

Chapter 1

I clambered down the ladder in the storeroom of The Cookbook Nook carrying a stack of cookie cookbooks in my arms. My foot hit something soft. I shrieked. Tigger, a stray kitten that had scampered into my life and won my heart a month ago, yowled. His claws skittered beneath him as he dashed from my path.

“Shh, Tigger. Hush, baby.” I had barely touched him with my toe. I knew he wasn’t hurt. “C’mere, little guy.” I arrived at the floor, knelt down, and spied him hunkering beneath the ladder, staring at me with his wide eyes. “It’s okay,” I cooed. As I scooped him up one-armed and nuzzled his neck, I felt a cool stream of the unknowable course its way up my spine. Tigger was a ginger-striped tabby, not a black cat. His passing beneath a ladder wasn’t a bad omen, was it? Why did I suddenly feel like seven years of bad luck was lurking in the shadows?

“Miss Jenna, yoo-hoo,” a girl squealed. “Miss Jenna, come quick!”

Fear ticked inside me. We had invited children to The Cookbook Nook for a cookie-decorating event—Aunt Vera’s idea. She was a master cookie baker herself, with an extensive personal collection of cookie cookbooks. Had one of the children gotten hurt? Was that the dark cloud I’d sensed in the storeroom? I raced into the shop and skidded to a slippery halt in my flip-flops.

“Look at my killer shark.” A girl with frothy orange hair was standing beside the tot-height table in the children’s corner, brandishing a deep blue, shark-shaped cookie.

Nothing amiss. Kids being kids. No one hurt. *Thank the breezes*, as my mother used to say.

I steadied my racing heart and said, “Cool cookie.” I set the cookbooks on the sales counter, then put Tigger on the floor and gave his bottom a push. Brave feline, he meandered beneath the children’s table,

probably hoping to score a crumb. “But please, kids, call me Jenna. Not Miss Jenna. I’m not a teacher.” The girl’s father frowned. Guess he preferred decorum. I wasn’t so hot on it. I liked to live fast and loose . . . sort of.

“But you’re so tall,” the girl said.

I grinned. I wasn’t an Amazon, but at five eight, I was slightly taller than her doughy father. “Just

because I’m tall doesn’t make me a teacher.” “If you say so.”

The first Friday of September was a perfect time in Crystal Cove to invite children to an afternoon cookie-decorating class. The weather hovered in the low seventies. The sun shone brightly. And school and homework hadn’t taken over the kids’ total concentration quite yet. For the class, in addition to ordering a fresh batch of cookie cookbooks like *The All-American Cookie Book*, *Betty Crocker’s The Big Book of Cookies*, and *Simply Sensational Cookies*, we had stocked up on fun cookie-decorating sets complete with squeezable icing bottles and interchangeable design tips. Our theme for today’s class was “Creatures of the Deep.”

“Did you bake the cookies, Jenna?” one of the parents asked.

“Me? What a laugh.” I was barely adept at making cookie batter—my limit of ingredients for recipes was a *daring* total of seven—but as an occasional artist, I embraced piping icing out of a squeeze bottle.

“Miss Jenna, look at my octopus.” A boy with gigantic freckles wiggled his green, gooey octopus cookie in the air, and then shoved his gruesome creation toward the face of the frothy-haired girl. She squeaked.

Aunt Vera, a flamboyant sixty-something and co-owner of The Cookbook Nook, moved to my side, the fabric of her exotic caftan billowing and falling. “Don’t you love kids?”

Me? I adore them. Except for the time I did a photo shoot at Taylor & Squibb, my previous employer, for Dabble Doodles. A few prankster boys squeezed the contents of their glue and glitter pens onto the girls’ clothing and—*gag me*—hair. Parents were livid.

“Yoo-hoo, Jenna. Kids?” my aunt repeated.

“Uh, sure. Love ’em.” I didn’t want any of my own. Not yet. I wasn’t quite thirty. And a widow. Timing was everything. I said, “Absolutely. How about you?”

She chuckled while adjusting the silver bejeweled turban on her head—my aunt would prefer giving tarot card readings to figuring out how to market our joint enterprise. “I would have loved to have a dozen just like you.”

“Aw. I love you, too.” My aunt on my father’s side had doted on me from the day I was born. When I moved back to Crystal Cove to help her open the cookbook shop, she offered me the cottage beside her beach house. I felt blessed to have her in my life, especially with my mother gone.

“While the kiddies finish up,” Aunt Vera said, “let’s discuss the town’s other ventures for this month.”

“As far as I know, the mayor has planned a dozen new events for September, including a Frisbee contest, a paddle boarding race, and Movie Night on the Strand.”

