BIBLIOPHILE ORNAMENTS

A PATTERN FOR BOOK LOVERS
by Kate Carlisle

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Paper and printer
- Paper cutter or scissors
- Elmer's Glue or similar
- Binder clips
- Drill, awl, or hole punch
- Ribbon or string

ABOUT THE BIBLIOPHILE MYSTERIES

Welcome to the book-loving world of pre-eminent bookbinder, Brooklyn Wainwright! Brooklyn brings rare books back from the brink of death in her San Francisco workshop. Unfortunately for her, many of the fine books she restores are linked to modern murder, which she feels compelled to investigate with the help of her love, British security expert Derek Stone, and her quirky friends and family.

STEP 1

Print.
A home printer works fine, but a color laser printer will give your miniature books deeper saturation. If you'd rather not print chapter 1 for each mini book, just print the covers. Print single-sided.

STEP 2

Cut and fold.
Cut out the book covers and fold in half. If you're planning to include chapter 1 in each mini book, cut out one book's pages at a time and clip them to the cover to keep them together. If you prefer, you can just cut blank pages instead.

STEP 3

Glue.
Stack the interior pages of one book and carefully spread very slightly to create a larger surface along the left edge. Spread a small amount of glue on edge and press into the fold of the book cover.

STEP 4

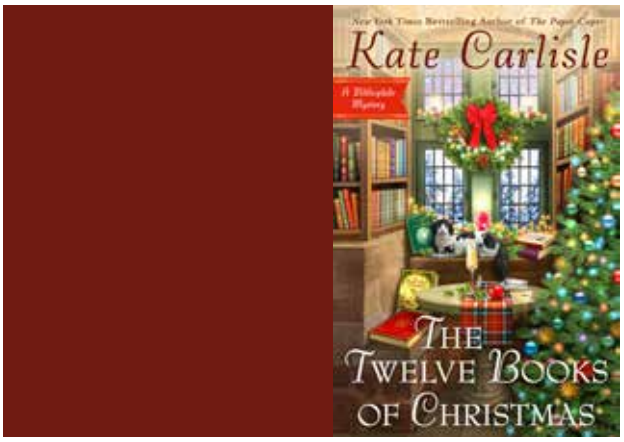
Press.
Clip the spine edge of the book cover with binder clips. If desired, place a popsicle stick or toothpick over the cover before using the binder clips to distribute the pressure. Let sit until set.

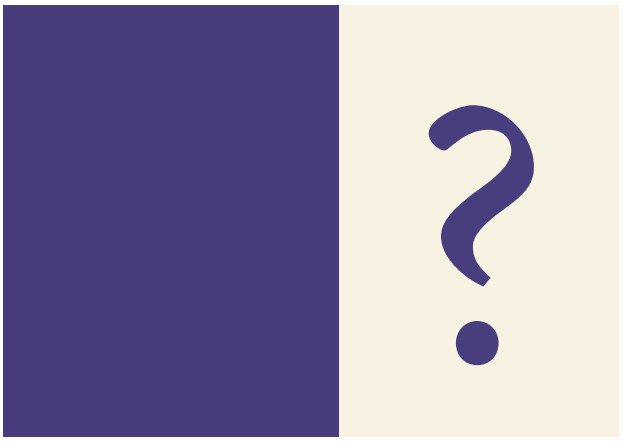
STEP 5

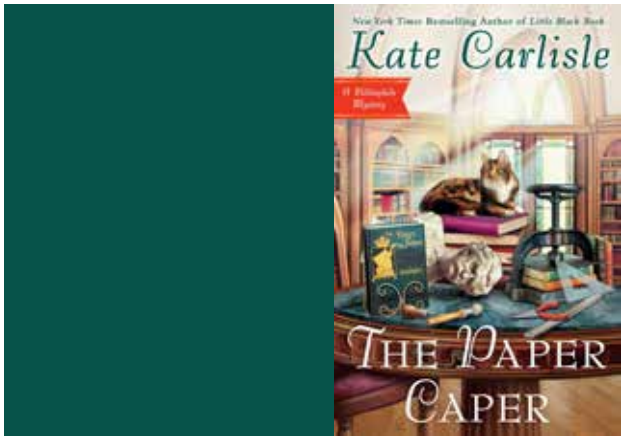
Drill or punch.
With a 1/8-inch drill bit, drill a hole all the way through the front cover, pages and back cover. If you don't have a drill, you can use an awl. A hole punch is the last option because the hole will be quite large.

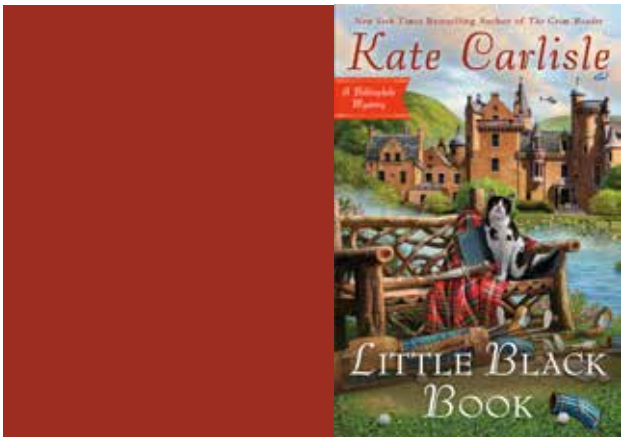
STEP 6

Tie.
Thread a piece of ribbon or string through the hole and hang your pretty new book ornament someplace that makes you feel happy every time you see it. Well done, Bibliophile!


Kate Carlisle
THE TWELVE BOOKS OF CHRISTMAS


?


