

Chapter 1

A cat yowled. Not mine. Tigger was back at The Cookbook Nook. However, I couldn't stand for an animal to be in pain. I leaped out of my chair and scanned the garden of the Crystal Cove Inn. At five eight, I could peer over most of the crowd. I looked from booth to booth. The Cookbook Nook was one of many vendors selling its wares at the Winsome Witches Faire on a gently breezy Sunday, all to benefit the Witches' cause—literacy. I dropped to all fours. I must have looked pretty silly in a black sheath with my rear end in the air and my sandals ready to fall off my water ski-sized feet, but I didn't care. "Here, kitty, kitty."

"Hi, Jenna." Katie, my friend and the head chef at the Nook Café, taller than me and larger all over, arrived with a tray of delectable homemade candies to give away to afternoon customers. "What are you looking for?"

"A cat yowled. Do you see it?"

"No, but don't worry. I'll bet it was a mouser. They're tough. Someone stepped on its tail, that's all."

Then why did a shiver run down my spine?

"C'mon." Katie nudged my knee with her toe. "Lose the frown. Cats are resilient. Remember that litter of six we found when we were kids?"

I'd wanted to bring them all home, but Katie reminded me that my mother was allergic. We put the kittens in a box and went house to house to find them new families.

"You're right," I conceded. Not hearing another screech, I scrambled to my feet and brushed off my hands.

Katie hitched her chin and chuckled; her wildly curly hair shook. "Fix your witch hat. It's lopsided."

I righted the hat, a little gold number I'd crafted together with felt, ribbon, and wire. Though I wasn't much of a cook yet, I was an artist. Oil paints and clay were my preferred mediums, but I wasn't bad with a pair of scissors and hot glue.

"Better." Katie shoved the tray of goodies my way. "Try one. I've brought *Iron Chef*-inspired maple mascarpone brittle."

I downed a crunchy piece and hummed my appreciation. "Wow."

Katie set the tray on the table beside the various Halloween-themed cookbooks, kitchen utensils, and colorful salt shakers and pepper mills I'd brought from the shop. Each year at Halloween, the Winsome Witches—they weren't really witches—held a number of charity events, culminating in an annual fund-raising luncheon, which was scheduled a few days from now. Throughout the week, the group asked that all attendees open their designer handbags and *give, give, give*. Prior to the luncheon, the community of Crystal Cove got into the spirit, too. The Cookbook Nook was planning a couple of family events. On one day, Katie would lead a candy-making class. On another, we were featuring a potion-making demonstration as well as a magic show to entertain the kiddies. In addition, the local groomer and pet rescue group sponsored the Black Cat Parade, and each shop in town participated in the annual Spookiest Window Display contest, which reminded me: I needed to get cracking on that. One more thing to add to my to-do list. Swell.

Glass shattered.

I gasped. My heart started to chug. "What now? Is it the cat?"

"Nope." Katie pointed toward the candle maker's booth, where a woman was trying to sweep up the remains of an antique mirror. "Poor thing." Katie *tsked*. "Like that will do any good. No matter what, she's got seven years of bad luck."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Of course, I do. Superstitions aren't conjured out of thin air. Centuries of folklore create them. Do you remember back in eighth grade how we used to dash past the cemetery holding our breaths?"

Did I ever. We believed ghosts would follow us home. I shuddered again. Why was I so jumpy? I shook off the bad vibes and squared my shoulders. "Superstitions, like wives' tales, are exactly that, fabricated to instill fear."

Katie lasered me with a cynical look. "Hold on a sec. Aren't you the one who used to wear only white to take tests in your senior year?"

I grinned. "That was just savvy wardrobe sense."

"How do you feel when a black cat crosses your path?"

"Lucky."

"Liar," Katie teased.

"Let's end this discussion, okay?" I eyed our display table, which Katie had rearranged to make room for the goodies tray. She could plate food better than anyone, but her display styling left something to be desired. Gingerly, I regrouped the cookbooks and drew the pumpkin-shaped salt shakers and pepper mills to the front. Voila.

