

KAREN SCALF LINAMEN

# The Chocolate Diaries



Secrets  
for a Sweeter Journey  
on the Rocky Road of Life



KAREN SCALF LINAMEN

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Chocolate  
Diaries



*Secrets*  
for a *Sweeter Journey*  
on the *Rocky Road* of Life



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P R E S S

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## Nobody Knows the Truffles I've Seen



Bumpy roads may be inevitable,  
but misery is optional.

Two nights ago I discovered my fifteen-year-old in the kitchen at 3 a.m., whipping up pasta and shrimp in a garlic-and-lemon cream sauce. Blinking, I asked, “What are you doing?”

Kacie shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. I kept dreaming of recipes.”

No surprise there. Kacie’s gotten the whole family hooked on the Food Network. In fact, the kid has fallen in love not only with cooking but with Italian cuisine in general and with one teenaged Italian-bakery delivery boy in particular.

It all began when we started watching *Cake Boss*, a reality show recorded at a century-old bakery founded and run by a boisterous Italian family in New Jersey. One of the many relatives who works at Carlo’s Bakery is seventeen-year-old Robert Faugno, nephew of Buddy Valastro, the master baker. Kacie is so taken with *Cake Boss*, the summer after she turns eighteen, she wants us to take a family trip to New

Jersey so she can visit the bakery and meet Robert (a.k.a. her future husband). Kacie's plan is to marry Robert and complete a brief pastry internship at the family bakery before the happy couple opens a Tuscan restaurant and starts giving birth to their own brood of boisterous future employees and reality TV stars.

Granted, Robert has yet to be informed of his pending engagement. But that's nothing more than a small glitch in the grand scheme of things. We tried to jump-start the relationship by looking for him on Facebook, but we couldn't find him. So if you happen to know Robert Faugno, would you please have him call Kacie?

I love that Kacie started watching the Food Network, fell in love with *Cake Boss*, and now sees her future life unfolding. I mean, what's not to like? You've got a big gregarious family. You've got festive events like weddings and bar mitzvahs. You've got chocolate.

Unfortunately, when I watch the Food Network, the programs that seem to best represent my life are part of a series called *Chopped*. In every episode up-and-coming chefs compete for ten thousand dollars by whipping up extravagant dishes in thirty minutes or less. The timer starts as each chef is given a basket containing three or four ingredients that *must* be included in the dish.

I'm not talking about flour, sugar, and eggs. These chefs have to create dishes using zany combinations such as oranges, grapefruit, and *bacon!* Or apples, shrimp, and peanut butter. My favorite episode is the one where the chefs are asked to create an appetizer with chocolate and sardines.

A tasty chocolate-and-fish appetizer. You should see the looks on their faces.

And then the timer starts.

Now *that's* real life. After all, you and I are given a limited amount of time on earth. (Sure, it's longer than thirty minutes, although we're

never sure how much longer. Thirty years? Sixty? Ninety?) Then we're given a variety of zany ingredients with which to make something of our lives. Inevitably, some of the ingredients are things we don't want and may not even know how to handle.

Just yesterday a woman was telling me about her pending divorce. Through tears she said, "It's not what I thought I'd have to deal with in my life." I've had that same feeling. My guess is that you have too.

As we stare into the kitchens of our lives, we see all sorts of ingredients we didn't ask for. There are ingredients that don't play well with others and some that are downright unpleasant. We see signs of our

••• Sweet Secrets •••

*Q:* What's your secret to a sweeter journey on the rocky road of life?

*A:* I try to find others who need encouragement. So often my crisis becomes less of a crisis when I take my eyes off myself and look at the needs of those around me. You get to wallow in your crisis and have a pity party for yourself during the tough times, sure. But after that, you have to reach out to those who are in their own crises. That's when you realize that giving is the greater medicine.

—CINDI CHASE JOSEPH, CALIFORNIA



hard labor and great effort—scattered flour and dirty pans and potato peelings on the floor—but not always the results we long for. When this happens it's easy to become discouraged. We can even become convinced that we've been given such bitter ingredients that nothing can ever make our lives sweet again. (After all, it's hard to imagine even a skillful chef making something palatable out of a childhood hurt, a mistake from long ago, baggage from a difficult marriage, or lingering disappointment!)