Kate Carlisle
THE PAPER CAPER

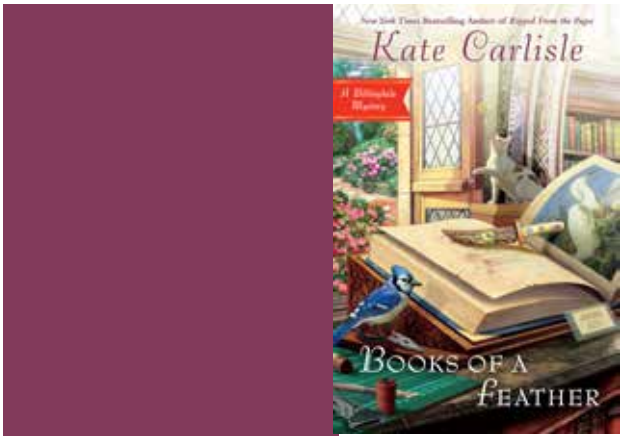

Kate Carlisle
LITTLE BLACK BOOK

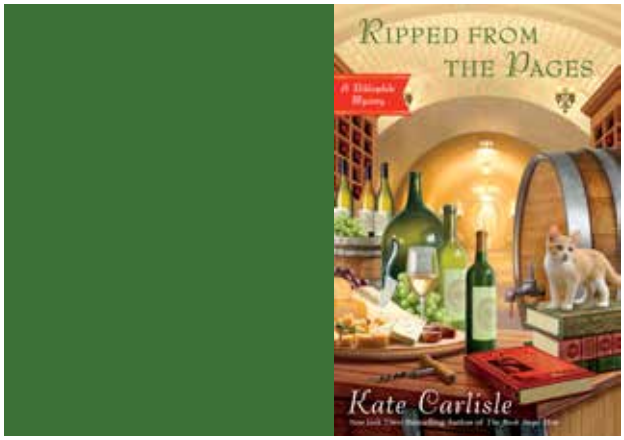

Kate Carlisle
THE GRIM READER

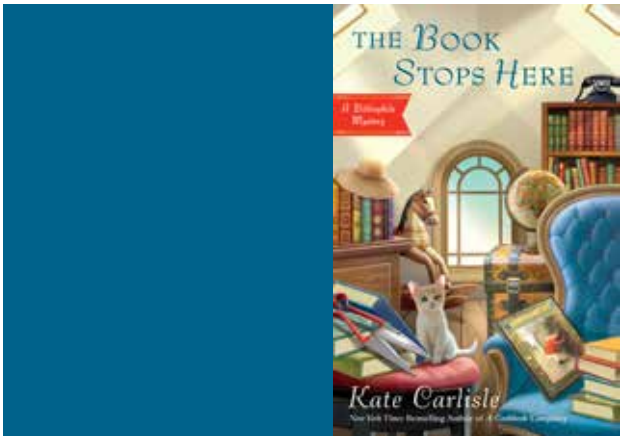

Kate Carlisle
THE BOOK SUPREMACY

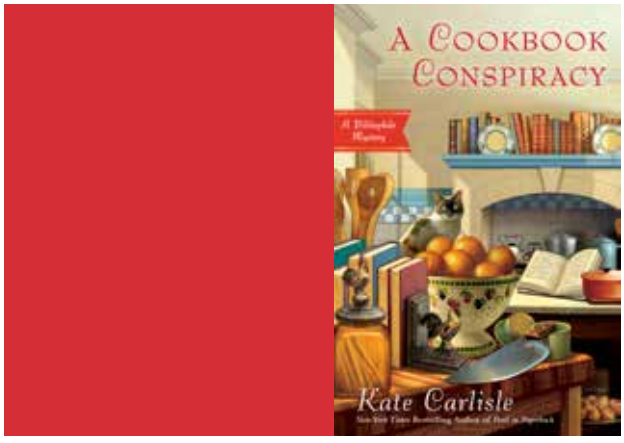

Kate Carlisle
Buried in Books


Kate Carlisle
Once upon a Spine


Kate Carlisle
Books of a Feather

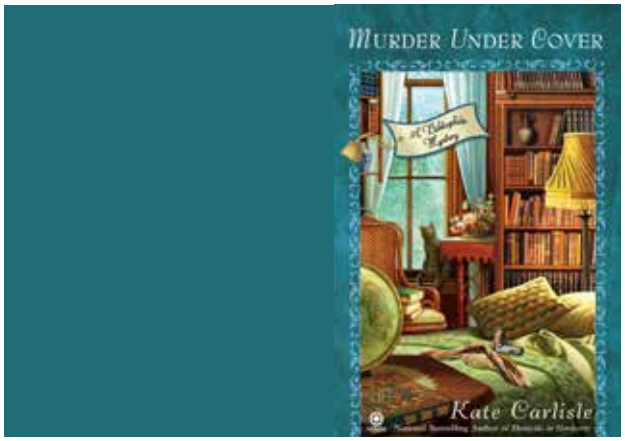

Ripped from the Pages
Kate Carlisle

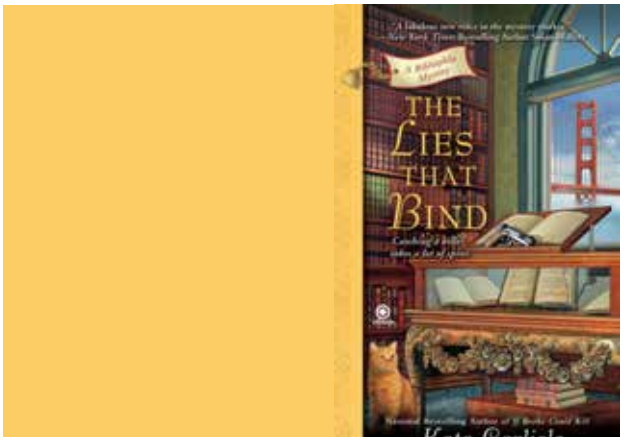

The Book Stops Here
Kate Carlisle

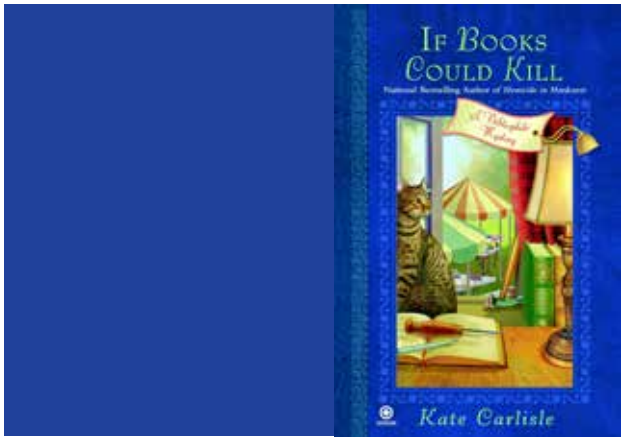

A Cookbook Conspiracy
Kate Carlisle

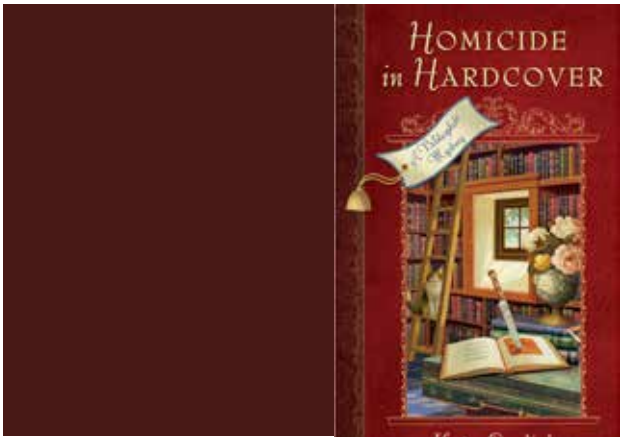

Peril in Paperback
Kate Carlisle


One Book in the Grave
Kate Carlisle


Murder Under Cover
Kate Carlisle


The Lies That Bind


If Books Could Kill
Kate Carlisle


Homicide in Hardcover

CHAPTER ONE

My teacher always told me that in order to save a patient you'd have to kill him first. Not the most child-friendly way of explaining his theory of book restoration to his eight-year-old apprentice, but it worked. I grew up determined to save them all.

As I studied the faded, brittle, leather-bound volume that lay near death on the worktable before me, I knew I could bring it back to life, too. But it wouldn't be easy. With six hundred pages of crusty, smelly pulp, the book's once-elegant, gilded spine was nearly severed from its body.

"Sorry, old thing, but I'm not letting you die on my watch." I dusted its hinges with a soft brush, then ran my finger along the spine. It came away covered in red powder. Red rot had set in. The leather binding was terminal.

I picked up my scalpel and pierced the frail calfskin along the aged, brown hinge, extricating the bits of thready sinew still clinging to the sticky bits of leather.