Customers started to flock to us.

"Ooh, how cute," was a common phrase, and, "Wow, I had no idea there were so many cookbook choices."

Neither did I until I opted to leave my advertising job in San Francisco and move home to Crystal Cove to help my aunt open a culinary bookshop and cafe. Best choice of my life. Especially now, after discovering the truth about my deceased husband and his dismal business—*life*—decisions. I needed family, and I needed friends. To remain in San Francisco, alone with my memories, wouldn't have been, well, *fun*. I wanted to move upward and onward. *Too-ra-loo*, as my aunt would say.

"I love this time of year," Katie said.

"Because we can dress up?"

Katie rarely dressed simply, preferring checkers and stripes. For the faire, however, she had donned a black dress. She also wore a silver *Wizard of Oz* necklace. You know the one I mean, with the witch riding the broom.

"No, silly," Katie said. "Because making sweets is one of my favorite things to do. Chocolate witches. Cinnamon-candied apples. Caramel popcorn balls. Yum." Katie moved a salt shaker and ogled me, daring me to reposition it. I controlled the impulse. Hard to do. "How about you?" she went on. "Do you like Halloween?"

"Of course." I treasured fond memories. My mother had loved to make costumes. She would choose a theme. My sister and brother and I were her guinea pigs. One year we were, indeed, that—the three little pigs. I was the bricklayer. Another year, we were characters right out of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I demanded to be Lucy Pevensie, Queen of Narnia. My brother was Aslan, the sage lion. My sister was Jadis, the White Witch, which was, I must admit, appropriate. Whitney could be an ice queen.

"What's your favorite costume ever?" Katie asked.

I didn't have to think long. "Glinda, the Good Witch of the North."

"I remember that one. It was so cool." Katie and I were lifelong friends, although we took a few years off during college for bad behavior—mine, for not keeping in touch. We reconnected a few months ago when I hired her for the position of chef at the Nook. "You had a crown and wore a bubble from the top of your head to your waist."

I'd looked a bit like a see-through beach ball. Fortunately, my mother possessed enough foresight to cut air holes in the bubble so I could breathe. My crown, which was coveted by my peers, glistened with *jewels*—stones my mother had gathered on a local hiking trip.

"Don't you love this inn, by the way?" Katie said.

"I do. It's got good vibes."

"Aha. So, you do believe in woo-woo stuff."

I cut her a wry look. "No, I don't."

"Do, too."

"Don't."

The Crystal Cove Inn, one of the original establishments in town, was a charming bed-and-breakfast made of stone and wood. The grounds reminded me of an estate right out of a Jane Austen novel. Like many of the buildings in Crystal Cove, the inn was painted white and sported a red-tiled roof. The hillside behind the inn boasted forests of Douglas fir, oak, and maple trees. The inn's gardens were filled with azaleas and hydrangeas, though none were in bloom in October. Nestled beneath the plants were masses of blue asters, autumn crocus, and assorted wildflowers.

Katie gestured to the crowd. "Don't you adore all the witches' costumes? Everyone looks so festive."

Each participant, whether at the luncheon or the faire, had been asked to wear a decorative witch hat.

A pair of women in matching silver witch hats stopped by our booth to purchase a specialty cookbook we had stocked for Halloween: *The Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook: From Cauldron Cakes to Knickerbocker Glory—More Than 150 Magical Recipes for Wizards and Muggles*. Who could resist dining on pumpkin pasties and treacle tart?

The larger woman said, "My nephew is going to love this. He's so into Harry Potter."

"Isn't he twenty-five?" her friend asked.

"He wasn't a reader until Harry came on the scene. He bought each book the day it came out. You never outgrow your first love of books."

How true, I thought. I had devoured the Potter books. Spoiler alert, but Ron and Hermione getting married . . . who'd have guessed?

