

## Chapter 1

*Crack! Clatter!* I heard the sound of something falling and glass breaking. Then my cat yowled.

“Tigger!” I raced from the master bedroom, cell phone in hand. “Buddy, are you okay?” I skidded to a stop in the living room and my insides snagged. Not for my ginger cat. He was fine and sitting at the top of the kitty condo looking down at me, mortified. “What happened?”

He mewed.

“I can see that,” I muttered. The painting I’d been working on for the Crystal Cove 5th Annual Art and Wine Festival competition was lying facedown on the floor. The easel it had been propped upon had tipped over and broken the west window. “Dang it.”

Tigger mewed again.

“Don’t worry. I’m not mad at you.” How could I be? He was the most adorable cat in the world. And accidents happened. But I was angry at the universe. I mean, honestly, what else could go wrong?

“Jenna, are you there?” asked my wedding planner, the source of my other woe. Her voice crackled through the cell phone. “Are you okay? It sounded as if glass broke. Is there an intruder? Do you need me to call—”

“I’m fine. It’s not an intruder. It was my cat.” I spotted a ball of yarn near the window. Tigger must have been chasing it and run into a leg of the easel.

“I’m glad to hear you’re okay. Now, about what we were talking about before we were interrupted . . .”

I combed hair off my face, tugged my aqua sweater over my jeans, and shuffled to the canvas. Lifting it by the corners, I inspected the painting. Luckily, the oils had dried completely. I worked

in thin layers and not impasto, using blobs of paint. I placed it on a chair at the dining room table and then sat at one of the other chairs and signaled for Tigger to come to me. He did. To calm myself as well as him, I stroked his head.

“Go on,” I said.

“Regarding the cancellation . . .” Harmony Bold had been arranging Rhett’s and my wedding for a number of months. Everything had been going smoothly until she’d phoned minutes ago to tell me the site for our nuptials in June had to bow out. The recent fire in Napa Valley hadn’t hurt the inn, but the beautiful gardens were covered in ash and wouldn’t recover for a very long time. If Rhett and I were determined to get married at that particular venue, we’d have to wait an entire year. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know.” I checked my watch. I would be late for my art workshop if I didn’t leave in one minute. “I don’t have time to brainstorm ideas. Let me consult Rhett and we’ll figure something out, okay?”

“There are plenty of lovely inns up and down California. I’m sure I can find you another place that you’ll be happy with.”

“By June?”

She cleared her throat. “I can do it. If not, by December at the latest.”

“Do what you can.” I willed the tension in my shoulders to ease. I had my wedding dress and I had my man. The rest would be icing on the cake. I ended the call, made sure Tigger’s food and water bowls were set, and hopped into my VW Beetle.

At the top of the mountain above Crystal Cove stood the Crystal Cove Inn, a charming place that like most buildings in town was painted white, with a red tile roof. Calling it an inn was an understatement. It boasted two wings of rooms as well as a dozen private cabanas and exquisite

grounds. With its coveted views of the ocean and the town below, the inn was consistently full.

I parked in the lot, grabbed my artwork from the backseat, and traipsed into the lobby. The spicy scent of apple cider greeted me, as did the aroma of a crackling fire. Crystal Cove was blessed with Mediterranean temperatures, and in April the weather was usually mild, but a storm was forecast for tomorrow, not great for a festival's opening night. The weatherman wasn't entirely sure the storm would hit us. A crisp wind current could send it south. Festival planners were probably crossing their fingers and toes. Given the number of guests sitting on the stone hearth of the fireplace, it was the *in* spot. A few patrons were sitting in the wing-backed chairs reading books.

To my right, a group of folks wearing last year's festival T-shirts had gathered around the concierge desk, no doubt looking for somewhere to dine. The festival didn't officially start until tomorrow night, Tuesday, but Crystal Cove was a tourist destination. Many festivalgoers had arrived over the weekend.

I walked through the lobby's archway leading to the grassy expanse outside.

"Jenna," a woman trilled. "Over here!"

Yardley Alks, owner of the Art Institute, waved to me from beneath the covered walkway that led to the private rooms, communal rooms, and cabanas. I strolled toward her, inhaling the heavenly scent of jasmine hanging from the walkway's eaves.

