

Chapter 1

“Aunt Vera, stop twirling me,” I yelled.

But she didn't. She continued to spin me in a circle. My eyes pinballed in my head. My braids whipped my cheeks—right, left, right, left. I didn't ordinarily wear braids, but cleaning up a shop that closed thirty years ago, over a year before my birth, was almost as dirty a business as having a garage sale. I had dressed for the occasion: cut-offs and tee shirt, so I wasn't worried about my clothes.

“Stop,” I repeated.

My aunt cackled with glee. “Jenna Starrett Hart, I am so excited.”

No kidding. The striped walls of the bookshop blurred together; I felt trapped in a

kaleidoscope. Chipped walls painted baby blue, olive green, and a weird fleshy pink color flashed around me. Normally, I liked twirling and dancing. I adored music—rock and roll, country, and big Hollywood musical classics. My mother used to play the radio full blast when she drove me to art classes and we would sing and car-dance to our hearts' content. But I had returned to my childhood town of Crystal Cove less than an hour ago, and I hadn't found my sea legs yet. Warmer than normal August temperatures weren't helping my equilibrium.

“Too-ra-loo,” my aunt sang merrily. Her turban flopped to and fro. Copious strands of beads clacked against her phoenix amulet. Her royal blue caftan flared out around her large frame. “I have such a good feeling about our new venture. Sing with me. Too-ra-loo.”

“Too-ra-loo,” I croaked as I tried to slow her down by skidding on my heels. Three-

dollar flip-flops didn't win the prize for gaining traction. Why couldn't I be a tennis shoe person?

Except when exercising, I never wore them. "I'm feeling seasick." The breakfast burrito that I had wolfed down on the short drive south from San Francisco was rebelling.

"Oh, my, you do look a little pookie." Without warning, Aunt Vera released me.

Like a top, I gyrated out of control and landed chest-first against the shop's ancient oak sales counter. Air spewed out of me. My butter yellow tee shirt inched up over my low-slung cut-offs. I wriggled the tee shirt down and checked my body for broken bones—none as far as I could tell, but my abdominals would ache for days.

Aunt Vera clapped. She wasn't a sadist; she was ecstatic. "I'm so glad you said yes."

Yes, to moving back to Crystal Cove. Yes, to moving in to the cottage beside her seaside home. Yes, to helping her revitalize the aging cookbook shop that resided in the quaint Crystal Cove Fisherman's Village.

"Now"—she pushed a plate of oatmeal caramel cookies that sat on the counter toward me, nabbing one for herself—"let's discuss you." Aunt Vera had no children; she had *adopted* me, by default. She nibbled and assessed all five-foot-eight inches of me. "Cookie?"

How could I resist? My aunt excelled as a baker. She had perhaps the largest collection of cookie cookbooks I had ever seen. A favorite I loved to browse was *One Girl Cookies*. The history of the beloved Brooklyn bakery enthralled me, and the pictures were luscious. I popped a bite-sized cookie into my mouth—the caramel chips added just the right amount of yum—and I brushed what had to be an inch of store dust off my nose. After swallowing, I said, "You meant, let's discuss my vision, didn't you?"

Aunt Vera clucked her tongue, which sent apprehension zinging through me. A week ago, I had sent her a business plan that she had gushed over. Was she changing her mind? Granted, I was not a cook. Far from it. But I was not inept in the kitchen...exactly. I wasn't

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afraid to boil water. I knew how to make the basics: Jell-O, meatloaf, a cake from a mix. I could read a recipe, and I appreciated the nuances, but my talent ended there. On the plus side, I enjoyed an educated palette. I had tasted everything from fried alligator to raw eel, and I had savored many bottles of fine wine. Perhaps a few too many. Could my blithely carefree aunt finally see my shortcomings? Was she having doubts about me?

“Aunt Vera, speak.”

She arched a dyed red eyebrow.

“What are you sensing?” I said. “Disaster?”

Aunt Vera spent her days giving psychic readings, hence the turban and caftan get-up, not that she could tell people much more about their futures than I could; she didn't have a direct connect to the other world—no ghosts pals, no spirit guides. On the other hand, the way she looked at me gave me the creeps.

“Aunt Vera, c'mon. What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong.”

“You're frowning.”

“So are you. It's the dust. Be gone!” She swatted the air. To my surprise, she didn't add:

Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo, like one of Cinderella's fairy godmothers. I remembered prom night when she had surprised my date and me by arriving with a horse-drawn carriage.

She swore she conjured the rig out of mice and a pumpkin.

“Truth, how do you feel about my vision for the shop?” I said.

“It’s brilliant. You’re a wizard. Problem solved.”