Despite my mother's misgivings, I was grateful I'd bypassed medical school because, let's face it, if this book were human, I'd be drenched in blood up to my elbows and probably unconscious. I didn't do so well around blood.

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "That's disgusting!"

I flinched and the scalpel flew from my hand. I looked up and saw my best friend Robin Tully staring at the flaky leather chunks and moldy paper splayed across the table.

"I didn't hear you come in," I said, patting my heart.

"Apparently not," she said as she retrieved the scalpel off the floor and placed it safely on the table. "A bomb could go off and you wouldn't notice."

I ignored that, jumped off the high stool and grabbed her in a tight hug. "You're early, aren't you?"

She checked her watch. "Actually, I'm right on time, which I suppose is early in your world."

I smiled, then held up my camera. "Do you mind? I need another few minutes to map and shoot this stuff."

"Procrastinate all you want. I'm in no hurry." She pulled off her fuzzy black jacket and fluffed her hair.

"I'm not procrastinating." I took several close-up shots of the decomposing front foredge, then looked up and caught Robin's look of profound pity. "What?"

She held up her hands. "I said nothing."

"I can hear you judging me." I put the camera down and grabbed a handful of chocolate-swirled caramel kisses, a product I personally considered a miracle of modern technology. I popped a few pieces into my mouth, tried to enjoy the warm burst of flavors, but finally threw my hands up in defeat. "Okay, I'm procrastinating. Can you blame me? I could be walking into a trap tonight."

She laughed. "We're going to the Library, not sneaking down a dark alley."

"I know it." I scowled. Tonight was a private showing of the most important book collection to open at the Covington Library in years. And the man being honored tonight, the man responsible for the restoration of the rare, antiquarian books on exhibit tonight was Abraham Karastovsky, my life-long teacher and mentor.

And nemesis?

I didn't know. We hadn't spoken in six months and I was frankly nervous about seeing him tonight after being estranged for so long.

Six months ago, after years of indecision, I'd finally given Abraham notice that I'd be moving out from under his shadow to start my own business. He hadn't taken the news well. He'd never accepted change well. He was old school, settled in his ways, determined to fight the modern trends in both book restoration and life in general. When I went off to college to study book restoration and conservations, he declared it was a useless waste of time and I'd learn more on the job, working with him.

Despite his gruff ways, it had been a difficult decision to leave him, even though I'd essentially been working independently for years. Abraham had been furious and had said some things I hoped he might be regretting now.

What would happen when we met face to face again? Would he treat me like an enemy? Cut me off without a word? Ridicule me in front of friends and colleagues? I was beyond worried. Could anyone blame me for procrastinating?

"He sent you an invitation," Robin said. "That proves he wants to see you. He's not the best communicator, but he loves you, Brooklyn. You know that."

I felt tears spring up and I prayed she was right. It was both comforting and annoying to know she usually was.

We'd been best friends since the age of seven when my parents joined a spiritual commune up in the wine country north of San Francisco. My mom and dad had dragged me and my five young siblings off to experience the excitement of growing our own vegetables, wearing clothing made of hemp, and sharing in the harmony and oneness of nature. I did not go quietly.

When we arrived at the commune, the first person I noticed among the crowd of strangers was a dark-haired girl about my age, defiantly clutching a bald-headed Barbie doll clad in a red satin dress and black stiletto heels. That was Robin. We bonded immediately, despite the fact that we were opposites in so many ways.

These days, Robin came across as a glamorous, carefree society girl. You'd never guess she ran her own tour and travel business and was also a brilliant sculptor. She was a curvy brunette with almond eyes and an uncanny ability to cause men to wander off sidewalks into oncoming traffic.

I, on the other hand, was serious, blonde, tall, still barely out of my gangly stage, and occasionally had men asking me about my revolutionary technique for stretching leather. Sounds kinky but sadly, it's not.

Tonight I was wearing a somber yet elegant black suit while Robin looked simply smashing, all dressed up for a splashy art opening in a sassy cocktail dress and spiky black heels, her only accessory a classic strand of pearls she'd inherited from her great-grandmother.

Unfortunately, we weren't going to a splashy art opening.

"Why are you so dressed up?" I asked, carefully removing my dust-covered lab coat. Tonight's private showing for the Covington Library Founders' Circle would be a somber affair attended by the Library trustees, past and present donors, the board of directors and the wealthiest members of San Francisco society.

"Hey, there may be nothing but wall-to-wall old farts tonight but I'm still there to par-tay."

"Ah." I hung the lab coat up in the small closet near the front door. "I thought maybe you'd forgotten where we're going."

"How could I forget?" she said, steering clear of the table as I carefully covered the brittle hunks of leather and swollen manuscript pages with a soft cloth. "Abraham called me again this afternoon to make sure I was coming tonight. He was almost hyperventilating, he's so excited."

"He's been calling you?" I felt a tug of resentment that Abraham had contacted her. But why wouldn't he? He'd been a commune member as long as Robin and I had lived there. We were all very close, but I'd always been his favorite. Now I didn't know what I was to him.

"He never used to call me," Robin pointed out. "I figure it's his way of keeping tabs on you."

"Maybe."

"And he never asks directly about you but I always end up talking more about you than me. Go figure."

I refused to get my hopes up. "So, he's anxious about tonight?"

"Frantic would be a more accurate word," she said, sitting at my desk. "I guess one of the most important books in the show isn't finished yet."

"The Faust," I murmured. It was all I could do to keep the woefully bitter jealousy yapping inside me from creeping into my voice. "I hear it's really something."

That might've been the understatement of the year.

Here I sat, toiling away on a set of lovely but anonymous old medical treatises while Abraham had snagged the dream commission of the century—the legendary Heinrich Winslow collection of rare antiquarian books and prints.

The Winslow book collection was considered one of the finest in the world, and the crowning glory was said to be a jewel-encrusted, gilded edition of Goethe's masterwork, Faust, commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm in 1880.

And it was cursed.

Some attributed the curse to the fact that it had belonged briefly to Adolf Hitler who apparently had little appreciation for books, no big surprise. Der Führer had passed the priceless Faust on to Heinrich Winslow's wife as a token gift for a dinner party thrown in his honor.

Shortly after that fateful dinner, Heinrich Winslow was poisoned and died a gruesome death. The books were distributed among the Winslow brothers and several other family members died after taking the Faust into their homes. No wonder they thought it was cursed.

Nobody loved a good book curse more than I did. I was so jealous of Abraham I could barely think straight.

"Hallooo? Brooklyn? I come with food?"

My eyes lit up as a pretty young Indian woman poked her head inside the doorway.

"Hey Vinnie, come on in," I said.

Her torn 501's and clunky biker chick boots belied her chirpy voice and delicate features as she walked in carrying a shopping bag stuffed with little white cartons. "I don't wish to interrupt but Suzie and I agreed you would like our leftover Chinese food? This is true?"

"God, yes," I said, practically drooling as the tempting scent of orange chicken and beef with broccoli sauce wafted my way. I turned to Robin. "Vinnie's one of my neighbors." To Vinnie I said, "This is my friend Robin."

"Nice to meet you," Robin said.

Vinnie bowed her head. "I am Vinamra Patel but please call me Vinnie."

Vinnie and her girlfriend Suzie Stein lived in a loft down the hall from me. They were wood sculptors and animal activists. Until I moved here, I'd never actually seen two chainsaw-wielding lesbians go to town on a three-hundred pound hunk of redwood burl. It was impressive.