A petite woman in her forties with a sunny disposition, Yardley was in charge of the workshop I was attending with the other finalists. "The rest aren't here yet," she said, pushing a strand of shoulder-length tawny hair behind her ear. "Let me revise that. Keller is, but none of the others."

Over two hundred artists had entered to win the yearly art competition that would put the winner's art on next year's festival poster. Seven of us had made the final cut. All were taking part

in the workshop. Yardley, a reputed art teacher, was on hand to give us suggestions as to how to make our work shine. The judging panel would announce the winner Sunday afternoon at Azure Park. I was so nervous I could barely breathe.

Yes, I owned the Cookbook Nook, a culinary bookshop, and yes, operating the shop and the Nook Café was a full-time, satisfying job, but prior to becoming a businesswoman, I'd entertained dreams of becoming an artist, so I'd entered the competition on a lark. To my complete surprise, I had been chosen as one of the finalists.

"The door to the workshop is open," Yardley said. She had negotiated with the inn's owner to provide a communal room where the artists could paint as well as store the tools of our trade. "Easels are set on the verandah. I'll be right there."

The verandah, at the far end of the grassy expanse, provided a beautiful view of the ocean. Tonight, it was lit up by bright floodlights.

I spotted two women my age setting up a wine tasting on the grassy expanse, both of whom I recognized. "Hi, Hannah," I called to the raven-haired one. "Have fun tonight."

"You'll be joining us later. See you then." Hannah Storm owned Hurricane Vineyard. "But *shh*. It's a secret."

During the festival, over one hundred artists and crafters as well as twenty Santa Cruz Mountain and Central Coast wineries would show their wares. In addition, locally made artisan foods would be featured at booths and restaurants throughout the town. Last's years basil olives were a huge sensation. A specialty Kids Zone at Azure Park would feature music while promoting craft projects designed for children. The festival promised a rollicking good time, and I anticipated it each year.

I hitched my art satchel higher on my shoulder and strode down the walkway to the communal

room. The door to the room was open. Like the verandah, it was brightly lit. Yardley believed we needed to see all the flaws of our art. Tonight, however, she'd planned for us to finish our work outdoors, drinking in the evening air for inspiration.

"Hey, hey, Jenna." Keller Landry, an ice cream entrepreneur and part-time handyman, turned to greet me. In his plaid shirt and narrow-legged jeans, he looked even leaner than usual. Had he lost weight? He swept the thatch of brown hair that invariably fell down his forehead to one side. "Just got off the phone with Katie." Keller was married to my good friend, who was the chef at the Nook Café. "She says you're full up on reservations for the night."

"Good to hear." I'd left work at five so I could make tonight's workshop. My aunt, who was co-owner of our thriving business, told me she would handle any emergencies, as if we'd have any. I needed to spruce up the display window tomorrow on my day off, but other than that, we'd been running as smoothly as clockwork for the past few months. No snags. No hiccups.

"Katie said she put one of the specials in a to-go box for me," Keller went on. "Chicken basil parmigiana."

"Lucky you." I'd visited Katie in the kitchen earlier and had tasted it. Major *yum*. "Coming outside?"

"Sure thing."

I removed my paints and brushes from my satchel, set the satchel in a cubby, tucked my work back under my arm, and followed him. Though we could leave all our tools in the communal room—it would be locked every night—I liked having my materials with me in case I wanted to tweak something on my canvas at home.

Keller set his work on one of the easels on the verandah and took off the cloth covering.

"Wow," I said, eyeing his work as I set mine on an easel. "That's getting better and better. I

love it. Have you named it?"

"I'm calling it *Humanity*." Keller enjoyed working with mixed media, which could include anything from paint to paper to pencils, glues, crayons and glitter. Then there were the more obscure media, as I liked to think of them, like hardware items, buttons, beeswax, or even pages from an old book. Everything became a potential item to add to one's mixed-media art.

Using red, green, and blue paint, silver glitter, and strips of beeswax, Keller had created a masterpiece of a raging ocean. Within the waves, in India ink, he had written a quote by Mahatma Gandhi: *You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean. If a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.*

"How did you get the writing so even?" I asked.