Phew. Prior to returning to Crystal Cove, I had worked in advertising. Therein lay my talent. Art, conceptualizing, and glib wording. The dancing, singing popcorn campaign for

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Poppity-Pop? Mine. Little bursts of sunshine doing cartwheels above an orange grove to promote the citrus industry? Mine.

“But I didn’t say let’s discuss your vision,” Aunt Vera went on. “I said, let’s discuss *you*. You weren’t thriving in...” Her cherub face flushed radish-red. She wasn’t the kind of person to say anything without enhancing the statement with optimism, but words had escaped her lips, so she finished. “...in the City.”

The City, San Francisco, the gem of the West. A city filled with life and laughter and high times. Super if you’re single. Great if you’re married. Not cool if you’re a widow.

Aunt Vera petted my dusty cheek. “How are you?”

“Fine. Dandy. Ready to thrive.” Choosing action over pondering life’s losses, I smacked my hands together and said, “I see you have everything we need to start painting.”

“I followed your list to the letter.” Aunt Vera may have been the owner of Fisherman’s Village, but she made me the manager of the cookbook store. Pushing sixty-five, she didn’t want the added burden. “And, surprise, surprise”—she twirled a finger at me—“your father is coming to help.”

I gulped. *Put the past behind, behind, behind.* “How is Dad?”

Aunt Vera sidled behind the cash register, an antique National with honeysuckle inlay, and pushed the buttons like a little kid on an elevator. *Ping, ping, ping.* She slammed the drawer between each ping.

I raced to her and gripped her wrists. “Stop.”

“It’s sticking.”

“We’ll fix it.” I should have purchased a new digital register, but the antique one looked handsome on the sales counter. I repeated, “How is Dad?”

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“Your father? He’s great. Wonderful. He’s in need of a new project.”

A little over two years ago—in March, to be exact—my mother and my husband died...within weeks of each other. My mother, who was never a smoker but perished from lung cancer, was the gem and light of my youth. I attended her funeral and left the next day to deal with my husband’s death alone. I know, I know. I was a horrible, neglectful daughter, and I owed my father better. He was heartbroken without my mother. My pragmatic sister, who lived in Los Angeles, was a saint and stood by Dad’s side. Even my hippie-dippie brother was on hand for Dad more than I was. Since the funerals, Dad and I had spoken a couple of times and, currently, I was off all antidepressants—□for three months I had taken the herbal kinds with Latin names I couldn’t pronounce; I stopped when I decided life, even alone, was still worth living—□but I still hadn’t found my true smile. I came home to Crystal Cove to see if it was hiding there.

“You look worried, dear. Please don’t be. He’s not coming until the day before we’re set to open. Besides, forgive and forget, that’s your father’s motto.”

Since when? I wondered.

“He’s in good shape. When he’s not running his hardware store or offering his services as a handyman, he’s busy with a food collection project. But he’ll need a new project soon, ergo, The Cookbook Nook.”

Ergo, me. Dad’s career as an FBI analyst hadn’t padded the coffers; his post-retirement work as an FBI consultant had. However, ten years into his retirement stint, he grew bored with consulting and, in addition to buying Nuts and Bolts, which the previous owner sold for a song, he devoted himself to all sorts of humanitarian projects. A man of his vim and vigor needed to keep busy.

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“His hair isn’t as black as yours any longer,” my aunt went on, “but he’s still got the Hart bright eyes and the Hart wit. He’s standing tall, shoulders back. No osteoporosis for him, no sir.” She demonstrated and saluted.

Was I slumping? Why was I reading hidden meaning into everything she said? Because I lacked vim and vigor, that’s why. I straightened my spine.

“There are quite a few women in town who wish to attract my little brother’s eye,” Aunt Vera said, beaming like an older sister should. “But it’s way too early for that. He was devoted to your mother.”

Theirs had been a love that had set the standard.

“By the by, your father adores your suggestions for the shop’s design.”

“He does?” That surprised me. Dad always offered pointers. I had settled on a sunset-colored theme of coral and aqua. Aunt Vera suggested we add pale cream seashells. She had already sketched them on the walls. The café that connected at an angle to the

shop would be painted a soft peach. I chose a border of pastel boats for the upper rim of the café; it would give just enough splash without being garish.

“Did I tell you your father walks every morning?” Aunt Vera said. “Same as you.”

“I run occasionally, too. And ride the bicycle.” The bike I rode, an old relic with a basket and hand bell, had belonged to my mother. In the City, I trekked from my apartment to Golden Gate Park. A challenge but worth it. “Say, you should stroll on the beach with me.” The ocean was a stone’s throw from Aunt Vera’s back porch.

“Oh, my, no. Exercise and I don’t mix.” My aunt swirled her spacious caftan. “It messes up my chakras.”