"This is really sweet, Vinnie," I said, staring into the stuffed shopping bag. "Thanks."

"We leave tonight for the Sierra Festival and didn't want to throw food away," she explained to Robin. "It will not go to waste here."

Robin shot me a look. "They know you so well."

My eyes narrowed. "They're attentive neighbors."

"She is a good little eater," Vinnie said with a soft smile. "I will put this in the kitchen." She disappeared down the hall that led to my living area.

Robin laughed. "No wonder you love this place."

She also knew me well. Yes, I liked to eat. A lot. I wasn't picky. I loved everything. Especially chocolate. And pizza. Oh, and red meat. I loved a good steak. I blamed it on my parents and the two-year "vegan phase" they'd foisted on me and my siblings during our formative years. I still had the emotional scars and enjoyed reminding them of the pain whenever they lit up the barbecue grill.

"Everything is in the fridge," Vinnie said in her sing-song voice as she handed me a cluster of keys. Her eyes widened as she noticed the lumpy shards of leather and paper on my table. "This is your new work?"

"Yes," I said proudly.

Her gaze darted to Robin and her forehead creased in distaste. "It is...very nice."

Robin snorted. "You mean, it's a pile of rancid crap?"

Vinnie nodded. "As you say."

"Thanks so much for the food, Vinnie," I said, shaking the key ring. "You and Suzie enjoy the art festival. I'll take good care of Pookie and Splinters."

Vinnie didn't seem concerned about the fate of her cats as she stared at the decrepit book parts like she was hypnotized or something.

I jiggled the keys again and she blinked. "You are most kind to attend to our darlings." Then she bowed one last time and took off.

Robin's brown eyes sparkled with amusement. "She left you in charge of her pets?"

"I can handle two cats for three days."

She laughed. "Famous last words from the woman with the largest plot at the commune pet cemetery."

"That's not fair." I grimaced. "I had goldfish. Goldfish always die."

"Come on. They banned you from the pet store."

"Shut up, please." I grabbed my purse. "Let's go."

She glanced down at my feet and her eyes widened. "Oh, my God. You can take the girl out of the commune..."

"Oh, dear." I kicked off my comfy sandals and slid into the pair of black pumps I'd left by the door.

"Better?"

"Marginally."

"Such a bitch."

She laughed as she opened the door. "Okay, I love the suit and the heels are definitely an improvement. But I can't believe you still wear Birkenstocks."

"Just when I'm working." I sighed. "It's like my feet are molded to their shape."

Robin snorted delicately. "Like a geisha, only not."

"Sad but true." I turned off the light. "But for Abraham, I'll bite the bullet and wear heels."

"Don't worry, you look great," she said over her shoulder. "He's just going to die when he sees you."

Chapter One

If my life were a book, I would have masking tape holding my hinges together. My pages would be loose, my edges tattered and my boards exposed, the front flyleaf torn and the leather mottled and moth-eaten. I'd have to take myself apart and put myself back together, as any good book restoration expert would do.

I had just finished my first glass of India Pale Ale in the pub of the Edinburgh hotel I'd checked into an hour earlier, and it seemed as good a time as any to throw myself a pity party and reflect on the strange turns my life had taken recently. I wasn't happy about it. I needed to get back on track. And it occurred to me, why not treat myself as I would a damaged book? Study the twists and turns and knots and smudges that had left me short-tempered and befuddled. And threadbare. Then I could dust off my pages, resew the torn folds, trim the frays and smooth out the dents. And be my happy self again. Trust me, nobody liked ago, the man I'd worked with most of my life and always considered a mix of beloved uncle and benevolent dictator, wouldn't be in Edinburgh with me.

I'd known him since I was eight years old, when he'd repaired a favorite book my brothers had ruined. Fascinated with what he'd done, I'd gone back every day to watch him work in his small bindery, pestering him so much that he'd finally brought me on as his apprentice.

Now Abraham was gone, senselessly murdered last month, and I felt an emptiness I'd never experienced before. It didn't help that the man had left me the lion's share of his estate, some six million dollars, give or take a million. And while it gave me a secret thrill to know that in his will, he'd called me the daughter of his heart, I hated that I'd benefited so greatly from his death. After all, I was now rich beyond my wildest dreams and all it had cost was Abraham's life.

"Brooklyn?"

I whipped around, then jumped up "Martin didn't like me attending the book fairs." She shook her head in irritation. "He said I flirted too much."

Translation: Helen was a nice person; Martin was a toad.

"Did you happen to mention that attending book fairs is part of your job?"

"Don't get me started," she said, puffing out a breath. "I lost ten pounds worrying about it but came to realize there's no making sense of it. Let's just say I was a moron to put up with it as long as I did. And now I'm determined to have a fabulous time while I'm here."

"Good." I hugged her again. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." She giggled. "And I have so much to tell you."

"Really? Let's hear it. What's going on with you?"

"You won't believe it," she said, moving closer to whisper in my ear. "I'm in love."

"What?"

"Shhh!" She waved her hand at you'll come?"

"Definitely. It sounds like fun."

"Wonderful. I'll add your name to the reservations."

"Great." We arranged a time and place to meet. Then she gave me a hug and took off, leaving me with a decision to make. It would be smart to take a nap, because I was starting to feel dizzy and sleep deprived, but I wanted to see and breathe in a bit of the city first.

I headed for the wide double doors but spied a sundries store tucked into the far corner of the lobby. I made the detour, walked in and found a candy bar for sustenance and a pack of cinnamon gum for clean breath. As I stepped up to the counter to pay, a tall, heavyset man pushed me aside, slapping a newspaper on the counter and reaching in his pocket for change.

"Hey!"

He ignored me completely as he fished for coins.

I knew him. Perry McDougall, a a grumpy bookbinder.

"You look like you could use another, love, and quickly," the waitress said, placing a second glass of ale on the table to replace the one I'd just swilled.

Great. Just in case I'd imagined things were okay with me, a kind stranger was here to assure me that I was indeed a total mess.

I smiled at her, an older woman with short, curly gray hair and a teasing grin, and said lightly, "I don't look that bad, do I?"

She studied me for a moment. "Aye, you do, love. And for that, the IPA's on the house."

"Thanks a lot," I said with a rueful laugh, then explained, "It's just jet lag. I'll be fine in twenty-four hours."

She nodded judiciously. "Of course it's jet lag if you say so." Her eyes narrowed as she studied me. "But my woman's intuition thinks 'tis a man you're mulling over."

I laughed a bit desperately. "Truly, I'm not."

She raised an eyebrow. "Then you'll be when I spied an old friend walking briskly toward me. "Helen!"

Helen Chin grinned as she glided confidently through the bar, her glossy black hair cut in a short, sassy bob. She'd always been demure and soft-spoken, a brilliant, petite Asian woman with lustrous long hair and a shy smile. The haircut and the confidence were major changes since the last time I saw her. That had to have been over two years ago, when we'd both taught spring classes in Lyon, France, at the Institut d'Histoire du Livre. But we'd first met and bonded while teaching summer courses at the University of Texas at Austin. A hurricane had come through, blowing the roof off the dormitory we were staying in. Nothing forges a friendship better than sharing trail mix and toothpaste while sleeping on cots in a crowded, smelly gymnasium for a week.

