Chapter 1

"Tigger, look!" I shouted and then whispered, "Scary." I pointed out the driver's window of my VW Beetle at the supersized blow-up Santa that towered in front of Jake Chapman's white Victorian beach house. I loved his house with its dormer windows and wraparound porch. It was situated at the north end of the strand and had a beautiful view of the ocean.

My ginger cat, not frightened in the least, stood in my lap on his hind feet, his front paws propped on the driver's window and nose sniffing the air. For over an hour, we had been cruising the streets of Crystal Cove while listening to a variety of Christmas music on the radio. Currently, Johnny Mathis was singing one of my favorites, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas." After touring five neighborhoods, Tigger and I had finally made it back to our own.

"The rest of his decorations are pretty, too, aren't they, Tig-Tig?"

Old Jake—as many in town call him—had affixed twinkling lights along the eaves and around every window, as well as along all of the branches of his leafless crape myrtles. A pair of gigantic candy canes flanked the end of his walkway. Wreaths hung on every door. "It might be the prettiest we've seen."

Tigger meowed then yawned.

"Ready to call it a night, pal?"

He purred his assent.

I made a U-turn to head toward home. "Most of our neighbors do Christmas up right, don't you think?" I'd set battery-operated candles in all of my windows and hung a beautiful berry and celosia wreath on my cottage door. "Not a lot of *bah humbug* types around here," I

said. Of course, a few hadn't decorated for religious reasons.

At the undecorated house across the street, I caught sight of Jake's neighbor, Emmett Atwater, peeking furtively between a break in the drapes. He reminded me of a weasel with his needle nose and beady eyes. The tip of his cigarette glowed as he inhaled. I didn't think he was gawking at me in particular. I wasn't the only one driving with headlights off to take in the festive décor. Catching me staring, he snapped the drapes closed.

"Can't please everyone," I murmured, recalling a time a few years ago when I'd worked at Taylor & Squibb Advertising and had championed a campaign for Laser Luminescence. The product was a type of lighting system that could be set up anywhere on the property. It would project moving holiday images on a house or garage door or even a tree: elves, snowflakes, sugar plum fairies, you name it. The owner of Laser Luminescence had a rollicking sense of humor. He thought it would be fun to make one of the actor *neighbors* carp about how bright and garish the lights were, so the actor *home owner,* purely to irk the neighbor, put out hot chocolate for all who came to admire his lights. Needless to say, the foot traffic drove the cranky neighbor nuts.

"Poor Mr. Atwater." I nuzzled Tigger under the chin. "Maybe Jake should give him a few shares of his Apple stock to appease him." Jake could afford the gesture. He was a self-made millionaire.

Tigger meowed.

I nodded. "You're right. Time for bed. No more dawdling. We have a big day ahead."

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Tuesday morning, after taking a brisk walk on the beach and eating an English muffin slathered with cream cheese and homemade cranberry sauce, I donned my favorite Kelly green sweater, a pair of jeans, glittery holiday earrings, and flip-flops—yes, even in December I liked to wear sandals—and drove to the Cookbook Nook, the culinary bookstore I now owned with my aunt.

Tuesday was typically my day off, but I couldn't afford to take it this week. The Crystal Cove Christmas Festival would get under way tomorrow and run until Sunday evening. Every day shoppers would be out in droves because Christmas was two weeks away. *Tick-tock*. We were almost ready. We'd set out numerous Christmas-themed cookbooks as well as a few mysteries featuring the holiday, like *A Cajun Christmas Killing* by Ellen Byron, *The Diva Wraps it Up* by Krista Davis, and *Read and Gone: A Haunted Library Mystery* by Allison Brook. The latter didn't offer any recipes, but I adored ghost stories.

Get a move on, Jenna Hart, I urged. I needed to tweak our window display and unpack dozens of boxes of new cookbooks and gift items.

I stepped out of my car with Tigger tucked under my arm and drew in a deep breath. How I loved the crisp air in winter. I found it invigorating and hopeful, like good things were in store. Singing "Fa-la-la-la-la," I pushed open the door to the shop, weaved through the bookshelves to the children's corner, and plunked Tigger on the kitty condo my father had built for him.

After stowing my purse and turning on a music loop of Christmas instrumental music—the first in the queue was a bright version of "The First Noel"—I moved to the display window and examined what I'd created yesterday. Wreaths were the theme the mayor had designated for the festival this year. She wanted a wreath hanging on every shop door. A few

days before Christmas, a panel of judges would choose a winner. All of the shops in Fisherman's Village, the charming white, two-story complex abutting the ocean where the Cookbook Nook and the Nook Café are located, had gotten on board. Beaders of Paradise, a beading and craft store, had fashioned a beautiful wreath using broaches, rhinestones, and pearls. It glistened in the morning sunlight. The surf shop had made a wreath with toy-sized surfboards. The retro movie theater on the second floor had cleverly decorated an old film reel with ribbon. Vines, the wine bar above the café, had adorned artificial vines with frosted grapes and twinkling lights.

For ours, I had commissioned a local artist to create a wreath using miniature cookbooks, tiny salt and pepper shakers, aprons, and cookie jars. A huge red bow trimmed the top. Perfect!

The window display, on the other hand, needed work. Yesterday I'd set out a white picket fence and a fake blanket of snow. Atop that, I'd positioned a number of cookbooks, including *Jamie Oliver's Christmas Cookbook: For the Best Christmas Ever*. Women were our primary customers, and over the course of the last year and a half, after leaving my advertising job to join my aunt in this venture, I'd learned that Jamie Oliver's handsome face was an instant lure to women. The recipes in the cookbook were a lure, too. I had my eye on trying either the roast goose or the turkey wellington. Granted, I was not a gourmet cook—yet. My mother had done all the cooking when I was growing up; I hadn't needed to learn until I'd moved home to Crystal Cove. I was still challenged by ten-ingredient recipes, but I was becoming bolder by the day.

"Cookies," I said aloud. "We need a plate of wreath-shaped cookies. And a set of cookie cutters. And a gingerbread house with wreaths on all its doors."

“Talking to yourself is a sign of dementia,” my aunt crooned as she came into the shop, the folds of her silver caftan rustling with every step. She was carrying the matching turban.

“Hogwash. I talk to myself all the time.”

“I rest my case.”

“LOL,” I said, using the abbreviated form for *laughing out loud*.

She strode to me and peeked at the display. “Hmm.” She tapped her chin. “You need glitter. And twinkling lights. And a north star.”

“A star. Of course.” I kissed her cheek. “You’re brilliant.”

“Tosh.”

My aunt was truly brilliant and she was wicked smart when it came to finance. She was top of her class and valedictorian in college. Like Jake, she had invested well over the years. In addition, she had a refined sixth sense. She enjoyed telling fortunes—hence, the caftan and turban—and she could read auras. I adored her and was thrilled she had convinced me to give up advertising and move home to Crystal Cove. I’d lost my smile. It felt good to have it back.

I hurried to the storage room, put the items my aunt had recommended into a box, and set the box on the sales counter by the antique register. Next, I raced through the breezeway that connected the shop to the Nook Café to put in an order for wreath-shaped cookies and a gingerbread house. Chef Katie Casey, one of my childhood friends, assured me she was up to the task. She would have my goodies ready in less than two hours.

Back at the shop, I plugged in my glue gun to warm it up. By that time, Aunt Vera had donned her turban and had settled onto a chair by the vintage kitchen table near the entry. She was straightening a jigsaw puzzle that featured a wintry Dickensian Christmas, complete

with vendors hawking food and gifts.

She glanced up. “Where’s Bailey?”

Bailey was one of my best friends and the lead salesperson at the shop.

“She asked for the day off. She and her hubby are house hunting.” Bailey and Tito Martinez recently married. So far, they were doing swimmingly. His small apartment, however, wasn’t going to be big enough for them in the long run. They were talking about starting a family. Yep, Bailey, who months ago had balked at the idea of kids, had been won over by her husband’s zeal. To get a jump on motherhood, she was reading every book she could find on the subject. I reminded her that her mother was one of the best role models in the world. Even so, she wanted to bone up so she wouldn’t screw up.

“And Tina?” Aunt Vera rose to her feet, righted her turban, and grabbed a feather duster, which she began swishing back and forth across the bookshelves.

“I’m here!” Tina Gump, a svelte young woman who was working for us while she took culinary classes at night—she hoped to become a chef—waltzed in. “Merry almost Christmas.”

“Why are you here?” I asked. “It’s your day off.”

“In December? Are you nuts? I’ll take a few extra days in January when we’re slow.” She lifted a candy cane apron off a hook, pressed it to her chest, and twirled like she was dancing with an imaginary partner. Tendrils from her casual updo wafted in the breeze.

“Aren’t you chipper?” I said. “What’s up?”

“I had a date.”

“With the poetry guy?”

“Yes.”

During the Renaissance Festival a few months ago, she'd fallen for a young man who delivered scrolls of poetry. His real day job was teaching at the junior college.

"He's so dreamy. Did I tell you his specialty is marine biology? He owns dozens of fish. He has a huge aquarium at his place."

"You've visited his apartment?" I waggled my eyebrows at her.

"No, not yet. *Pfft."* Tina flicked a tendril of hair off her face. "We're taking it slow. But I've seen pictures. He has dozens of pictures. By the way . . ." She didn't continue. She rehung the apron, fixed the sales tag, flung her purse on a shelf beneath the cash register, and started in on sorting money into the register drawers.

"Go on. You said, 'By the way.'" I returned to the display case with my box of decorations and trusty glue gun.

"Right. Sorry. I got distracted. Anyway, when I was at Latte Luck Café this morning, I saw Jake with a guy who looks just like him. He was really tan and scrawny. But he wasn't dressed very nicely. I think Jake was treating him to coffee."

"And . . ." I asked leadingly.

"They were talking in muffled voices, like they had a secret."

"Okay."

"A bad secret." She gazed earnestly at me. "The other guy seemed frightened."

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Ever since Tina told me about seeing Jake and his friend, a worrisome knot had taken up residence in my stomach. No amount of Christmas music was easing it. Decorating my three-

foot-high Douglas fir wasn't helping, either. So when someone began frantically knocking on my cottage door, my sensors went on high alert.

Heart racing, I called, "Who's there?" I knew it wasn't my boyfriend, Rhett, or my aunt. Rhett was in Napa Valley visiting his family. My aunt was having dinner with Deputy Appleby.

"Jenna, open up!" a woman with a low-pitched voice shouted. Not Bailey. Her voice was higher in tone, plus she and Tito were making candy cane cookies to donate to the homeless shelter.

"Jenna!" More knocking.

I rose to my feet. The woman knew my name. It wasn't posted on my mailbox or the door of my cottage. Wiping my hands on my jeans, I stole to the door. "Who is it?"

"Me," the woman replied.

"And me!" a girl trilled, giving me a hint of who might be assaulting my door.

Tigger scampered to my side and batted my leg with his tail.

"Don't worry, buddy." I peeked through the peephole and confirmed my guess. "This is friend, not foe." But not someone I was expecting. Whitney. Winsome, willful Whitney. My older sister. Light to my dark and curvier all over. And her eldest daughter, Lacy.

I finger-combed my hair, shook out my shoulders to loosen any kinks—I hated looking tense around my sister—and whipped open the door. The pretty wreath I'd hung on the door swung to and fro. "What a surprise."

My sister hugged me briefly, the top of her head barely reaching my chin, after which she breezed into my cottage. The tails of her mohair cardigan flapped backward like wings. *New and homemade,* I supposed. Whitney was a whiz with knitting needles.

“Nice wreath,” Whitney said. “Did you make it?”