I grinned. “Let’s get to work.”

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We swept and vacuumed the floors, counters, and shelves, and we dusted and stacked the old cookbooks in boxes. Many of the once-beautiful cookbooks could be salvaged, but in my business model, I planned to have lots of fresh new titles on hand. Ours wouldn’t be a store where only your mother’s *Betty Crocker Cookbook* would be sold, though we had plenty on hand. We would also sell books by Ina Garten, José Andrés, and Bobby Flay. I wanted cookbooks that featured recipes that sounded exotic or fun: grilled corn poblano salad with chipotle vinaigrette, *tournedos à la béarnaise*, beer and bison burgers with pub cheese, brandy black bottom chiffon pie. We would also stock specialty books that dealt with allergies, food restrictions, and sustainability gardening. I had picked up a few rare books, including an original copy of *The Physiology of Taste* by Brillat-Savarin, the famous cheese maker, and a first edition of *The Joy of Cooking* by Irma S. Rombauer. The bindings for both were in perfect

condition. Dreaming big, bigger, biggest, I intended to feature celebrity chefs as well as local and celebrity cookbook authors. We would have food tastings in the café and perhaps throw a cookout for the town and sit-down dinners for food critics. A few weeks ago, before moving to town, I started generating buzz about The Cookbook Nook. I created a web page. I posted on social networking sites. As I had hoped, locals and tourists were chatting on blogs about The Cookbook Nook.

Aunt Vera said, “I want our little venture to be such a success.”

“I know you do.” I laid out tarps and opened cans of paints. “Tell me something.” “Uh-oh.” She wagged a finger. “Do not glower at me like your father does. What do you want to know?”

“What’s the history of this place?” Once before, I had broached the subject with my mother, but, in a matter of seconds, she had snapped the lid closed on that line of query saying: *It’s your aunt’s private business.* “I know you purchased Fisherman’s Village in the seventies.”

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The L-shaped two-story village, with its elegant columns, white balustrades, boardwalk-style walkways, and brick parking lot had to have cost a pretty penny.

Aunt Vera pressed her lips together.

“I heard a rumor that you bought it so you could specifically own The Cookbook Nook and café. If so, why didn’t you ever open the store?”

Aunt Vera looped a finger under her strands of beads. She twisted them into a fierce figure eight.

“I’ll probe until I find out,” I said. “I’m good at probing.”

“Not now, dear.” She released the beads. “Now is all about you. You are my niece. My beautiful niece. And it is your time to shine. I want to make this exactly like the store you envision, with cookbooks, gadgets, children’s cooking toys, and culinary mysteries and fiction.”

I planned to set up a vintage kitchen table with funky chairs where our guests could sit and pore over recipes or have fun piecing together jigsaw puzzles of delectable food. We would have a reading alcove for fiction enthusiasts, too; I was an avid reader. . I adored the smell of new books; some might call it a fetish. I didn't digest as many books in a year as a librarian, but I could read a book a week. My nightstand to-be-read pile stood eight to ten books high at all times. Also, if we found the right chef for the café, we might even offer cooking classes.

So many ideas; lots of time.

“By the by,” Aunt Vera said, “I expect the shop to thrive. I don’t want to be giving psychic readings well into my golden years.”

“Like you need to.” A fact I did glean from my mother was that Aunt Vera had made a killing in the stock market way back when.

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Aunt Vera didn’t blink an eye. “I want to rest and relax and drink in the scent of the ocean.”

“Mom said that the ocean is part of our soul.” When I was young, my mother used to take me to the beach, our paint kits and canvases in hand.

“She was a special woman,” Aunt Vera said as she began to color in the seashells she had drawn. “How she loved painting seascapes.”

I, on the other hand, thanks to a Degas retrospective that I saw at the age of eight, liked to paint dancing girls. I enjoyed the fluidity of motion and catching girls mid-spin. At nine, I announced that I would become the greatest ballerina artist in the world. It didn't happen; I settled for moderate talent and huge appreciation.

"After we're done here," my aunt said, "let's get you settled into your abode. I've hung new drapes, and I updated the kitchen. The cottage has a new stove and oven."

I flashed her a wicked smile.

"You can learn to cook," she said.

"Who will have the patience to teach me?"

"If you follow a recipe to the letter, it always works."

"Ha! Tell that to someone trying to make an angel food cake. That was one of my first attempts back in high school—a disaster. Can you spell glue?"