I gave her a tight hug. She felt thinner than I remembered.

"I saw your name in the program," she said, and clasped my arms with both hands. me. "Nobody knows. We've kept it very hush-hush. It's crazy, but I've never been so happy."

She did look happy, and I was glad for her. Trust me, anyone who had put up with Martin all this time deserved to be happy.

"Okay, we definitely have to talk," I said, clutching her arm. "We can go up to my room. I'll order drinks."

"I can't," she said, pouting. "I'm off to meet a client. But look, a bunch of us are doing the ghost tour later. Join us. It'll be a hoot. We can have a drink afterward, just you and me, and catch up."

I caught someone moving in my peripheral vision.

"Hello, Martin," I said loudly to alert Helen. He'd literally sneaked up on us, probably to overhear our conversation. What a creep. I hoped he hadn't heard our plans, because I refused to spend any more time with him than was absolutely necessary.

"Hello, Brooklyn," he said, giving me a smile I didn't trust for a second. pompous ass who thought he was smarter and better than everyone on the planet. Perry was one of Abraham's contemporaries. He owned a rare-book store in Glasgow and fancied himself a scholar, specializing in Scottish history and the Georgian and Regency periods of the British monarchy. He'd always been a rude, angry man. Guess that hadn't changed.

"Excuse me," I said, getting more annoyed by the second. He hadn't even glanced at me. In Perry's world, only Perry mattered.

He took his change and folded the paper under his arm.

"I said excuse me," I said more loudly. "You need to learn to wait your turn."

He turned and sniffed at me. "I beg your pardon?"

"You can beg all you want, but it doesn't mean you get to push people out of the way who were here first."

He looked at me as if I'd soiled his shoes. "What are you raving on about, you returning the IPA?"

"No." I gripped the beer I'd been craving for the last six hours of my transatlantic flight. "No, I'm sorry. I'm going to need this."

Her eyes twinkled gaily. "Aye, I knew it." She tapped the side of her head. "Can't another woman tell when one of her ilk is suffering, then? And isn't it always about a man, damn their skins!"

"Order up, Mary!" the bartender shouted.

"Haud yer wheesht!" she yelled over her shoulder, then smiled sweetly at me. "Enjoy your luncheon and take good care." She turned and marched to the bar, where she bared her teeth at the burly bartender as she collected a tray of drinks.

I wasn't an expert in the Scottish dialect, but I believed she'd just suggested to her boss that he shove a sock in his piehole.

I chuckled as I checked my wristwatch, then paid the bill. Barely an hour in Edinburgh and I'd fallen in love with the people all over again. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I wouldn't miss it." I took a closer look at her, checking out the new hairstyle, her pretty red jacket, black pants and shiny black shoes. "You look amazing, and you've lost weight. Are you moonlighting as a supermodel?"

"Oh, right," she said with a laugh.

"Seriously, you look great."

"Well, you don't have to sound so surprised," she said lightly, but I could sense the defensiveness underneath.

"Silly," I said, avoiding the bait as I hugged her again. I casually looked around. "So where's Martin?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "He's here somewhere, but it doesn't matter. I might as well tell you I've filed for divorce."

I hoped my eyes weren't bugging out of my head as I said, "No way! I'm so sorry."

She gave me a pointed look. "Oh, please." Then she slipped her arm through mine and we walked through the lobby. "You're not sorry and neither am I." I supposed some women would consider him handsome. He was tall and lean and wore white linen pants with a beige linen jacket. He looked elegantly rumpled, with boyish blond good looks and an easy grin. He owned a bookstore somewhere in London, and I always figured he had some family money tucked away. He was feckless and disdainful of most of humanity. I'd seen the way he treated Helen and I didn't like it. I didn't like him.

The smile disappeared as he confronted Helen. "I told you I'd meet you on the conference level."

"And I told you I'd try to make it but probably wouldn't be able to," Helen said defiantly.

"We have to talk now." He pushed up the sleeves of his linen jacket.

"I'm off to meet a client," she said as she glanced at her wristwatch. "I can try to see you at two thirty."

He tapped his elegantly shod foot as red blotches of annoyance cropped up on silly wench?"

Blame the two beers and an extreme case of jet lag, but I moved up close to him and said, "I'll show you raving, pal." Then, without thinking, I grabbed his newspaper and waved it at his face.

He recoiled and I realized I'd lost what was left of my mind.

"Sorry," I said, and handed his paper back to him.

His mouth opened and closed like a trout's, but he finally said, "You're a crazed bitch."

"Oh, I'm a bitch because rude people piss me off? At least I said I was sorry. But not you. You're just a big bully." I slammed a pound note on the counter to cover the cost of the gum, the chocolate and the hissy fit, and walked out.

"I know you!" he shouted after me. "You worked with Karastovsky. I'll make sure you never work again, missy."

Oh, crap. I rushed across the lobby and escaped through the automatic doors. What I'd arrived at the Royal Thistle Hotel after flying nonstop from San Francisco to London, then catching a quick shuttle flight north. I'd checked in, unpacked my bags and headed straight for the hotel pub to grab a sandwich and a beer. Now I was ready for a brisk walk out in the cold March air. In travel, I believed in hitting the ground running.

I was here to attend the annual Edinburgh Book Fair and was looking forward to visiting with friends and colleagues I hadn't seen in a while. I would be giving a few workshops, and there would be thousands of beautiful books and fine bindings to study and drool over. With any luck, I'd find one or two bargains to snag for my very own. I expected lots of good conversation and much pub crawling in one of the most delightful cities on the planet.

I should've been elated. Instead, I was sad and feeling a little overwhelmed, knowing that Abraham Karastovsky, the man who first taught me bookbinding years "How's Martin taking it?"

"Not well, as you might expect." She shook her head in disgust. "He was as big a jerk as everyone said, and I'm thrilled to be rid of him."

I squeezed her arm. "Okay. Then I'm doubly happy for you and not sorry at all."

Helen was right. I'd never liked Martin Warrington, and I wasn't the only one. When she'd announced her engagement in Lyon, I hadn't understood how such a smart woman could marry such an annoying man. Then I figured, with my own stellar record of bad choices and broken engagements, I was hardly one to criticize.

At the time, I was more sorry for myself than for her, because I knew we wouldn't be able to be friends once she married Martin. He didn't like me any more than I liked him, probably because I'd tried to talk Helen out of marrying him and he'd caught wind of it.

"So where have you been hiding?" I asked. "I didn't see you in Lisbon." his cheeks. He shot a quick glance at me, then said to Helen, "I'm meeting with the president of King's College at two and will be tied up all afternoon."

Well, la-di-da. Was he trying to impress me?

"I'm sorry, Martin," she said, but she didn't sound at all remorseful. "Maybe tomorrow."

His face puckered up as though he'd bitten into a lemon; then he flashed me a venomous look as if it were my fault his wife was insolent. "I can see you're in a mood. I'll speak with you later this afternoon."

We both watched him stalk away.

"Gosh, I've put you in a mood," I said, using air quotes as I tried to lighten the moment. "Sorry."

"Yes, it's all your fault." She shook her head and tried to laugh. "What a pill."

"You handled him well."