But this philosophy suggests that the ingredients are more important than the life they produce. Don't believe it!

After all, Food Network chefs are routinely handed bizarre ingredients (such as sardines and chocolate) and manage to rise above their dismay to create the most amazing dishes despite haphazard combinations of flavors.

You might be thinking, *Well, of course they do. It's television! Even if it is a reality show, it's still entertainment.* And yet you and I know real people who exhibit the same talent, don't we? People who have been handed some *really* distasteful things yet have managed to fold them into the batter of their lives in such a way that the end results are not just appetizing, they're also amazing! These are people we love to be around, because their lives aren't characterized by bitterness despite the hardships they have experienced. Instead, they've extracted both the good and the bad from their pasts and blended it all to create lives that are rich and satisfying.

If you've never met anyone like this before, be patient, because in this book you will. Even better, these amazing folks are going to share their secrets for embracing a sweeter journey in spite of the rocky roads of life.

Some of the ingredients in our baskets are tasty. Others are bitter,

and if they aren't handled well, they have the potential to overpower the entire recipe. And yet *if we know the secrets*, the bitter flavors can not only be tamed, sometimes they also end up being the very thing that transforms our efforts from ordinary to truly remarkable.

## Not Exactly What I Had in Mind

I don't know a single person who hasn't traversed rocky roads (and only a few who aren't rattling over a few bumps even now). So why are you and I so surprised (or dismayed, or afraid, or even overwhelmed) when it happens to us?

We resist the bumpiness of life because it seems so unfair and it's always unwanted. But the truth is, rocky roads are inevitable. That's the bad news.

The good news is that even though hard times are unavoidable, the rockiest roads are veined with the greatest treasure, meant to be experienced fully and even mined for their riches.

A few months ago I tried to communicate this idea to one of my children. When Kacie complained that we were short on money, I assured her we were going to be fine, then went on to inform her that having too much month at the end of the checkbook was one of life's rocky challenges that I *wanted* her to experience!

Truth be told, I want each of my daughters to know what it feels like to

- have ten bucks in your account until payday and have to figure out how to manage until then.
- fight with someone you love, then experience the joy of discovering how to forgive each other, resolve things, and move forward.

- become frustrated with a messy house, then enjoy the satisfying feeling of bringing order back into your world.
- be stressed and figure out how to reclaim peace.
- experience the mountain peaks of love and the deep valleys of loss, and discover how to find beauty in *every* landscape and terrain of the soul.

We can't escape it. Life brings these challenges many times over, and I want my daughters to have the moxie to know how to handle them as they arise. I also want my daughters to be women of depth and wisdom, traits that are rarely picked up along the broad, smooth, easy highway of life.

Depth and wisdom are most often discovered as we stumble along dim and twisting back roads, trying to find our way back home. As much as we wish these treasures could be gleaned from comfort and success, the truth is that the bumpier roads offer the richer rewards.

Some days I understand all of this. That's when I say things to my kids like, "Rocky roads are chock-full of treasure. Grab a spoon and dig in!" On other days, however, I lose my bearings, and the *last* thing I want to do is celebrate the mettle-producing benefits of difficult terrain. On those days, I may be reeling because my own rocky roads have taken sharp, unexpected turns. I feel lost and overwhelmed, my journey suddenly turning dark and disenchanting. For that moment I'm no longer a member of the search and rescue team, but the one huddled under a tree, waiting for someone with a working compass to show up and encourage me toward home.

And yet this is what makes the adventure so very, very grand: we need one another! Whether we're high on living the sweet life or trudging fatigued on the ol' rocky road, we're not in this alone. Best yet, as

we whisper to one another the encouraging secrets we've learned along the way, our journeys will be so much richer.

## Java Therapy

A few weeks ago I had dinner with a couple of my girlfriends. We were in Debbie's dining room, enjoying a wonderful meal of bread and hummus and fruit. I'd just asked these women about their rocky roads. I wanted to know what they did to cope—no, wait, not just cope, but actually *thrive*—when life got hard.