"G-l-u-e." Aunt Vera roared. "Oh, that reminds me." She set down her paintbrush, ducked behind the counter, and popped up with a pile of cookbooks. "I've assembled a starter's set for you. A number of them are *Cook's Illustrated*. *The Best 30-Minute Recipe*. *The Best Light Recipe*. Best, best, best." She chuckled. "The smart shopping tips help make a cook's job hassle free. And I adore this one." She shook a bright pink paperback called *Cook Like A Rock Star*:

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125 Recipes, Lessons, and Culinary Secrets. A picture of white-haired Chef Anne Burrell graced the cover. "You've seen her. She stars on that Food Network show."

"Personality up the wazoo."

"That's the one. Love her. In this book"—□ Aunt Vera opened the book to the

index—□“Anne offers all sorts of encouragement and professional tricks. There’s a list of what to

put in your basic pantry, and explanations for all sorts of scary cooking words, like braise and sauté. I’ll start the collection in the storeroom.”

As she carried the cookbooks out of the room, I poured coral paint into a deep-well roller tray, soaked my paint roller in the goo, and started covering over the fleshy pink on the wall behind the sales counter.

In less than an hour, I gave the wall a single coat. I set the roller down and stretched.

Aunt Vera followed suit, groaning audibly with the effort. “You know, your father is quite a chef.”

“Really?” My mother always did the cooking.

“A single man must adjust.”

Yet again, I picked up her veiled meaning. A single woman must adjust, too. Not only did

I need to learn to cook but, like my father, I had to move on and reconnect with the fun part of living. “Did you tell Dad our first celebrity guest is Desiree Divine?”

“I wanted to keep it hush-hush.” Aunt Vera held a finger to her lips. “She’s such a star.”

“She was always Dad’s favorite of my college roommates. They bonded at a Habitat for Humanity project.”

“Her name sounds like a stripper’s.”

I chuckled. “Desiree is always fast to point that out.”

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“Really?”

I would never forget the first day of college. Desiree swept into the dorm room at Cal Poly with such confidence, plunked onto one of the tiny beds, and said, “Let’s dish.”

“I’ve read her profile on the Internet.” Aunt Vera set down her paintbrush and perched on the three-step ladder by the sales counter. She crossed her legs, hoisting her caftan ever so slightly to reveal a brand new pair of Birkenstock sandals. “She says she’s a foodie fashionista who”—my aunt fanned herself—“likes to cook in stilettos and nothing else.”

I rolled my eyes. “I was a party girl, but Desiree was a party expert. I attended a beer bash; she attended a champagne soiree.”

“I love the fact that you keep in touch.”

“We talk about once a month. She was the first person to call after David—” My mouth filled with imaginary cotton balls. I fiddled with my mother’s heart-shaped locket that hung around my neck, unable to finish the sentence, but I knew my aunt understood: *After my husband died in the boating accident.*

When I regrouped, she plunged ahead. Aunt Vera was nothing if not pragmatic. “I have attempted to make Desiree’s eggs and caviar recipe. I’ve failed miserably.”

“At least you’ve dared.” I had eaten the delicacy at a restaurant in San Francisco that mimicked the dish—a lightly poached egg, slipped into a bowl, with a dollop of caviar and two crust-less toasts, drizzled with truffle butter. Melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

“When will she arrive?” Aunt Vera scooped off the ladder and picked up her paintbrush to resume her task.

“In two days. I’ve booked her at the Crystal Cove Inn.”

Crystal Cove was a seaside community, which consisted of three crescent-shaped bays. A range of modest mountains that defined the eastern border of the town trapped ocean moisture and blessed Crystal Cove with a temperate Mediterranean climate. Stores and restaurants and quaint malls, like the Fisherman's Village, lined the roads that paralleled the ocean. Houses, hotels, and numerous bed-and-breakfast inns populated the streets that twisted up the mountains away from town. Fifty years ago, in an effort to unify Crystal Cove, the city council mandated that the buildings be whitewashed and sport red tiled roofs. All but a few residents complied. The town was as pretty as a picture postcard. As I grew up, I didn't think there was a future for me in such a gentle town, but in the eight years since I had graduated college, Crystal Cove burgeoned, and I was willing to give moving home a try. Anything to find that elusive smile.

"Is it true Desiree has received hate mail?" Aunt Vera said.

"If you read the gossip magazines, Desiree has stolen not only a recipe but a boyfriend and a husband. She's anorexic, bulimic, and a fraud, and she's popping pills faster than that actress..." I clicked my fingers trying to come up with the name and failing.

My aunt pulled a pouch from the pocket of her caftan. She brandished it and mumbled something under her breath.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"Casting away the curse."

My pulse—which had calmed down while we painted—spiked. "Is there a curse on The Cookbook Nook?"

"Nonsense. I have a bad feeling about your friend Desiree. Such unwarranted anger and

hatred can destroy a soul. She must beware.”

My aunt’s words sent a shiver down my spine.

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