He pulled a tapered burin, an etching tool with a six-inch blade, from a set of tools Katie had given to him as a birthday gift. "This tip"—he tested it with his finger—"can fix anything."

"Looks sharp."

"Sharper than sharp. But . . ." He regarded his work and sighed forlornly. "It's missing something."

*The kitchen sink?* I thought wryly.

"I'm thinking of adding an origami fish, but that seems trite." He sighed again. It was almost a moan.

"Are you okay?" I scrutinized him more closely. His skin was lax and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Me?"

"There's nobody else here."

"Truth is, I'm struggling."

"With?"

“Selling ice cream is, you know, limited, and being a handyman isn’t really stirring my creative juices.”

“You’re going to finish the work on our house, right?” I asked teasingly. He’d been helping out for a few months, stripping and repainting the walls of the house my aunt had given us. No more out-of-date wallpaper or colors that didn’t suit us.

He shifted feet. “Yes, but—”

“Yes, but what?” I did my best not to worry. There were other handymen in town, but Keller had the same sensibilities as Rhett and I. He was nailing every aspect of our remodel.

“I’d like to expand my financial horizons through my art.” Keller brandished the burin in front of his painting. “I get that it’s a pipe dream, but—”

I patted his arm. “You should follow your dream.”

“Except I’m worried about Min-Yi.”

Keller and Katie had adopted an adorable Korean girl a while back. She was nearly fifteen months old.

“She’s not going to college any time soon,” I joked. “You have plenty of time to save up.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s . . . She’s not sleeping well. I think it might be my fault. I’ve been working on this piece for months, and I pace as I work through ideas. She hears me and wakes up crying. Maybe I should quit and—”

“Hello-o-o.” The Fairchild twins, Faith and Flora, sashayed to two easels and set up their artwork. They didn’t look or act like twins. Flora wore her hair in a long braid; Faith wore hers in spiky abandon. Flora preferred understated and somewhat boxy beaded sweaters. Faith wore clingy upscale workout clothes and gads of colorful jewelry. Flora was down to earth while Faith, who at one time had been an artist’s representative but was now hoping to become a full-fledged

artist, was a tad brassy and narcissistic.

Faith's work, like her, was a bold array of colors depicting ocean waves. Flora's piece, a pen-and-ink of the mountains and neighborhoods that rose above Crystal Cove, was refined and delicate. For Home Sweet Home, the shop she owned in town, she made all sorts of candles, ornaments, wall hangings, and more. She was quite a talent.

"Jenna," Flora said, in the bubbly way she spoke, "that orange plush cat you ordered has come in."

"Terrific. I'll come by later this week to pick it up."

"Keller, your work is really coming along." Flora contemplated his painting, taking in every corner of it. "It makes such a statement. I can see you've done a lot to it." She studied mine. "And Jenna, that's simply lovely."

Faith chortled. "You do have a penchant for blue, Jenna."

She wasn't wrong. I'd painted Buena Vista Boulevard, the main drag in Crystal Cove, at sunset. Blue and darker blue shadows lined the storefronts. Overhead, strings of party lights cast a luminous glow.

"Is this your van Gogh period?" she asked while fussing to straighten her oversized agate pendant necklace. "Van-go or van-gock? Which do you prefer?"

"I think van-go is the most common pronunciation," I said judiciously. We weren't Dutch. Why pretend to be?

Yardley swept into view, the folds of her floral shawl-style sweater wafting. She clapped her hands. "Are we ready?"

Two other artists slipped up behind her. Each said, "I'm here." I didn't know either of them well. One, a dashing Latino in his fifties, owned a pet store that only sold reptiles. The other, a



freckly redhead, made coral jewelry that she sold online.

“Welcome,” Yardley said. “Now, let’s quiet down and get started. As I approach each of you, I want you to tell me what you hope to accomplish this evening. This is our final workshop. Your finished product will remain with me and will be sent along to the judges. How about a little music?”

She clicked an instrumental jazz playlist on her iPhone. The music piped through a portable Bose speaker. Nice. I could feel my shoulders relax. So what if I didn’t win the competition? It was an honor to have made it this far.

For a half hour, Yardley orbited the verandah, giving each of us tips on how to improve this or that. So far, I’d heeded every tip she offered. The last art class I’d taken was in college. After Taylor & Squibb Advertising hired me, I had painted solely in the privacy of my home. I’d meant to take classes after I’d relocated to Crystal Cove—there were a number of fabulous art teachers in town as well as an artists’ retreat—but I hadn’t found the time.

To Faith she said, “See if you can find a way to add a smidgen of white along a crest of the waves.”

“Darlin’, I don’t do anything a smidgen,” Faith bragged.

“Try.”

To Flora she said, “I thought you were going to fine-tune this with pastels?”

“I am.” Flora giggled and held up a pack of chalk.

“You’re going to do it all tonight?” Yardley fought a skeptical smile.

Flora nodded.

“Go for it.” Yardley patted Flora’s shoulder.

Yardley stopped beside me and reviewed my painting, her chin resting on her hand. “Jenna,

how about a dot of red here and there? Liven it up.”

I recalled an artist named Rabindra, who drew gorgeous pen-and-ink animals. He’d added a bold red dot to each of his paintings. It had been his signature. I didn’t want to imitate him.

“Better yet, what do you think about a splash of yellow on one particular shop?” Yardley suggested. “Draw in your viewers and make them wonder what’s going on inside the shop. Mystery matters in a painting such as yours.”

“Excellent idea.”

“Sorry I’m late.” Quade, a roguish multimedia artist in his late twenties, walked onto the verandah with a cynical slouch, his work covered in burlap. He set it on an easel but didn’t remove the burlap. “Traffic,” he said with a wry smile while finger-combing his shoulder-length brown hair.

Usually, Crystal Cove had light traffic unless the main street was shut down.

“Don’t kid a kidder,” Yardley said. “You fell asleep.”

“Caught me.” Quade offered a cocksure smile.

When Yardley frowned, I got the feeling she didn’t approve of his cavalier attitude.

Quade, no last name, a recent transplant who was known for the two gigantic murals he’d been commissioned to paint in Crystal Cove, had dreams of becoming the most famous artist in the world. Rumors abounded about him. He’d been in numerous relationships. No, he was a monk. No, he’d been married twice. No, he was the child of a drug lord who’d sent him to Crystal Cove to hide. Personally, I thought Quade was spreading the rumors himself to add to his mysterious persona.

“Whoa, Keller, dude,” Quade said, eyeing Keller’s work. “What the heck is that?”

“Ha-ha, very funny. You’ve seen it before.”

“Nope, don’t think I have.”

“Sure you have.” Keller yucked.

Quade imitated Keller’s unusual laugh.

“Don’t make fun,” Yardley warned.

“Make fun? *Moi?*” Quade’s mouth turned up with surly defiance. “All I’m saying is he really messed up his piece. Last week it was good. Sometimes less is more, dude.”

Keller’s brow knitted with frustration. “You’re not the teacher.”

“And you’re not gonna be the winner.”

“Fellas,” Yardley said.

“He’s a pretender, teach.” Quade jutted a hand at Keller’s work. “Be honest. He’s on a fool’s errand.” He removed the burlap from his art, and Yardley gasped.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Something new. *Night Sky.*”

Yardley hadn’t gasped because his new work was horrible. In truth, it was incredible. It was bold and kinetic, like nothing I’d ever seen. Black on black with large strokes, sharp lines, and textural grooves. He’d adhered silver aluminum bars to the canvas, which caught the light. It reminded me of death and jail and anger all at the same time.

“But your other work . . . *Morning,*” Yardley said.

Quade’s initial submission had been the complete opposite of the new work in tone. It had been done in pale colors and the aluminum bars he’d used had been gold filigree, representative of the way the sunlight bathed the ocean waves at sunrise. The honesty and sensitivity of the work had surprised me, given the artist’s temperament.

“Where is it?” Yardley pressed. “That’s the one that was accepted into the competition.”

“Yeah, about that.” He jutted his chin. “It seems to be missing.”

“Missing?”

“M.I.A. I think someone stole it.” Quade stared daggers at Keller.

“Whoa!” Keller threw up his hands. “Don’t put that on me, man.”

“Did you report the theft to the police?” Yardley asked.

“As if.” Quade shrugged a shoulder. “Police won’t help the likes of me.”