“I bought it.” I was an artist, and in my spare time I painted, but during the holiday season I barely had time to breathe.

Lacy, a fourteen-year-old who roamed the earth under a dark cloud, slogged inside after her. She matched her mother in skin tone and hair color, but she was taller than Whitney by at least four inches and apparently didn’t like her mother’s neutral color palette. Her attire consisted of black leggings, black army-style boots, black tank top, and black scarf knotted at the neck. A silver ring adorned her nose. Black orchid tattoos graced her shoulders. Wasn’t she cold? She offered me a slim smile—no hug—and instantly scooped up Tigger. “Hey, kitty, kitty.”

“Tigger,” I said. “His name is Tigger.”

“Tigger,” Lacy cooed. “You are so cute.”

I peered outside searching for more of Whitney’s family. I didn’t see a car. The merry Christmas lights illuminating the roof on my aunt’s house would have revealed one. “Where’s Spencer?” Her husband.

“He’s dropping our stuff at Dad’s house and then has an errand to run.”

“Dad’s house?”

“That’s where we’re staying while he’s on the cruise. Didn’t he tell you?”

My father and his significant other, Lola, Bailey’s mother, were on a river cruise along the Danube. I was so excited for them. He and my mother, rest her soul, hadn’t traveled as much as they would have liked. Lola had renewed his spirit to explore. They would be back on Christmas Eve.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Geez!” Whitney huffed. “I told Dad to tell you. Lacy is competing in the Christmas a cappella event at the festival in Azure Park. Twenty groups from up and down California have qualified for it.”

“Congratulations, Lacy.”

She grunted.

“Of course, Lacy’s group isn’t like typical a cappella groups,” my sister went on. “It’s very edgy. They do a lot of hard rock.” Her disdain was evident.

Lacy threw her mother a vile look. “We’re good.”

“Where’s Lily?” I asked, referring to my other niece, a twelve-year-old tomboy who resembled me more than she did her mother. Dark shoulder-length hair. Cute turned-up nose. No curves.

“She begged to stay with her friend in Los Angeles. She hates going to competitions with her sister. She wants to practice her pitching.” Lily was an ace softball player. “You know kids.”

Actually, I didn’t. Other than the ones that frequented the Cookbook Nook, I was at a loss. Oh, sure, I’d done a little babysitting growing up, but I’d never spent lengths of time with children. Did I want them? Rhett and I hadn’t broached the subject yet. We’d recently started talking about tying the knot. After my husband’s death, I’d been gun shy about committing to a relationship.

Whitney shrugged out of her sweater, revealing a pretty cream blouse tucked into coffee-colored trousers. She always dressed picture perfect. She fluffed her honey blonde tresses and eyed my place. It was the first time she’d visited since I’d moved home to Crystal Cove. “It’s tiny.”

“It’s perfect,” I countered.

“Small tree.”

“In scale with the cottage,” I said in singsong fashion, one of my coping mechanisms with my sister. Over the years, I had learned to deflect her dismissals. I turned to Lacy. “Are you excited about the competition?”

“Sure.” Her single word lacked conviction.

I tilted my head. Was she singing for her enjoyment or for her mother’s?

“Got anything to eat?” Whitney asked, making a beeline for my refrigerator.

“I was getting ready to make Mom’s meat loaf. Want to join me?”

“Why don’t I throw it together?” she offered.

“I can handle it. I’ve been practicing.”

Whitney wrinkled her nose. I scrunched mine in response. *Sisters*.

“Should you let Spencer know you’re staying for dinner?” I asked.

“He’ll figure it out.”

I grabbed her arm. “Hold it. What’s with the attitude? What’s going on?” My sister liked to have tabs on her family at all times.

Whitney glanced at Lacy, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the fireplace taunting Tigger with a piece of string, and then hooked her index finger at me to follow her to the front porch.

I did and closed the door. “Spill.”

Whitney blinked back tears. “I think Spencer is having an affair.”