"I've had some practice," she said. "He makes it hard to be nice. Now, where were we? Oh, the ghost tour. Please say was wrong with me? I never confronted people. Was this part of my new weirdness? Was I going to turn into a crazy old crone and mutter to myself? Would I scare small children wherever I went?

Maybe.

Chapter One

Layla Fontaine, Executive Artistic Director of the Bay Area Book Arts Center, was tall, blond and strikingly beautiful, with a hair trigger temper and a reputation for ruthlessness. Some in the book community called her a malevolent shark. Others disagreed, insisting that calling her a shark only served to tarnish the reputation of decent sharks everywhere.

Since I had business with the shark, I arrived at the Book Center early and parked my car in the adjacent lot. Grabbing the small package I'd brought, I climbed out of the car and immediately started to shiver. It was dusk and the March air in San Francisco was positively frigid. I seemed to be in the direct path of a brisk wind that whooshed straight off the Bay over AT&T Park and up Potrero Hill. Huddling inside my down vest, I quickly jogged to the front entrance of the Book Center and climbed the stairs.

I almost whimpered as I stepped inside the warm interior and rubbed my arms to rid myself of the chills. But looking around, I grinned with giddy excitement. It was the first night of my latest bookbinding class and I, Brooklyn Wainwright, Super Bookbinder, was like a kid on the first day of grammar school. A nerdy kid, of course; one who actually looked forward to spending the day in school. I couldn't help myself. This place was a veritable shrine to paper and books and bookbinding arts, and I had to admit, grudgingly, that it was all due to Layla Fontaine.

As head fundraiser and the public face of the Bay Area Book Arts Center, or BABA as some affectionately called it, Layla had her finger—and usually a few other body parts—on the pulse of every well-heeled person in the San Francisco Bay area. She was willing to do, say or promise anything to keep BABA on firm financial ground, no matter how shaky the legalities seemed. Hers was a higher calling, she claimed, right up there with Doctors Without Borders and Save the Children, and anything was fair game in the nonprofit sector. While that might've been true, the fact remained that Layla Fontaine was a snarky, sneaky, notoriously picky, manipulative bitch.

But Layla had one true saving grace, and that was her pure and abiding appreciation of and devotion to books. She had an extensive collection of antiquarian treasures that she displayed regularly in BABA's main gallery. And miracle of miracles, she'd managed to turn BABA into a profitable enterprise and a prestigious place to visit and contribute one's time and money to.

Most importantly, she had brought me on staff to teach bookbinding classes here, and she'd also hired me privately to do restoration work on her own books. In exchange, I suppose I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt when it came to her questionable behavior. Yes, I could be bought. I wasn't ashamed to admit it. After all, a girl's got to make a living.

I walked through the foyer where artists' brochures and postcards and flyers and all the local free press papers were stacked, then entered the main gallery. The room was large with a dramatically high ceiling and skylights. Two ramps led down to the lower gallery where glass display cases showed off the best works of the visiting bookbinders and artists. In the center was an unusual mix of ancient art and new technology, including an antique printing press and a large freestanding, eighteenth-century cast-iron paper cutter with a thirty-inch blade. Next to these was BABA's latest acquisition, a computerized guillotine that could cut cleanly through six inches of compacted paper.

The lower gallery was surrounded by the upper level, conveniently referred to as the upper gallery, that ran the perimeter of the room. Here were the main display walls and two large alcoves filled with bookshelves and comfortable seating areas.

Strolling through the upper gallery, I spied Naomi Fontaine, Layla's niece and BABA's facilities coordinator. She was busy assembling a new display of children's vintage pop-up books.

To my left, on the main display wall, a number of darkly dramatic, steampunk-style wood block prints were hung. On another wall, tall shelves of beautifully bound books were available to study or purchase.

Off the main room were three long halls that angled off like spokes on a bicycle wheel. Down these halls were classrooms, offices, mudrooms, a number of individual workrooms, the printing press room and several smaller galleries.

"Hi, Naomi," I called out. "Is Layla in her office?"

She bared her teeth at me. "She's in there and she's in rare form today. Good luck."

"Thanks for the heads up," I said, wondering, not for the first time, why Naomi Fontaine stayed with BABA. She would never get the respect she deserved from her aunt Layla and would always stand in her shadow. Naomi was a true bluestocking who, in another era, might've been just as happy as a cloistered nun. She was pretty in an understated way, and talented enough, but she was a mouse. Shy and a bit obsequious, she lacked the dynamic personality it took to appeal to the high society types with whom her aunt Layla hobnobbed.

Still, it was wise to keep on Naomi's good side. She was the person to talk to if you wanted to get anything done here. If Layla was the brains behind BABA, Naomi was its heart and soul. She had her faults, but everything ran smoothly because of her.

I crossed the gallery and walked down the North hall toward Layla's office. I was anxious to show her the restoration work I'd done on a rotted-out copy of a nineteenth century illustrated edition of Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist. She'd given me the decrepit old book to restore and if I said so myself, I'd done a fabulous job for her.

Layla planned to use the book as the centerpiece for BABA's week-long celebration of the one hundred seventy-fifth anniversary of Dickens' publication of Oliver Twist. She was calling the festival "'Twisted." Layla was always throwing lavish parties to celebrate obscure anniversaries such as this one. Anything to drum up sponsors and visitors to BABA.

I was grateful for the work and figured that as long as Layla was willing to provide me with books to restore, I was willing to believe she had a heart buried somewhere in that size Double D chest of hers.

As I reached the end of the long hall leading to Layla's office, I could hear voices, loud ones. Her door was closed but the angry shouts penetrated through the thick wood. I was about to knock when the door flew open. I jumped back and missed being hit by an inch.

"You'll be sorry you crossed me, you bitch," a furious man declared, then stormed out of Layla's office. I stood flat against the wall as a handsome, well-dressed Asian man stomped past me, down the hall, across the gallery and out the front door.

I took a moment to catch my breath, then peeked around the doorway to make sure Layla was all right. She sat at her desk, casually applying red lipstick and looking as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She glanced at me over her mirror. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"That guy sounded like he wanted to wring your neck."

"Men." She waved away my concern, swept her cosmetics into her top drawer, then stood and rounded her desk. She was dressed in an impossibly tight, short black skirt and a crisp white blouse unbuttoned to show off her impressive cleavage. In her five-inch black patent leather stilettos, she looked like an overeducated Pussycat Doll.

"Give me the book," she demanded.

I hesitated, feeling a bit like a mother wavering at the thought of handing a beloved child over to a stern East German nanny. Yes, the woman might make sure the child was fed, but she wouldn't love it.

"Brooklyn." She snapped her fingers.

I don't know why I faltered. The book belonged to Layla. Aside from that, she was my employer. I exhaled heavily and carefully handed her the wrapped parcel, then had to watch as she ripped the brown paper to shreds to find the Oliver Twist.

"Oh, it's perfect," she said greedily as she turned the book over and back. "You did a good job."

"Thank you." Good? It was a great job. If I said so myself. She'd given it to me in tattered pieces and I'd turned it into a stunning piece of art.

She stared at the elegant spine, studying my work, then she glanced inside and stared at the endpapers. Turning to the title page, she murmured, "No one will ever suspect this isn't a first edition."

I laughed. "Unless they know books."

She glared at me. "Nobody knows that much about books. If I say it's a first edition, then that's what they'll believe."

"Probably," I conceded.