Crystal Cove was a lovely seaside town on the coast of California, with beautiful rolling hills to the east and a glorious stretch of ocean running the length of the town to the west. The mayor of our fair city was always on the lookout for events that would lure tourists. “To pay tribute to the events the mayor has fashioned, I’ve ordered dozens of new cookbooks with beach and/or movie themes.”

“Ooh, lovely. You’ve included *The Beach House Cookbook*, I assume?”

“I have.” *The Beach House Cookbook* had beautiful photographs of food and the seaside. In our business, cookbooks with enticing pictures were guaranteed sales. I still couldn’t believe it, but some people bought cookbooks merely to peruse. Prior to my new enterprise, I was a function-and-use person. If it didn’t have a function, I didn’t use it.

“I’ve also brought in *At Blanchard’s Table: A Trip to the Beach Cookbook*.” This particular cookbook included recipes that were as delicious as they were simple.

Prosciutto bundles? Balsamic goat cheese? They sounded easy enough that even I could make them. “Also, I ordered *Good Fish: Sustainable Seafood Recipes from the Pacific Coast*.” The Seattle-based author of *Good Fish* was a seafood advocate who really educated her readers. I especially loved that she had brought in another knowledgeable source to pair the fish with wine.

“That title’s a mouthful.”

“Between you, me, and the lamppost,” I said, “some titles on cookbooks go on forever.”

“They do, but competition is fierce and specificity matters. An unpretentious title like *Good Food*

won’t light a fire under the intended audience.”

My aunt was right. She was always right. She knew cookbooks backward and forward.

Me? I was

just getting the hang of how popular they were. At my aunt's behest, last month I returned to Crystal Cove to run The Cookbook Nook and the café because, well, my life in San Francisco, as I'd dreamed it, was over. I needed a new beginning. My aunt needed a marketing whiz.

"I love what you've done in the bay window," Aunt Vera said.

Our store was one of many in the Fisherman's Village complex. The bay window faced the parking lot and was our first calling card to passersby. In keeping with the town's monthly events, I had set out a seaside-themed display, complete with bright yellow oars, aqua blue Frisbees, and coral and white sand toys. Near the decorative kitchen items that we carried, I had set up our movie-themed display, which included the women's fiction books *Chocolat* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, both of which had been made into movies, and a mystery series about a cheese shop, which I heard might become a television show à la *Murder, She Wrote*.

"Jenna." My best friend and new assistant in the store, Bailey Bird—Minnie Mouse in size and Mighty Mouse in energy—hurried into the shop. "Whee! You'll never guess."

"What's with you?" I grinned.

"No caffeine. For twenty-four hours. I feel so-o-o good."

I liked a cup of coffee each morning, something with a little zip, but I didn't drink it throughout the

day. Bailey, on the other hand, nursed a coffee or cola about every two hours. She was off the stuff? When would she crash? My aunt gave me a worried look and began to rub the phoenix amulet she wore around her neck.

“Listen. Listen.” Bailey spun in a circle. The skirt of her silky halter dress fluted around her well- formed calves. Sun streaming in the big plate-glass windows highlighted her short copper hair. “I just

spoke with the mayor, and she wants us.” “For what?”

“To hold the Grill Fest.”

“But Brick’s always hosts the Grill Fest.” Brick’s was a barbecue restaurant about a half mile from Fisherman’s Village.

“Brick’s is going under. It just declared bankruptcy.”

“How horrible.”

“It is, isn’t it? Tragic. However, the mayor doesn’t want to delay the four-day fest. She’s afraid that

could hurt the town’s economy,” Bailey rushed on. “Tourism—”

“Can’t afford any setbacks,” I finished, quoting the mayor.

“It takes money to run this place, she says. The squeaky wheel gets the biggest piece of the pie.” “Excuse me?”

“The mayor messed up the wording, not I.”

Our mayor, a frizzy bundle of raw energy, was nothing if not Crystal Cove proactive.

Without

tourists and the taxes they paid, how else could we finance our infrastructure? Only a few thousand people, including part-timers, lived here. Though many residents had incomes well above normal, the town couldn’t manage to maintain the elaborate maze of windy roads, the parks, the aquarium, the junior college that offered a specialized degree in the study of grapes, and The Pier, which was a major go-to spot, complete with a

boardwalk, restaurants, stores, and more.

“I suggested we have the Grill Fest at the shop,” Bailey said, polishing her fingernails on her silky bodice. “I said, ‘Jenna and Vera will think it’s a fabulous idea.’ You do, don’t you? Think it’s a good idea?” She slurped in an excited breath.

The contest consisted of four rounds, eight contestants. All contestants would participate in the opening round. After each round, judges would make their determinations, and two contestants would be eliminated, until only two contestants remained. They would vie for the grand prize—a medal and boasting rights.

“Well?” Bailey said.

My aunt and I nodded. How could we disappoint her?

“We can set up portable cooking stations, like we do for cooking classes,” Bailey continued. “We’ll

ask the kitchen shop down the way to provide the tools and grills or sauté pans, depending on a contestant’s preference. Think of the traffic. The cross-promotion. The conflict. The press.”

Last year’s Grill Fest had garnered all sorts of media coverage thanks to one contestant—the winner for eight straight years—who lambasted the runner-up for her grilled steak recipe. They ended up in a spatula fight. Someone had filmed the spectacle, which went viral on YouTube.

“And think of all the grilling cookbooks we can stock, like *Simply Grilling: 105 Recipes for Quick and Casual Grilling*,” Bailey said, the title tripping easily off her tongue.

See what I mean about long book titles?

“The author not only gives a clear account of the types of grilling and the utensils needed,” Bailey went on, “but she also includes a recipe for one of my all-time favorite foods, Buffalo Sliders with Blue Cheese Slaw. And the pictures? Family-style adorable.” Bailey had a mind like a steel trap. She could probably recite the contents of every book in the shop.

“What’s this year’s challenge?” I asked.

“Grilled cheese.”

Aunt Vera applauded. “Yum. We’ll serve delectable sandwiches at the Nook Café.” The café was an

adjunct to The Cookbook Nook. During the opening month, we hadn’t landed on a name for the café, and then we settled on the obvious. “Folks will flock to us for lunch and dinner. Ka-ching.” My aunt was not interested in money. She had plenty because, years ago, she had invested wisely in the stock market. But she was all about bragging rights. She took great pride in our tasty enterprise.

“Ka-ching is right,” Bailey echoed. She was all about dollar signs. Back at Taylor & Squibb, Bailey, who had been in charge of monitoring on-air, magazine, and Internet campaigns, would visit my office daily and give me a rundown of our earnings. Not our, as in Taylor & Squibb, but *our*, as in *ours*. Hers and mine. Every Christmas, she found out early, down to the penny, what we were earning for our holiday

bonuses. She needed to, because she had to budget for her monthly clothes-buying sprees.

“Meow!” Tigger raced from beneath the cookie preparation table and leaped onto the counter by the

register.

“I didn’t do it.” The freckle-faced boy threw his hands in the air, which of course meant he had done

whatever *it* was.

I hurried to the counter and scooped up Tigger, a new wave of anxiety gushing through me. “Shh,

fella. You’re okay. Why are you so jumpy today?” I checked him out, making sure he didn’t have icing in his eyes or ears—he didn’t—and breathed a sigh of relief. I frowned at the boy, whose mother was giving him a quiet talking-to. I imagined pulling a cat’s tail had been one of his crimes. He nodded obediently to her, but I could see he was holding back giggles.

As I set Tigger on the ground and encouraged him to be brave and mingle with the public again, I heard a jangle.

“Phone’s ringing,” Bailey said as she sidled behind me to set down her things.

I rummaged through my purse, which I had stowed on a shelf beneath the antique National cash register, and retrieved my cell phone. The readout said: *Whitney*. Wholesome, wondrous Whitney. My sister was brilliant at most things, but being a home-business entrepreneur, she was a tad dim when it came to knowing the hours other people kept at work. I asked Bailey to mind the shop, then sneaked to the storage room with my cell phone and pressed Send. “Hey, Sis. I can’t talk right now. We have a kids’ soiree going on.” Not to mention a café to run and more cookbooks to inventory.

“Jenna Starrett Hart, listen up.”

I was single when I had established myself in my advertising career. After David and

I got married, I decided not to change my surname to his, Harris. Hart . . . Harris. People would have gotten confused.

“Jenna,” my sister barked.

“Don’t have a tizzy.” I laughed. I loved pushing my sister’s buttons. “What’s up?”

“You know I’m here in Crystal Cove.”

“No.” If she was checking up on me after my encounter with a murderer last month, I was going to

clock her. I didn’t need a reminder. I had put the past behind me. And I could clock her. I had six inches on her and a lot more hard-earned muscle, especially since I’d returned to a daily routine of running on the beach.

“Well, I am. I’m at The Seaside Bakery on The Pier getting the cake for Dad’s surprise party tonight. You know it’s tonight, right?”

I would have if she had clued me in. To anything. Ever. Well-meaning, warped Whitney. All my life I’d slung *w* adjectives together for my sister. She did the same to me: *jazzy, jittery Jenna*. Luckily I didn’t have plans.

“Anyway,” my sister continued, “I need you to pick up—” She halted, then screeched, “Omigosh!” “What?”

“Get down here. Right. Now.”

“No need to shout. Where are you?”

“The Seaside Bakery. Aren’t you listening? I mean it. Come right now. And bring Bailey. Her mom, Lola. I think she’s going to throw a punch.”