I slipped one of the bookmarks I'd made with a list of the shop's special events inside the book, offered the ladies a candy from Katie's assortment, and bid them Happy Halloween. The women moved on, giggling like schoolgirls.

An hour later, after I served our three hundredth visitor, I needed a break. Also, I wanted to check in on my aunt, who was giving tarot readings at the far end of the garden. I asked Katie if she would mind tending the booth. She was delighted. The assistant chef that she'd recently hired was working out great. She didn't have to return to the cafe for at least a half hour.

"You're sure?" I said.

"Absolutely. I can go it alone." She grasped one of the salt shakers and spritzed salt

over her left shoulder.

"Why did you do that?"

"For luck. Other than the broken mirror, no other bad things have happened, but"—she winked—"one can never be too careful."

I found Aunt Vera beneath the shade of an elderberry tree, sitting at a table giving tarot card and palm readings. She didn't have ESP, but she loved providing people with possibilities. Though she typically wore a caftan and a turban, my aunt had gotten into the spirit of the event by donning a purple witch costume and purple hat adorned with antique lace and silk flowers. Of course, she was also wearing her phoenix amulet. She never went anywhere without it. Her table looked fabulously exotic, covered with a rich purple cloth, on top of which sat a crystal ball surrounded by an array of polished glass stones and tarot cards.

With her face fixed in concentration, Aunt Vera addressed a woman whose hand she was holding. "He's going to love you forever," she said.

"Really?" Bingo Bedelia was one of my aunt's longtime friends. She got her quirky name in what my aunt described as a lengthy but funny story; her real name was Barbara. "You swear?"

"On the cover of one of your dusty old Bibles."

Bingo was the owner of Aunt Teek's, a popular antiques and collectibles shop near the center of town. She was also the second-in-command for the Winsome Witches' event. With her ruby red hair pulled off her face and her black witch hat pitched back off her forehead, I couldn't help but notice Bingo's very prominent, knobby chin—what many called a lantern jaw.

Bingo frowned. "Don't lie to me."

"You know I wouldn't."

Bingo, like my aunt, had never married. Neither was a spinster, just unlucky in love. I didn't know if Bingo had been jilted as a younger woman or whether or she had lost the love of her life. My aunt had suffered a double whammy.

"Look here. Your love line is strong." Aunt Vera drew her finger along Bingo's palm. "I assure you, he knows you are a treasure."

Bingo caught sight of me and flushed the color of her hair. "Hello, Jenna. Are you listening in?"

"Trying to catch some tips," I quipped.

"Whatever you do, cherish your man."

I had, but he died. There was a handsome guy in town I was interested in, a former chef who switched careers and now owned Bait and Switch Fishing and Sport Supply Store. We'd known each other only a short time, but I sizzled with desire whenever I was around him.

"There are so few good ones," Bingo added. "Mine"—recently, Bingo had become engaged to a darling pastor everyone in town referred to as the Reverend—"is such a sweetie pie. I don't know what I'd do without him."

A plump forty-something woman sneaked up behind Bingo and gripped her shoulders. "You'd die."

Bingo shrieked.

The woman, Pearl Thornton, cackled; her black witch hat made her hair appear as white as snow. "Did I scare you, Barbara Bedelia?" Pearl was a therapist in town—mine,

as well as others'. I was seeing her to learn coping skills. Being a widow, at any age, wasn't easy.

"You know you did, and you'll call me Bingo, if you know what's good for you."

Bingo pulled her hand free from my aunt's grasp and shook a finger at Pearl.

"Or what?" Pearl said.

Bingo popped her finger as if pulling a trigger. "Bang! You're dead."

Pearl laughed heartily. So did Bingo. She wasn't angry. How could she be? She and Pearl were dear friends. Pearl was the High Priestess of the Winsome Witches.

"Do you need me for a prep meeting?" Bingo asked.

"No, relax. Enjoy." Right after Pearl's husband died, she founded the Winsome Witches and wrangled her friends to participate. I don't think anyone had foreseen what a huge success the annual week of events would be.