Then she jabbed her finger at the date on the title page. I tried not to wince but I could see the dent she'd made in the thick vellum. "It says right there, printed in 1838. The year he wrote it."

"Right," I said slowly. "But that doesn't mean anything. We both know it's not a first edition."

Her left eye began to twitch and she rubbed her temple as she leaned her hip against the edge of her desk. "True. But no one's going to hear the real story, are they, Brooklyn?"

Her tone was vaguely threatening. Was I missing something?

"Are you saying I should lie about the book?" I asked.

"I'm saying you should keep your mouth shut."

"But what's the big deal? The festival is all about this book, and it's got an interesting history."

To me, anyway. The story went that, back in 1838, Charles Dickens was doing so well with the serialization of Oliver Twist that his publisher went behind his back and published the manuscript, using Dickens' pseudonym, "Boz." That first edition included all of the illustrator Cruikshank's drawings.

Dickens was displeased because he'd intended to use his real name once the book was published. He was also unhappy with one of Cruikshank's drawings in the book, calling it too sentimental, according to some accounts. He insisted that the publisher pull that edition and revise it to his specifications. It was done within the week.

A true first edition of Oliver Twist, written under the pseudonym of Boz, with Cruikshank's unauthorized drawing, was beyond rare.

Layla's book had Charles Dickens listed as author on the title page, and the Cruikshank illustration was missing. So, officially, it didn't count as a first edition.

"I don't want you going around telling people about this book, do you hear me?" Layla pushed away from the desk, drew herself up to her full height and glared down at me. She was only an inch or so taller than I, but it was a good attempt at intimidation. "For the purposes of the festival, this book is a first edition, got it?"

I looked at her sideways. "So you want me to lie."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"It just seems like the real story would be more interesting to people."

"Jesus, do you ever give up?" she asked. "Nobody cares about your stupid book theories, and if you like working here, you'll say what I tell you to say. Capice?"

I sucked my cheeks in, something I tended to do whenever I wanted to chew somebody's ass but needed to hold my tongue instead. After a long moment, I gritted my teeth and said, "Got it."

Casually slapping the exquisite, nineteenth century volume against her hand, she said, "That's what I thought you'd say."

"You know what?" I turned toward the door. "I've got to go get my classroom set up."

She pointed her finger at me as though it were a gun and she'd just pulled the trigger. "Good idea."

I rushed out of her office and made it back to the central gallery before the urge to strangle her took over.

Naomi caught one look at my face and snorted. "Glad I'm not the only one she's picking on today."

"Yeah, lucky me." As I headed toward my classroom, I couldn't decide what annoyed me more: the fact that Layla hadn't given me enough props for my work, or the idea that I should lie about the whole first edition issue. The lack of props won out. I'd done a spectacular job of restoring the book but she was just too screwed up and snotty to say so, more than that pitiful "good job" comment she'd grudgingly given me. I would have to think twice if she offered me any more restoration work.

But Layla was forgotten as a sudden, bone-deep chill settled over me, as if someone had just walked on my grave. My mother used to say that, but I never knew what it meant until this moment.

"Well, if it isn't the black widow herself," a woman said in a familiar, high, whiny tone that was purported to cause dogs' ears to bleed. "Wherever she goes, somebody dies."

Minka LaBoeuf.

My worst nightmare. To think I'd been so happy to be here only a few minutes ago.

I turned and glared at her. "So maybe you ought to leave, just to be on the safe side."

"Very funny," she said, tossing back her overly processed, stringy black hair. "I should think they'd be afraid to let you in here with your record."

I ignored that comment, just as I ignored the cheap, fuzzy black angora sweater she wore that was causing tiny black hairs to stick in unattractive clumps on her face and neck. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm an instructor now," she said, jutting her pointy chin out smugly. "I ran into Layla at the book fair in Edinburgh and she offered me the position."

"What?" I might've shrieked the word. I couldn't help it. Minka was the world's worst bookbinder. She destroyed books. She was like the bubonic plague to books. Why in the world would anyone hire her to teach bookbinding? "You've got to be kidding."

CHAPTER ONE

"You're having sex!" my best friend Robin cried as soon as I opened the door. "I mean, not currently, thank God, but recently. Oh, I'm so happy for you!"

"Say it a little louder, why don't you?" I yanked her into my apartment and quickly shut the door behind her. "I don't think they heard you up in Petaluma."

She dropped her bags on my worktable and pulled me into a hug. "Your closest neighbors are two lesbians. Do you really think they'll judge?"

"It's nobody's business," I grumbled. "I'm not even going to ask how you can tell."

"It's a gift." She patted my cheek. "Besides, just look at you. You're glowing."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, feeling my cheeks warm up. So maybe she was right, maybe I was glowing. Did she have to point it out to the world?

Robin Tully had been my BFF for years, ever since we were eight years old and our parents joined the same spiritual commune in the hills of Sonoma County. We first bonded over Barbie dolls, Johnny Depp, and a mutual disgust of dirt. Now, all that dirt has transformed itself into the upscale town of Dharma, a wine country destination spot for Bay Area foodies. But back in the day, it was backwoods enough to make two fastidious little girls go berserk.

Robin grinned, amused by my reaction. Then she scooped up her bags from the table. "I brought wine and presents."

"I ordered pizza," I said, leading the way down the short hall to my living area.

"I'd kill for pizza."

"No need. I'll share." I pulled two wine glasses from the kitchen shelf and set them on the smooth wood surface of the bar that separated my kitchen from the living room. "I missed you a lot. How was India?"

"India was exotic and wonderful and smoggy, and I missed you, too." She pulled the bottle of wine from one of her bags and handed it to me to open. "And I missed showers. And ice cream. And hamburgers."

"The pizza's got sausage and pepperoni."

"Oh God, meat." She closed her eyes and sighed. "It sounds like heaven."

"I have ice cream, too."

"I love you, have I told you lately?"

With a laugh, I poured the wine and handed her the glass. "Welcome home."

"Thanks." We clicked glasses and she took a good long drink. "You have no idea how happy I am to be back."

The doorbell rang and I ran to pay the pizza delivery man. After piling pizza and salad onto plates and pouring more wine, we sat at my dining room table to eat.

Besides Robin's work as a sculptor, she owned a small travel company that specialized in tours of sacred and mystical destinations all over the world. In the beginning, she had catered mainly to fellow commune members, but her client base was growing. It seemed there were more and more people interested in stone circles, pyramids, Gothic cathedrals, and harmonic power centers. And who better to guide them than my friendly and gifted pal, Robin? Her tours catered to the adventurous seeker of esoteric knowledge who had tons of cash to throw her way. She had just returned from leading a group of four couples on a three week tour of India.

So for three long weeks I'd been gnashing my teeth, unable to share my exciting news—specifically, the news about me and my mysterious British boyfriend—with my closest friend. And Robin had guessed it the very first second she saw me. I supposed that's what the whole BFF thing was all about.

We opened another bottle of wine as she regaled me with the highlights of her India trip and I filled her in on all the news about me and Derek Stone, the hunky British security expert I'd met a few months back during a murder investigation. Yes, we'd done the deed, as she'd shouted to the world earlier. And yes, he was opening a San Francisco branch of Stone Security. And yes, our relationship was so new that I still tingled every time I thought of him, and yes, I'd boldly offered him a place to stay with me until he found a home in San Francisco. So yes, he was staying with me, but no, he wasn't home at the moment. Right now, he was flying back from Kuala Lumpur where he'd provided security for an installation of priceless artwork from the Louvre.