Ronlyn knew about rocky roads. So did Debbie. So did I, for that matter. Among the three of us, we pretty much had all the bases covered, including single-parenting challenges, financial stress, career mishaps, depression, childhood trauma, health problems, and broken hearts.

"As you know," Ronlyn shared, "I went through a really tough time last year. But I think I began to cope—and really heal—in the Starbucks drive-through lane." (Now this is *my* kind of coping strategy! I waited eagerly for her to continue.)

"I'd been depressed," she reminded us, "really struggling with a lot of stuff going on in my life. One morning it dawned on me that if I didn't find a way to take my thoughts off my problems, I was going to drive myself crazy!"

An hour later, on her way to work, Ronlyn pulled into a Starbucks drive-through lane. Waiting in line, she had a crazy idea. When it was her turn to pay, she handed her debit card to the clerk taking orders at the window and, on a whim, announced: "I want to pay for the car behind me too."

And so Ronlyn's addiction began.

It started innocently enough with two or three random acts of Starbucks-drive-through kindness a week. Then she started looking for thrills in other places, like McDonald's and even Taco Bell. One afternoon she paid for the person in the car behind her while her kids were with her. And just like that, they were hooked. Before long, her entire family couldn't get enough of the giddy rush of good deeds at drive-through lanes.

Not that there weren't sacrifices. Ronlyn, a single mom, never knew (until the deed was done, of course) if the driver behind her had ordered a cup of coffee or venti cappuccinos for the entire office. Sometimes the bill was a few bucks. Once it was nearly thirty.

This was not a cheap habit.

But maybe that was all right. It was cheaper than therapy. Plus, it gave Ronlyn a renewed sense of hope. Even though she was still living in her private quarters of stress and hurt, she had discovered a window to a happier world. And the more she created happiness for others, the more she found the courage to believe that happiness could exist in her future too.

Ronlyn couldn't stop smiling at the thought of how her newfound vice was impacting her innocent victims. As they drove away with their complimentary cup of joe or sausage biscuit, were they smiling? shaking their heads in grateful disbelief? Did they feel luckier or happier or even a little less invisible than when they'd rolled out of bed that morning? How were Ronlyn's random acts of drive-through kindness making a difference? She would never know.

Or would she? One morning on her way to work, Ronlyn pulled up to the Starbucks window and reached for her debit card. The clerk grinned and said, "There's no charge. The car in front just paid for your coffee."

I guess it's possible that nobody knows the troubles you've seen. But it's more likely that others have not only traveled the road you're on, they've also discovered a few secrets for making the journey a little sweeter. I believe your journey can be sweeter too.

You and I love our chocolate, don't we? Not the bitter stuff; we like our chocolate smooth and sweet. We want our lives smooth and sweet as well. Unfortunately, you may have learned, as I have, that it's a whole lot easier to control your choice of chocolate than your life.

And yet the next time life hands you a bitter ingredient, don't despair. After all, if sardines—with enough chocolate—have the makings of something truly amazing, think what hope there is for you and me!

## Food for Thought

- ☞ Which reality TV show best portrays your life, and why?
- ☞ What are some unpleasant ingredients that you have had to fold into the batter of your life?
- ☞ Are you in danger of letting the bitterness of certain experiences overpower and define your life? If so, what are your other options?
- ☞ Has a friend ever shared something she learned from traveling her own rocky road that helped you get through a rough stretch? What did she share, and how did it help? Have you ever had that kind of impact on someone else?
- ☞ How did Ronlyn make her rocky journey a little sweeter? If you tried something similar, how might it help make your journey sweeter?

Because *Real Women*  
Don't Need a *Cookbook*

**Crazy for Coconut**

Recently I had a craving for something sweet, so I starting ransacking the kitchen. I found about a quarter cup of lonely coconut left in its package, so I dumped it into a bowl. I poured plenty of chocolate syrup over the coconut and added a couple of almonds on top. Wow! It tasted just like an Almond Joy, my childhood favorite.

—Beth Lueders, Colorado Springs, Colorado



**Want More?**

To find more chocolate recipes, or to post your own, go to [www.thechocolatediariesonline.com](http://www.thechocolatediariesonline.com).

## A Messy Kitchen: The Sign of Good Things to Come?



- Sometimes healing starts when things are still in disarray—in a creative, messy place brimming with chaos and promise. Kind of like a kitchen.

Ask any woman about the time she felt the most broken, and she will tell you a story. It might be a story of love lost, financial hardship, debilitating depression, a father wound, a wayward husband, chronic pain, or broken dreams. Some women are still living their stories, wondering if their lives are broken beyond repair. Others have gone on to feel whole again.

All of which makes me wonder: how do women heal? And more important, why does tragedy make one person bitter and another better?

I love the story Ronlyn told in chapter 1 about her good deeds at drive-through windows! I love how—if we're simply open to the



possibilities—almost anything can become an element of our healing, the ingredient that, folded into a bitter season, can change it into something new and rich and satisfying.

As Ronlyn shared her story, we were sitting at Debbie's finely set table, enjoying beautifully prepared dishes. And in that setting, we got to hear the story—and see some of the fruit—of Ronlyn's secret for a sweeter life.

But that's not where her story began. In fact, our stories of healing rarely begin at the banquet table where we share the fruit of our journeys. Instead, they usually start in disarray, in the tumultuous kitchen of our lives—in that creative, messy place brimming with chaos and promise.

## It Started with a Shimmy

Having signed up for belly-dancing lessons, I arrived at the studio for the first class and found myself in an eclectic group of women. Middle-aged moms, tongue-pierced teens, menopausal hippies, and a couple of trophy wives mingled politely, if tentatively. One woman in particular caught my attention. She appeared to be in her late thirties, with long hair bleached white and lips painted black. The effect might have been intimidating if not for the fact that her lipstick was slightly crooked. She approached me and smiled. "I'm Phoenix," she said cheerfully. "I'm broken."

"Nice to meet you, Phoenix. Have you studied belly dancing before, or is this your first time?"

She waved her hand. "Oh, no. I've studied with all the really good teachers in Denver. I've never worked with this teacher before, but I hear she's very good."

"You said you were broken. How are things going? Are they getting any better?"

“I think so. Yes, things are better.” She shrugged and smiled. “But I’m still broken.”

Our instructor took command of the class at that moment, inviting us to sit cross-legged on the studio floor and take turns introducing ourselves to the rest of the group. Halfway through, it was my new friend’s turn. She announced brightly, “Hi. I’m Phoenix. I’m broken.”

Her real name is probably Barbara or Sue or Carol, but I like the idea that she prefers Phoenix. After all, since childhood I’ve been fascinated by the story of the mythical bird of the same name.

The phoenix, it is said, has the physique of an eagle and is adorned with beautiful red-gold and purple plumage. She has a lifespan of five hundred years, eventually becoming old and weary. Then, knowing she is nearing the end of her life, she readies herself for her final flight.

By now, of course, her feathers are tattered from centuries of wind. In fact, some of them are missing completely, having been plucked by treasure-seeking humans before she learned to isolate herself for protection. She even has a few scars from traps that tried to snare her.

Bone weary, she musters strength for her final journey. It’s time to go home, to the nest on the face of the cliff where she was born. In flight, she approaches the cliff. Catching an updraft, she rises, then cuts into the wind, adjusting her direction before dropping altitude, her weary heart beating hard. Her destination—and her destiny—lies ahead. She tilts her wings to slow her descent. And then, in what can only be described as the ultimate crash and burn, she collapses into her nest and bursts into flames. Within minutes she is consumed by the fire. After a while the flames subside, embers flicker, and eventually nothing is left of our heroine except a pile of white ash.

The afternoon sun beats against the side of the cliff.

Aimless white clouds drift across the sky.

Then, in late afternoon, a breeze kicks up and blows across the nest. The ashes stir, then dance. In the movement, a shape emerges. Of cinder or flesh, it's hard to tell. It looks like a baby bird. She shakes off a powdery shroud and blinks at the sun. She feels the breeze and stretches virgin wings. She grows rapidly, reaching her full height within minutes. She is beautiful, with a young, strong body, bright eyes, and pristine feathers. In a sudden burst of strength and sinew, she beats at the air with her wings, scattering the last ashes from the nest. She rises, buoyed by muscle and current. Airborne now, her feathers glow magenta and plum in the afternoon sun. Reborn and renewed, she soars.

By the third week of class, I got to see Phoenix dance. She was beautiful. Tentative at times, but graceful. Made me think of ashes in the breeze.

It's an image I hang on to. Phoenix may still think of herself as broken, but I think she's gonna be okay. What's more, I feel honored that I had the privilege of meeting her—not at some point in the future as she looks back and tells the story of how she healed, but right here in the middle, or maybe even the beginning, of her transformation.

I've crashed and burned lots of times. Like Phoenix—and maybe even like you—I know what it feels like to have to reinvent my well-being and even my world from the ashes on up.

## Looking for Signs of Life

One of my crash-and-burn experiences occurred about four years ago. I had recently moved from a suburb of Denver to a big house in the woods in Colorado Springs so I could live closer to my family. My new house was just a couple of miles from my parents', and from my sisters' too. They were so excited to have us nearby that Dad let me borrow his

prized, one-ton truck and favorite trailer, plus a couple of hired hands, to help move my things. The move went smoothly (except for losing the metal gate off the back of Dad's trailer—yikes!) and seemed to herald the beginning of good things for my two daughters and me.

While I loved everything about my new life, there were things I missed from our old life in Denver. In fact, I was surprised how much I grieved losing those few things. The first was silly, when I think about it. But I really missed waking up and seeing the sunrise from my bedroom window. The second thing wasn't silly at all: I had left someone behind whom I loved. Even though he was making plans to follow me to Colorado Springs, I grieved his absence.

Six months after my move, that relationship ended on a dime. I was caught completely off guard. I felt numb and, at the same time, fully aware of the pulse of enormous pain throbbing just beneath the surface, like careless dental work as the anesthesia is wearing off.

My vision seemed different too. Whereas once I'd looked ahead and seen a future, at that time all I could see was hurt. There was no happy, healing ending in sight. If healing existed in my future (and it did, of course), I was convinced that it was far away, hidden beyond miles of road and hillocks and even a hairpin turn or two. Talk about a rocky road!

Just like an imagined Food Network version of my life, I had been handed a mess of bitter ingredients. I was stuck in a messy kitchen, surrounded by unfamiliar (and unwanted!) ingredients, with no clue how to transform the chaos into anything that might be the least bit satisfying.

The day the relationship ended, I went for a long walk: five, maybe six miles. I did the same thing the next day, and the day after that. Pushing my body past comfort and into pain provided a small distraction from the other pain, the one Epsom salts couldn't cure.

On the third morning I woke up early and groaned as my eyes adjusted to the pink morning light. Wait, pink light? Looking out my window I saw vivid strokes of sunrise across the horizon. I blinked. For the six months I'd lived here, the sun had always risen off stage, slightly past the edge of my bedroom-window view. Now, apparently thanks to the seasonal tilt of the earth, it was rising in plain sight, painting the

### *Sweet Secrets*

**Q:** What's your secret to a sweeter journey on the rocky road of life?

**A:** I've certainly lived this in the past months. I have developed a routine of self-care that includes

- keeping up with my health and well-being through exercise, healthy diet, and plenty of rest.
- staying in the moment (not vainly imagining the worst for the future) by touching something within my reach in the here and now.
- confiding in a few very close friends for prayer and emotional support (and the occasional coffee, tea, lunch, or chocolate ☺).
- most important, staying in a really close relationship with God (prayer, study, and reading inspirational stuff).

—SHAREN WATSON

sky behind the pines with the glowing hues of dawn. The sunrise I had missed so much had come home, a bright and timely gift in the midst of my darkness.

That afternoon I struck out on another walk. On a whim I headed to my parents' house two miles away. They live on a quiet dirt road with little traffic. For most of the way, I walked with my eyes closed, looking for something I suspected couldn't be found anywhere except inside of me. And to be honest, I doubted that I'd find it even there.

Knowing I was approaching a slight bend in the road, I opened my eyes. I immediately caught the glint of sunlight on something in the tall weeds at the side of the road. I veered over to take a look.

