



THE
SECRET
COOKING
CLUB
Confetti & Cake

The title is surrounded by decorative icons: a heart, a bow, a bell, and another heart.

LAUREL REMINGTON



Chicken
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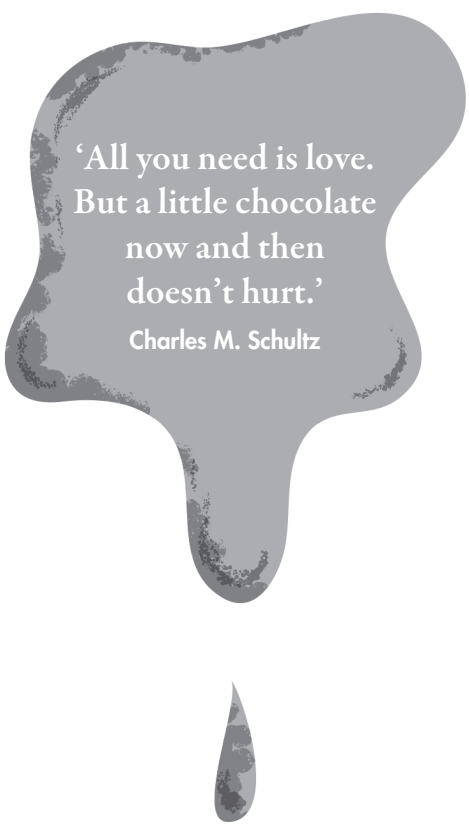
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'All you need is love.
But a little chocolate
now and then
doesn't hurt.'

Charles M. Schultz

Also by Laurel Remington

The Secret Cooking Club



THE BAKE-OFF

If I wasn't already full, I'd say I was in heaven. Spread in front of me is a huge table covered with cakes – cupcakes, cakes baked in ice cream cones, layer cakes, fondant fancies – all decorated with pastel-coloured icing, sprinkles, chocolate shavings, gummies and candied eggs. They're all so beautiful and different that it almost seems a shame to cut them up to take a bite – just a tiny bite – of each one. But the head teacher is standing on the other side of the table with her camera, and she's counting on me to do this.

It's not easy, but I choose five batches as a 'shortlist'. I leave aside the cakes that look just a

little too good – they might be shop-bought, or maybe someone’s mum helped them with the decorating. The ones I choose may not look the best, but they’re the most creative, I think. One batch of cupcakes is decorated with little nests made of red liquorice, and I don’t think it would be possible to fit another candied egg, marshmallow, sprinkle or gummy on top. Brilliant! The next one is a chocolate cake with squiggly writing saying Happy Easter, and a funny bunny made from goopy gel icing and decorated with Smarties and chocolate buttons. Then there are the ice cream cone cakes, a plate of biscuits chock-a-block with glitter and decorations, a cake decorated like a spring garden – all different, and all looking amazing. Though I can barely eat another bite after sampling the cakes on the year six table, I can’t wait to try these lovely things baked by the year fives.

The head teacher takes my photo as I cut a small bite from each of them. I feel like I’m a real judge on TV’s *Bake Off* as I take a bite of the chocolate cake. The sponge practically melts in my mouth. The icing is a little too sweet, maybe, but I don’t mind. It’s delicious.

In the end, I choose the cupcakes with the liquorice nests. They’re made from carrot cake that’s soft and spicy and, instead of nuts, they’ve

used peanut butter chips. Clever! But everything about the cupcakes – from the time taken with the decoration, to the taste – is special. These cakes were baked with love.

‘I think these should win for the year fives,’ I say, smiling. ‘Do you want to try them?’

‘Oh yes!’ The head teacher tastes the winners – and all the others too – and nods her head. ‘I agree completely,’ she says. ‘Let’s see whose they are.’

She looks underneath the paper plate for the name. ‘Annabel Greene,’ she says.

I don’t go to this school, so I don’t know Annabel Greene, but even so, I can almost imagine that I do.

‘That’s perfect,’ the head teacher says. ‘She’s new here, and kind of quiet. This will really help bring her out of her shell.’

‘Good,’ I say. ‘She deserves this.’

We choose the runners-up, and she ushers me into the hall to the assembly that’s already begun. Another teacher is showing slides of a school in Malawi, which is the school’s charity.

‘And some of these children have to walk seven or eight miles to school every day,’ the teacher is saying. ‘That is, when they’re able to go at all. And if they break a pencil, or lose a pen, there may not be another one. That’s why every bit of money that we earn to help them buy stationery is so important. Your cakes are making a big difference.’

Hearing that, I feel proud. Thanks to The Secret Cooking Club Online, a blog that I set up at the end of last year, five different schools nearby have done charity bake-offs. I've helped organize them – even though it's such hard work being a judge!

The teacher hands the microphone to the head teacher, who takes over. She explains about the charity bake-off – selling cakes after school to help raise money for the school charity. 'And we're so fortunate to have a very special judge with us today,' she's saying. 'I'm very proud to introduce a talented young baker and blogger, and founder of The Secret Cooking Club Online. Please give a big round of applause for . . . Scarlett Cooper.'

The second my name is called, my stomach churns with nerves. My knees feel weak as I walk up to the front of the assembly. I love helping organize charity bake-offs, but I don't like drawing attention to myself. For two years before I started The Secret Cooking Club, my mum wrote a tell-all mummy blog starring the embarrassing details of my life. I felt like the whole world knew the moment when I farted at Christmas dinner or the smell of my gym kit on a scale of 1–10. I became a hermit – no friends, no clubs, no interests. Anything to stay out of the limelight. Then I met Violet, a new girl at school who became my best friend. She and I started The Secret Cooking Club.

And life hasn't been the same ever since.

My hand shakes a little as I take the microphone, and breathe in. 'Umm, thanks for having me here at your school.' My voice always sounds strange coming through a microphone. 'I just want to say that the cakes you've made were absolutely amazing, and I know you'll earn lots of money for the school in Malawi. I'm really lucky to have been a judge. So now, let me tell you who the winners are.' I uncrumple the paper in my hand and read off the names. 'For the year sixes, the runner-up is Patrick Morgan, and the winner is Ayesha Hassan.' I pause and wait as there's talking and clapping.

'And for the year fives, the runner-up is Grace Halliday, and the winner – and the overall star baker – is . . .' I pause for effect, 'Annabel Greene!'

There's more clapping and a few whistles as the kids come up. I hand them each their prizes. A Secret Cooking Club badge and keychain for the winners, and for the star baker, a gift voucher donated by a local cookery shop. Annabel Greene is a small girl with straight black hair, who looks positively shell-shocked to be standing up in front of everyone.

'Congratulations,' I say to her, leaving the microphone aside. 'Your cakes must have taken you ages to make. They were so creative, and beautiful.'

‘Thank you so much.’ Her whole face lights up as she smiles, and at that moment, my nerves are totally gone and I feel like I’m on top of the world. The Secret Cooking Club has transformed my life, and maybe it can transform the lives not only of children in Malawi, but kids right here at home.

‘And now,’ I say back into the microphone, ‘let the charity cake sale begin!’