"Are all of you ready for the"—Pearl rested the tip of her finger to her mouth—"haunted walk on Tuesday?" She teetered a bit. "It's going to be *spoo-oo-ooky*." The event planners had scheduled an evening tour to visit Crystal Cove's historic sites. "If you don't watch out, someone might"—she wiggled her fingers in Bingo's face—"scare you."

"Stop it." Bingo batted her friend's fingers away. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No."

I wasn't so sure. Pearl appeared a little off-balance.

Suddenly, she clutched her chest. Her eyes widened. She gasped for breath. Without warning, she crumpled to the ground. Bingo, who had been a nurse before she moved to

Crystal Cove to open her dream shop, crouched beside Pearl. She grabbed her wrist. Just as she pressed two fingers against Pearl's throat, Pearl bolted to a sitting position. Bingo fell backward on her rump.

Pearl roared with laughter. "I'm not dead, you goon."

Bingo's mouth fell open. "Why, you—"

My aunt leaped to a stand and said, "What on earth?"

Pearl continued to laugh. "I'm sorry. It's almost Halloween."

"Pranks are for April Fools' Day," Bingo chided.

"C'mon. Can't anybody take a joke?"

"Dying is no joke!"

"Of course it's not," Pearl stammered. "But you mimed pulling a trigger a second ago, and I thought—"

"You could have given us all a heart attack."

"But I didn't, and it's just . . ." Pearl's mouth drew into a grim line. Her gaze turned serious. "I apologize. I'm a little punch-drunk, that's all. I—" She hesitated.

"Out with it," Bingo demanded.

"I just learned the results of some tests. I've been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. I know it's not life-threatening. It's all about having the right amount of insulin in my system, but the report sounded so stark. I've never watched my weight. I should have"—she patted her plump stomach—"but I haven't. I simply needed to do something to lighten my day. I didn't mean to frighten you so much. Forgive me?" She reached for Bingo's hand and squeezed.

"Are you going to be okay?" Bingo said.

"Of course. I've started my medication, and I'm taking the advice I give to my patients. Positive thinking." She eyed me. One of her favorite mantras was: *All things level out in time*. She lumbered to her feet and offered a hand to Bingo, who accepted.

Bingo brushed off her dress and said, "Come with me. Let's get a cup of tea, and I'll fill you in on some dietary tips. Number one, remember that stress can raise glucose levels." The pair walked off, arm in arm.

My aunt turned to me and kissed me on both cheeks. "Well, that was fun. *Not*."

I laughed. "I have to say I was shocked Pearl would do something like that, as rational as she always is."

"Medical surprises can turn a person's world upside down." Aunt Vera glanced at her watch. "My, my. Time flies when you're having a ball. Speaking of which, I've been cleaning up at my table. I've earned over three hundred dollars for the cause." She was charging a dollar per palm or tarot card reading. "How about The Cookbook Nook booth?"

"We're doing great. The *Harry Potter* cookbook, as expected, is a best seller, and we've sold tons of herbal potion books. I think everyone attending the faire is drawn to the mystical."

"Wonderful. Now . . . as long as nothing else goes wrong . . ." Her face, normally radiant with hope, turned grim.

A chill ran through me. "Why would you say that?"

"A moment ago, when Pearl arrived, I got the worst feeling."

A breath caught in my chest. "What kind of feeling?"

"I was all itchy, and the light up here"—she tapped her temple—"went extremely

dark."

"Maybe you were sensing Pearl's prank."

Aunt Vera nodded in agreement. "You're right. Silly me." She kissed her fingers and tossed the imaginary kiss to the wind, something I'd seen her do all of my life. She said it was a good way to return bad energy to the universe.

In spite of her gesture, an uneasy feeling surged through me. Desperate to shake it off, I said, "It's a good thing no more mirrors have broken."

My aunt rapped the table. "Knock on wood."