There, in the ragweed and tall grass, was the lost gate from my dad's trailer! Apparently it had fallen off months earlier when we were driving down this gravel road to return the trailer to Dad's house. Seeing it lying there in the weeds, I rejoiced, then hurried to tell my dad the good news.

Something else unusual happened that week while I was still in the messy kitchen of my life. It was evening, and I was sitting in Starbucks with my friend Linda and my daughters. It was a half hour before closing, and we were drinking cappuccino and hot chocolate. That's when I noticed a man standing at the counter with his back to us.

I studied the familiar form. He turned and walked past us, toward the exit.

I began to laugh. "John?"

My old friend turned, spotted us, and grinned. The next thing I knew, I was in the middle of a big bear hug. No, it wasn't the boy I had left in Denver, but a good friend and former business partner. We'd had a blast working together for more than a year, until stressful events and an unfortunate tiff had driven us apart. And then I'd moved to Colorado Springs and he to California, and with nine hundred miles

and the memory of frustrated words between us, reconciliation seemed unlikely.

About as unlikely as running into him now, in some random Starbucks.

“John, what in the world are you doing here?”

“I’m here on business and was driving through town on my way to Denver when I remembered there was this Starbucks not far off the freeway...”

We caught up briefly on each other’s lives, hugged again, and promised to stay in touch. As soon as he was gone, one of my daughters looked at me with wide eyes. “I thought you guys were mad at each other!”

“We were.”

“But you weren’t mad just now. How come?”

I shrugged. “I think the crazy jolt of running into each other jarred us out of our ruts and reminded us that life was good when we were friends!”

“So you’re not mad?”

“Nope.”

“Not even a little?”

“Not even a little.”

## Back in the Kitchen

I pondered the events of that week for a very long time. I was still in a very messy kitchen. It would be months—more than a year, actually—before I’d find a way to put my heart and my life back in order.

But I had caught a glimpse of a potent truth. Sometimes you lose things and you grieve. You think the things you lost are gone forever, and in some cases they really are. But sometimes things lost can be

found again. Like sunrises. And tailgates. And good friends. And definitely hope and joy, and maybe, one day, even love.

It was the kind of truth you can use to season a pot of bitter herbs, then let it simmer for a while. Eventually you end up with something palatable. Savory, even.

Maybe you've been handed your own bitter ingredients and you're not sure what to do next. I know it's scary, but don't despise the kitchen, that creative, messy space where good things begin.

Or perhaps you've crashed and burned and you feel like a pile of gray ash waiting for a life-giving breeze. Don't despair. Please, don't despair. Be patient. A wind will arise. It always does. And when it does, well, as our friend Phoenix is discovering, first you dance, then you fly.

## Food for Thought

- ☞ If healing is a dance, where will you take your first steps? In a belly-dance studio? On a scenic trail? When you think of things that represent your first steps toward healing—recently or years ago—what comes to mind?
- ☞ Whether we're talking about making an exotic meal from scratch, redecorating a room, writing a book, crafting a sculpture, or even raising a kid, the creative process often feels overwhelming or ruined or even futile. In fact, it almost always feels that way right before a major breakthrough or flash of genius. But just because something *feels* overwhelming or hopeless doesn't mean it really is. Can you think of any times this has been true in your life?



- ☞ Have you ever crashed and burned? What was it like, and what is your life like today?
- ☞ If someone you loved admitted to you, “I feel like I’m broken and I’ll never be whole again,” what would you say?

Because *Real Women*  
Don't Need a *Cookbook*

**Homemade Peanut Butter Cup on a Spoon**

When I need a chocolate 911, I start with a spoon. I use it to grab a spoonful of peanut butter, add mini chocolate chips on top, shove it in my mouth, and aah...instant heaven!

**Mock Hot Fudge Sundae on a Spoon**

Grab a jar of hot fudge and a spoon. Scoop up a spoonful of fudge, add some whipped cream from a can, top with a cherry, and you will absolutely drool!

—Michelle Morton, Raleigh, North Carolina



Michelle, I love the spoon theme! If I got in the habit of making sundaes in a spoon, instead of a mixing bowl, think how many calories I might save! —KSL