

An Excerpt from

FUDGE CUPCAKE MURDER

A HANNAH SWENSEN MYSTERY



JOANNE FLUKE



KENSINGTON BOOKS
KENSINGTON PUBLISHING CORP.
<http://www.kensingtonbooks.com>



Chapter One



Hannah Swensen moved to the front of the rectangular box and braced herself. Although she had no specialized training, she felt like a member of a bomb squad who was preparing to disarm an explosive device. Taking a deep breath for courage, Hannah reached forward and released the catch that held the grate in place, jumping back to what she hoped would be a safe distance.

“Good heavens!” Hannah gasped as Moishe shot out of the veterinarian-approved small dog carrier and barreled into the kitchen. She’d had no idea her feline roommate could move that fast. He resembled an orange and white blur with multiple feet, all of them moving at warp speed.

Hannah picked up the carrier and stashed it in the laundry room cupboard. The one time she’d forgotten to put it away, Moishe made inroads on the plastic, and it now looked as if a miniature plow had been digging furrows in the top. At least the plastic carrier had held up better than the cardboard one she used the first time she took Moishe to the vet. By the time she arrived, the cardboard was in shreds and Moishe was out and prowling around in the back of her truck, yowling in outrage.

Pausing in the doorway, Hannah was relieved to hear a loud crunching noise coming from the depths of the kitchen.

The early morning trip to the vet had been traumatic for both of them and Moishe was attempting to forget the ordeal by eating. It was a good thing she'd topped off his food bowl before they left the condo.

Hannah grabbed the bag of "senior" kitty crunchies her vet had recommended and carried them to the kitchen. Doctor Bob warned her that some cats rejected new food and he'd handed her a handout of helpful tips that were supposed to transform all cats into eager eaters of senior fare.

Moishe raised his head from his bowl to glare at Hannah balefully. It was the same look one might give to a traitor or an unfaithful spouse, and Hannah immediately felt guilty.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I know you hate to go to the vet," Hannah did her best to explain to a cat who'd never looked more unforgiving. "You were due for your shots and I'm only trying to keep you healthy."

Moishe stared at her for another long moment and then turned back to his food bowl again. Hannah took advantage of this temporary truce to pour a cup of coffee from the thermos she'd filled before they'd left. "I'll be right back," Hannah said to the ears that stuck up over the rim of the food bowl. The rest of Moishe's face was buried in its depths. "I have to change clothes. You shed all over my new sweater."

Moishe didn't deign to reply and Hannah headed off toward the bedroom. Her resident feline always shed when he was unhappy. It wasn't Doctor Bob. Moishe liked him as well as a cat could like the man who gave him his shots and prodded him in undignified places. He just hated the process of traveling there.

Once Hannah had changed into clothing less hairy, she came back to the kitchen to find Moishe sitting beside an empty food bowl. Since there was no time like the present to try out his new cuisine, Hannah dumped in the senior food and crossed her fingers for luck. Leaving Moishe sniffing the new food suspiciously, she slipped into the old bomber jacket she'd found at Helping Hands, Lake Eden's thrift shop, and headed for the door. But before Hannah could grab

the battle-scarred shoulder bag purse that contained everything she might need for the day and then some, the phone rang.

“Mother,” Hannah muttered in the same tone she reserved for the expletives she tried not to use around her five-year-old niece, Tracey. It had to be her mother. Delores Swensen was a genius at calling at precisely the moment that Hannah intended to step out the door. Sorely tempted to let the answering machine bail her out, Hannah thought better of it. Her mother would only call again at an even more inconvenient time. Giving a deep sigh, she retraced her steps and grabbed the wall phone above the kitchen table.

“Hello, Mother,” Hannah said, sinking down in a chair. Conversations with Delores were seldom brief. But the voice that answered her wasn’t her mother’s.

“I called the shop, but Lisa said you were coming in late because you had to take Moishe to the vet.”

“That’s right,” Hannah said, getting up to pour the last of the coffee into her cup. It was her sister and conversations with Andrea weren’t exactly short either.

“There’s nothing wrong, is there?” Andrea asked.

“Only with my ears. Moishe yowled all the way there and all the way back. He’s fine, Andrea. I just took him in for his shots and his yearly checkup.”

“That’s good,” Andrea said, sounding relieved. “I know how crazy you are about him. Did you take one of Bill’s posters to the vet’s office?”

“Yes. Sue was just putting it up in the window when I left.”

“Oh, good. Every poster helps. Have you read the paper yet?”

Hannah glanced down at her purse. The *Lake Eden Journal*, still in its heat-sealed plastic sleeve, was stuck in the side pocket. “I’m bringing it to work with me. I thought I’d read it when I take my break.”

“Look at it now, Hannah. Turn to page three.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed, proceeding to do just that. But

page three was the editorial section, where she didn't see anything that would account for Andrea's excitement.

"Do you see it?" Andrea asked, an I-know-something-you-don't-know note in her voice.

"No."

"It's the election poll!"

Hannah bent over the paper for a closer look at the small box Rod Metcalf had been running in the paper for the past month. Then she let out a whoop of excitement. "Bill's running neck and neck with Sheriff Grant!"

"That's right! I told him we could do it! Of course the election's still two weeks away and anything can happen, but wouldn't it be wonderful if Bill actually *won*?"

"Absolutely! You've done a wonderful job running his campaign, Andrea."

"Thanks. I've got some other news, too."

"What's that?"

"Doc Knight moved up my due date to the third week in November."

Hannah frowned. "Can he do that?"

"Sure. It's all guesswork, anyway. Everybody thinks they can tell, but they can't. Bill's mother says she's sure the baby will be born on election night, but I think she just wants to take my place at Bill's victory party. Mother's holding out for early December. She says I'm not as big as I was with Tracey and it'll be a while yet. Then there's Bill. He thinks I'll have the baby early, like before Halloween."

"When do *you* think it'll be?"

"On Thanksgiving Day, just as we're sitting down to dessert."

"How can you tell?" Hannah asked. "Is there some sort of sixth sense that expectant mothers have?"

"No, it's just that your pecan pie is my favorite part of Thanksgiving dinner. And I'm looking forward to it so much, I just know I'm going to miss it."

"You won't miss it. If you have to go to the hospital, I'll bake another pie and bring it to you."

“That’s so sweet! Thanks, Hannah. I’d better run . . . or maybe I should say *waddle*. My balance is off today. I’ll check in with you later.”

Hannah said goodbye and hung up the phone. She refilled Moishe’s water and told him what a good boy he was. And since he appeared to be eating his senior fare without a problem, she crumpled up the tip sheet Doctor Bob had given her and tossed it in the trash. Then she pulled on her gloves and headed out the door.

An icy wind greeted Hannah as she stepped outside, and she shivered as she descended the stairs to the ground floor. It was only the middle of October, but it was time to think about resurrecting her winter parka. Once she’d gone down another flight of stairs to the underground garage, Hannah headed straight for her candy apple red Suburban, the vehicle all the Lake Eden children called the “cookie truck,” climbed in behind the wheel, started it up, and headed up the ramp toward the exit.

Hannah drove through her condo complex, turned left on Old Lake Road, and took the scenic route to town. Its circuitous course wound around Eden Lake and although it was longer than the interstate by several miles, Hannah preferred it. There was something soothing about driving past Minnesota family farms and groves of maple trees sporting colorful fall leaves. She preferred the scent of cool water and aromatic pine to the exhaust from whatever car she happened to be following on the interstate.

As Hannah waited for the stoplight at the intersection of Old Lake Road and Dairy Avenue, she spotted a perfect telephone pole. Since there was no one behind her, she pulled over at the side of the road and retrieved one of Bill’s posters from the back of her truck. It only took a moment to tack it up on the pole and Hannah grinned as she stepped back and faced the larger than life-size picture of her brother-in-law’s smiling face. The poster bore the legend “Bill Todd for Sheriff” in large block letters and Hannah had promised Andrea that she’d put up at least six posters every day.

Ten minutes later, Hannah pulled into the alley and turned in at the small white building that housed her bakery and cookie shop. Once she'd parked in her spot and gone in the back door, she washed her hands and went through the swinging restaurant-style door into the coffee shop, prepared to relieve her young partner, Lisa Herman. She found Lisa on a tall stool behind the counter, surrounded by a crowd of morning cookie buyers.

"Here she is now!" Lisa called out, looking very relieved to see Hannah. "You can ask her yourself."

The crowd swiveled toward Hannah and she noticed that Bertie Straub had stationed herself in front as the point man. Bertie was still wearing her bright purple smock from the Cut 'n Curl and the scowl on her face inversely mirrored the gold happy face on the bib of the smock.

"Well, it's about time!" Bertie said, glancing pointedly at her watch. "We saw that Bill's ahead in the polls. Do you honestly think he's going to win?"

"Of course Bill's going to win!" It was her mother's voice. Hannah turned toward the doorway to see Delores standing there, resplendent in a fashionable royal blue pantsuit and sporting a "Bill Todd for Sheriff" button on her collar. "And if you don't vote for him, Bertie Straub, you'll have to deal with me!"

Bertie gave an audible gulp. "I'm going to vote for him, Delores."

"I should hope so!" Delores walked over to take Hannah's arm. "I need to see you in the kitchen, dear."

Moments later, Hannah's mother was settled at the workstation with a cup of coffee and two Peanut Butter Melts. Hannah sat down on an adjoining stool and waited patiently while Delores ate one cookie in dainty bites.

"Delicious!" her mother declared, wiping her hands on a napkin. "Have you heard from Norman?"

"Not yet," Hannah said, hoping this wasn't going to turn into a lecture about her reluctance to commit to one particular man. Hannah liked Norman Rhodes and dated him whenever

the opportunity presented itself, but her mother believed that any female who wasn't married by the time she renewed her TV Guide subscription for the second time was doomed. Now that Delores had gone into the antique business with Norman's mother, Carrie, both of them were nudging for nuptials.

"Carrie says he's all tied up with the convention," Delores went on. "He's heading up a panel on cosmetic dentistry, you know. It's quite a coup for a practitioner of Norman's age."

"I know, Mother. Norman told me all about it before he left for Seattle."

"Maybe not all," Delores looked a bit smug. "Did he tell you that Beverly is on his panel?"

"Beverly who?" Hannah asked, even though asking wasn't really necessary since Delores was all primed to tell her.

"Doctor Beverly Thorndike."

"Oh," Hannah said, deciding a one-word response was wisest since she had no idea who Doctor Thorndike was.

"Carrie told me they were planning to be married, but Beverly decided she was too young to make that sort of commitment. At least she gave back the ring. But you must know all this so I won't go into it again."

Hannah nodded, even though she knew nothing about Norman's failed engagement to Beverly Thorndike, female dentist.

"That's not the reason I came in," Delores said, reaching into her purse to pull out a recipe card. "I'm sorry I'm late, but here's my recipe for Hawaiian Pot Roast."

Hannah did her best not to sigh as she reached out and took the handwritten card. Hawaiian Pot Roast was her mother's favorite recipe and Hannah had eaten enough of it to last her a lifetime.

"I was in a rush when I copied it. You can read it, can't you?"

Hannah glanced down at the recipe and nodded.

"It's not too late to get it in the Lake Eden cookbook, is it, dear?"

Hannah wavered. Saying it was too late would be a handy

excuse and it was theoretically true, since the deadline Hannah had given to the other contributors had come and gone. But if she said it was too late to her mother, Delores would never let her hear the end of it. In the interest of family peace, Hannah was obliged to include it.

"It's not too late," Hannah said, earning a smile from her mother.

"Thank you, dear. I know I should have turned it in sooner, but I've been so busy lately with Bill's campaign and the store. And now I'd better run. We're expecting a shipment of Chippewa artifacts and Jon Walker promised he'd stop by to see if he could tell if they're authentic."

Delores gave a little wave and ducked out the back door. Granny's Attic was the next building over and she could dash across the parking lot. Hannah waited until the door had closed behind her mother and then she glanced down at the recipe. "*Four* cups of sugar?"

Lisa came into the kitchen just in time to hear Hannah's comment. "Is that Rose's coconut cake recipe?"

"No, it's Mother's Hawaiian Pot Roast."

"And it's that sweet?"

"Enough to make your teeth ache. Mother wrote it out for me and she wants it in the cookbook. Do you think that I should . . ."

"No," Lisa interrupted, shaking her head. "She'll never forgive you if you don't include it."

"You're right. I'll reduce the sugar, but I can't make too many changes. If Mother doesn't recognize her own recipe, I'm going to be on her kill-now-and-bury-later list for the rest of my life."

Keep reading! Purchase *Fudge Brownie Murder* and other Joanne Fluke culinary mystery novels by visiting www.kensingtonbooks.com/joannefluke