And yes, I'd been threatened by another vicious killer. Robin had been packing to leave for India at the time and wasn't around to hear the entire story, so I filled her in on all the gory details. The killer was safely tucked away in jail now. And that was my last three weeks in a nutshell.

As we cleared the dishes, I figured it was time to ask Robin the burning question I'd avoided long enough.

"So, did you see your mother?" I asked cautiously.

Robin scowled. "And we were having such a lovely evening."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault," she said with a sigh. "Yes, I saw her. I left my group in New Delhi and flew down to Varanasi to spend some time with her. And yes, she's just as annoying as ever."

That was no big surprise. She and her mother, Shiva Quinn, had always had issues.

Shiva's real name was Myra Tully and she was raised by missionaries. Suffice to say, Myra had a real savior complex from the get-go. In the 1970's, Myra had accompanied the Beatles to India to see Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. While there, she changed her name to Shiva Quinn. No one was sure where Quinn came from. As for Shiva, Robin always thought it was telling that her mother had named herself after the supreme god of Hinduism.

When Robin was really irritated with Shiva, she'd call her Myra.

It didn't help that her mother was tall, glamorous and model thin. She was also sophisticated and interesting and everyone loved to be around her. Her missionary upbringing gave her an awareness of the world and its problems, which led her to become the spokesperson for a humanitarian organization called Feed the World.

By the time Robin was ten years old, her mother was traveling constantly, returning home every few months for only a day or so. But that was okay with me, because when Shiva left the commune, Robin would stay at my house. We had a slumber party every night. I would've been happy if Shiva stayed away permanently, but I could never say that to Robin.

"How long did you visit with her?" I asked as I started the dishwasher.

"Three excruciating days." Robin laughed drily. "She's such a drama queen. She couldn't settle in London or Paris. No, she had to go live in Varanasi. I swear she thinks she's Mother Theresa in Prada. She shows up at the marketplace and women beg for her advice on everything from childcare to fashion. Childcare. Are you kidding me?"

"That's a little surprising."

"You think?" Robin shook her head. "But you know she loves it all. Never mind. I promised myself I wouldn't bitch about her, but it's always so tempting. Anyway, the city of Varanasi itself was awesome. I'll probably return with a tour group sometime. I saw the Monkey Temple and walked for hours along the Ghats overlooking the Ganges. It was amazing. I took lots of photos. I'll send you the link."

The Ghats were the flights of steps that ran for miles along the Ganges River. "It all sounds fascinating."

"It was. And I have a surprise for you from my mother."

"For me?"

"Yes." She held up one of the bags she'd brought with her. "Do you want to see it?"

"Of course I do."

"Let's go to your workroom."

My curiosity piqued, I picked up our wine glasses and followed her to the front room of my loft where I did my bookbinding work. We pulled two tall chairs close together and sat at my worktable. Robin turned the shopping bag on its side and slid the contents out onto the surface. It was a worn leather satchel, made in the style of a courier bag with a long, wide shoulder strap, but it had to be decades old.

"It's ... a bag," I said. "How thoughtful."

Robin chuckled. "Wait for it. You know my mother. We must build the suspense."

She unbuckled the satchel and pulled out something wrapped in a wadded old swath of Indian print material.

"Um, is it a scarf?" I said, touching the faded, scratchy woven fabric. Once, it might've been dark green with burgundy and orange swirls of paisley, but it was faded now. Colorful beads, tiny brass animals and chunks of mirrored glass were woven into the fabric and tied into the braided fringe at each end. "Is this really for me?"

"Hell, no." Robin wrinkled her nose at the matted material. "That's my mother's idea of wrapping paper, I guess."

"Ah."

"She told me I could keep it and wear it. She just doesn't get me. Never did." Resigned, she flicked one of the silvery beads.

"No, she never did." The threadbare fabric had an ethnic style that was intriguing, but I knew Robin wouldn't be caught dead in it. I stroked the worn leather of the satchel. "This bag is nice."

"I suppose it is, if you're a camel driver."

I laughed, then fingered the old scarf again. "Maybe Shiva's been in India a little too long."

"You think?" She shook her head as she gingerly unwrapped the cloth. "Okay, get ready." She pulled the last of the fabric away. "This is for you."

"Oh, my God," I whispered.

It was a book. The most exquisite jeweled book I'd ever seen. And possibly the oldest. It was large, about twelve inches tall by nine inches wide, and almost three inches thick. I suppressed the urge to whip out my metal ruler.

The heavily padded leather binding was decorated with intricate gilding and precious gems. Teardrop-shaped rubies were affixed to each corner. Small, round sapphires lined the circular center where a gilded peacock spread its tail feathers. Tiny diamonds, emeralds and rubies were encrusted in the feathers. The thickly gilded borders of the cover and turn-ins were reminiscent of the patterns used by royal French bookbinders of the eighteenth century. Some of the gold had flaked off and the red leather was rubbed and faded in spots.

"Peacocks are the national bird of India," Robin said. "Did you know that?"

"I had no idea." I picked up the book and studied the foredge. With the book closed, the pages were deckled, or untrimmed, for a ragged effect. I could tell that the paper itself was thick vellum.

I checked the spine. It read Vatsyayana. I looked at Robin. "What is this?"

"Open it and find out."

"I'm almost afraid." But I lifted the front cover and turned to the title page. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"The Kama Sutra?"

"Yes." Robin grinned.

"From your mother?"

Now she laughed. "It actually belongs to one of Mom's friends who's been wanting to have it refurbished for a long time. Mom insisted there was no one better for the job than you."

"That's so sweet."

"I thought so." Robin sipped her wine as she watched me ogle the book.

"Who's her friend?" I asked.

"His name is Rajiv Mizra and she's known him forever. Nice man. Wealthier than sin, naturally, or why would Mom hang out with him? I think he's been in love with her for ages but she always says they're just good friends."

"Very interesting."

"Yeah, I wonder if maybe they'll get together eventually. Anyway, he wrote a letter of authorization and tucked it inside the book. That's to let you know he's consented to let you do whatever is necessary to make it sparkle and shine. So, you think you can clean it up?"

"I can take it apart?"

She laughed. "I guess, but you don't have to sound so excited about it."

"Are you serious? I live for that."

"Good times." She took another sip of wine.

"It is for me." I stroked the corded spine, counting the ribs.

"Once it's cleaned up, they'd also like you to have it appraised."

"Sure." Opening the cover, I studied the dentelles, the lacy patterns of gold that were worked into the leather borders. Some dentelles were so intricate and unique, they were as good as a bookbinder's signature. I couldn't wait to study this pattern more closely. "I wonder why your mom recommended me to do the work."

"Apparently, Abraham visited her a few years ago and talked you up."

"Really?" I smiled softly. "Isn't that nice?" Abraham had been my bookbinding teacher for years. He'd died a few months back and I still missed him every day. I turned another page with care, unwilling to disturb the binding too much. The book was at least two hundred years old and I was amazed to see that it was written in French.

I turned to a page near the middle of the book and saw a hand-painted illustration of a couple having sex in a most fascinating style. I closed it quickly. