked back. Sadie was glad—a woman like Gayle needed people, and people needed women like Gayle.

Gayle opened her mouth to say something, but then straightened, dropped her chin coyly, and looked over Sadie's head. "Speaking of single men," she said, then smiled brilliantly and cocked her head to the side.

Sadie swiveled in her seat, then sat up straight as Detective Pete Cunningham entered the ballroom and headed toward their table. If only she'd been able to fit into her black velvet formal. Instead she was in her navy blue sparkle-dress, which was nice, but not nearly as elegant as the flowing dress Gayle was sporting.

Sadie stood and smiled as Pete approached their table. He unbuttoned the button of his tux jacket so it wouldn't wrinkle when he sat down. The man looked downright dapper in his patent leather shoes and bow tie. His well-trimmed silver and black hair and beard were a perfect complement to his formal attire, and for a moment Sadie thought he might kiss her hello; on the cheek if nothing else. Instead he gave her a quick hug. "Sorry I'm late—paperwork."

"Not a problem," Sadie said as she sat back down. He helped push her chair in. He was always such a gentleman—too much of one sometimes. In the three months they'd been officially dating, he had yet to kiss her even once. It was beginning to give Sadie a complex.

Pete had met Gayle twice before and said hello before Sadie

introduced the other people at their table, including Trixie-Bambi, whose real name turned out to be Michele. Apparently she was Frank's niece and an English literature major. Who knew?

Pete shook hands with the people at their table—some of whom he already knew—before finally taking his seat. Sadie was nearly bursting with pride to be the girl on his arm. “I’m sorry you missed dinner,” she said. She should probably offer him some of her cake, but she wasn’t sure their relationship was at that level. Certainly a little lip-locking was a prerequisite to sharing devil’s food cake, right? Instead, she waved to get the attention of one of the servers and then pointed at Pete. The server nodded and headed toward the doors leading to the kitchen. Sadie pulled her plate a bit closer to herself in hopes that Pete wouldn’t get any ideas before the server returned with his food.

“They’re getting your dinner,” Sadie said.

“Oh, good, I’m starving,” Pete said. He looked toward the stage. “I haven’t missed the main event, have I?”

Sadie shook her head and looked to the stage as well. Thom was still fiddling with the microphone. They had someone from the hotel helping him now. It was weird that they were having problems with it. The microphone had worked fine for Sadie’s introduction forty-five minutes earlier. She knew the hotel had a wooden podium with a detachable wired microphone off stage right as a backup. She wondered how long they would keep trying to make the wireless system work before they gave up and moved to plan B.

“He doesn’t look much different, does he?” Pete commented, nodding toward Thom.

“Did you know Thom when he used to live here?” Gayle asked, leaning toward them and speaking in a high, sweet voice.

Sadie felt a flash of jealousy that surprised her. Was it her

imagination that Gayle was being flirtatious? Or was she just feeling insecure about the no-kissing-for-three-months thing?

Pete looked from the stage to Gayle. "I was one of the detectives on his son's case," he said.

"Oh," Sadie and Gayle said at the same time. Sadie wondered why Pete hadn't told her that before now, but she wasn't about to ask in front of Gayle.

"Maybe you should remind them about the wired microphone?" Sadie heard herself say to Gayle.

"Me?" Gayle said in surprise, dropping her smile for a moment.

"I think they've forgotten about the backup," Sadie said, giving her friend a pointed look. She'd like a few minutes alone with Pete to catch up on the day. Surely Gayle could understand that. And maybe Gayle would have a chance to say hello to Thom in the process. Sadie's motives weren't totally selfish.

Gayle was silent, but put down her fork, correctly interpreting Sadie's look. "Well, I guess I could," she said. Sadie smiled a thank-you. Gayle stood up and put her napkin on her chair before heading toward the front of the room. As she stepped away, a server set down both a dinner and a dessert plate in front of Pete. By the time Sadie looked up again, Gayle had disappeared behind the curtain to the right of the stage. Sadie owed her one.

Michele also stood and excused herself to use the ladies' room.

Sadie nodded toward Pete's dinner. "It's worth the hundred and fifty dollars," she said. "I promise." She only wished she could say she'd made it herself. Feeding the people she cared about was one of her favorite things to do.

Pete smiled and winked at her before using his knife to cut off a piece of prime rib.

Sadie looked up at the stage in time to see Gayle roll the podium

out from the curtains on the right and Thom walk offstage left, looking frustrated. The manager must have been backstage as well. A hotel worker helped Gayle plug a wire from the floor into a port on the side of the wooden podium. Sadie took another bite of cake to distract herself from the guilt of making Gayle go up on stage. She wasn't even on the library board this year. Sadie was the one who should be helping out.

Suddenly the stage area was cleared except for the manager and the podium. An expectant hush fell over the crowd, and the manager looked out at the room of people as if just remembering they were there. After straightening his suit coat, he made his way to the podium, which was so tall that the microphone pointed over his head. He reached up both hands to adjust the snakelike microphone holder so that he could speak into it. However, when his mouth moved, the microphone failed to pick up the sound.

Is there a problem with the entire sound system? Sadie wondered. After all their work to pull off this dinner, she would be really, really mad if it all fell apart now.

Mr. Ogreski continued to wrestle with the microphone, which seemed to be stuck. He pulled it free from the holder, but the wire, which should feed through the hole in the podium didn't have much give and he couldn't seem to hold the microphone close enough to his mouth. After a few more seconds, Mr. Ogreski clenched his jaw, adjusted his grip on the microphone, and yanked it toward him, presumably to free the cord that seemed to be tangled within the wooden podium. It didn't budge. He took a breath and planted his feet, poised to pull again.

Sadie let her eyes drift closed, grateful to give herself up to the chocolate ecstasy in her mouth instead of focusing on what was happening onstage for the moment. There were only a few bites left.

In the next instant, a shotgun blast echoed off the walls of the ballroom. Sadie choked on her cake as the people in the room screamed in horror.

Devil's Food Cake

1 cup sour milk (1 cup milk + 2 teaspoons white vinegar or lemon juice OR use 1 cup buttermilk)
2 cups flour
2 cups sugar
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup unsweetened cocoa
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
2 eggs
1 cup vegetable oil
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup boiling water
1 teaspoon baking soda

For sour milk, mix milk and vinegar in a small bowl. Set aside for five minutes.

In a large bowl, mix together all ingredients except the water and baking soda. Mix until batter is smooth. Add the soda to the boiling water (kids love this part because it bubbles). Add soda/water mixture to batter. Mix well—batter will be thin.

Pour batter into a greased and floured 9x13-inch pan and bake at 350 degrees for 35 to 45 minutes or until middle is set.

If using round cake pans, grease pans very well and cut a round of wax paper to fit inside the bottom of the pans to prevent cake from sticking when removed. Let cake cool five minutes in pans before turning out onto a wire rack.

Serves 12.

*Shawn (i.e. Mint-aholic) likes a teaspoon of mint extract added to the batter.

CHAPTER 2



By the time Sadie stopped coughing cake from her lungs, the room was in chaos and Pete had disappeared from his seat beside her. Frantic dinner guests had flipped tables on their sides as barricades and a few people ran for the doors. Sadie jumped to her feet and scanned the room, looking for Pete.

“Stay where you are!”

Sadie wheeled around in time to see Pete jump onto the stage and turn to face the audience, looking like James Bond in his tux. “There is not an imminent threat,” Pete continued, his voice booming through the room. He held one hand out, palm down. His other hand was in his jacket—likely on the pistol he kept in a shoulder harness most of the time. There might not be an imminent threat, but Sadie knew he wasn’t taking chances. “Someone call 911,” he yelled.

A hundred cell phones were whipped out of pockets and purses and Sadie put her hand on her hip out of pure reflex. All she felt was the seam of her dress. That’s right; she hadn’t expected to need her phone tonight, so she’d left it in the car instead of carrying it with her.

Pete turned away from the crowd, walked a few feet, and stopped in front of Mr. Ogreski's body, crouching down to get a better look. It was hard to see anything from Sadie's position at the back of the room. A flash of green toward the right side of the stage caught Sadie's attention. Gayle was screaming hysterically with her hands on either side of her face and staring at the body on the stage.

What on earth just happened? Sadie thought as she picked up her skirts and began making her way toward Gayle. Had it really been a shotgun blast she heard? Or could it have been a bomb? Sadie was getting better at keeping herself together in situations such as this—after all, this was her third dead body in four months—but there was nothing casual in her thoughts or the racing of her heart.

Gayle was still screaming when Sadie reached the stairs so she hiked her skirt up to her calves and moved as fast as her heels would allow. A few people had joined Pete on stage; he was telling them to back away from the body. Thom stood by the curtains on the left side of the stage completely frozen. His face was pale and his eyes were transfixed on the body. Sadie wished she could help him, but Gayle needed her more. Sadie hurried over to her friend who was shaking uncontrollably and put an arm around Gayle's back. She put her other hand over Gayle's hands, which were clenched to her chest. Gayle stopped screaming at Sadie's touch, but her mouth remained open and her eyes wide. Her pale, white face made her green eyes look unnaturally bright.

"It's okay," Sadie said, but then she looked past all the people and saw the body sprawled across the flat gray carpet of the temporary stage. Her stomach turned and she looked away. Why on earth was she saying everything was okay?

She turned her attention to Gayle in hopes to quell the nausea rising in her stomach. "You need to sit down," she said. There were

chairs behind the curtains and, without letting go of Gayle, Sadie grabbed the closest one with one hand, turning it away from the grisly scene. A police officer had done something similar for Sadie when Sadie had come upon the body of her neighbor in a field last fall.

"Sit," Sadie said. Gayle sat, but she was still shaking. "I think you're in shock." Sadie rubbed her friend's cold arms. Gayle's hands were still clenched tightly together, but Sadie noticed something hot pink between them.

"What's that?" Sadie asked while gently trying to open Gayle's hands.

Gayle looked down, finally opening her hands to reveal a crumpled Post-It note. Sadie picked it up carefully and tried to smooth it out as best she could.

The handwriting was sloppy, but readable, as though whoever wrote it had been in a hurry.

*BACKUP mic TESTED AND OPERATIONAL.
Plug into floor outlet to use.*

"It—it was on the podium," Gayle explained, her voice tight and shaky.

Sadie nodded and smiled at her friend reassuringly. "I'll make sure Pete gets it," she said, patting Gayle's arm again. She looked around the room. Everything was a mess, but the din of screaming had mostly faded into anxiously murmured conversation. People had stood up from behind their barricades and hotel staff members had come through the back doors of the ballroom, looking lost and confused. Apparently they didn't have much specialized training in what to do when there was a shooting in the ballroom. Dishes were

all over the floor, and devil's food cake was ground into the carpet, chairs, and tablecloths.

"Sadie!"

Sadie looked up at the sound of her name and saw Pete motioning for her. She glanced at Gayle, who managed a nod and a shaky "I'm okay."

Sadie tried not to look directly at the body as she headed toward Pete. When she reached him, she immediately handed him the pink note. "Gayle said this was on the podium."

Pete looked at it, then nodded and put it in his front pocket. "I'll bag it later," he said. For some reason Sadie hadn't thought of the note as evidence, but realized now that was exactly what it was. She hoped she or Gayle hadn't ruined the evidence by touching it.

Pete touched Sadie's arm. "Get everyone off the stage, but don't let them leave. We'll need statements."

Sadie wasn't sure why he wanted her to do this—she wasn't a trained police officer—and yet she was flattered by his request. Without hesitation, she made shooing motions to the increasing crowd on the stage. "You heard him. Everyone off, but don't leave." She scanned faces, looking for someone she knew well enough to ask for help. "Carl," she called, looking pointedly at another member of the library board. "Get some people to man the doors—no one in or out."

Carl nodded and seemed relieved to have something to do.

As Sadie continued herding people off the stage, she noticed Thom standing at the back of the ballroom.

When did he leave the stage? she wondered.

Carl yelled for another man to help him cover the doors, and Thom seemed to overhear it. Rather than move into the room, like

everyone else, he made a break toward the door, taking Sadie off guard.

“Thom!” she yelled, louder than she’d have expected herself capable of doing. He looked at her briefly, as did several other people, but he didn’t stop. Instead he slipped through one of the doors left open when the hotel staff had entered, immediately disappearing into the foyer area. The sound of sirens rose above the ruckus of two hundred people trying to make sense of what had happened. She turned back to Pete. “Thom left,” she said, feeling panicked.

“We’ll find him,” Pete said, but his glance toward the ballroom doors didn’t seem the least bit casual, reminding Sadie that Pete was the only officer on the scene of a brutal murder with hundreds of witnesses. Talk about pressure. He whipped out his phone and dialed a number.

She looked toward the door Thom had left through. Should she follow him? Why would Thom leave in the first place? Of everyone the police would want to talk to, Thom would be at the top of the list. He’d been right there when it happened and he was the only person who actually knew the victim. In fact, an introduction by Mr. Ogreski wasn’t on the printed schedule for the evening—Thomas Mortenson was supposed to give his address during dessert.

Pete ended the phone call and put his phone back in his pocket.

Sadie looked at the body of the man who wasn’t supposed to be at the podium at all. “He’s dead?” she asked, a lump in her throat.

Pete looked up from where he’d been taking a detailed look at the orientation of the body. He nodded slowly. “He was probably dead before he hit the floor.” His eyes went to the podium lying on its back on the ballroom floor, and Sadie looked as well. The front access door was in pieces all over the stage. Set inside—where Sadie imagined the electronic equipment should be—was a gun.

A sawed-off shotgun, if Sadie wasn't mistaken. An elaborate webbing of what looked like string, or maybe a thin cable, was wrapped around the gun, though it was in disarray now and tangled with the thicker cord of the microphone. Had the cable held the gun in place and engaged the trigger when Mr. Ogreski pulled on the microphone? Someone had put an awful lot of thought into this.

"It wasn't an accident," Sadie said. The words had no sooner left her mouth than she realized they were likely the dumbest words she'd ever said in her life. Guns didn't accidentally end up hidden inside a podium.

"No," Pete said. "It wasn't."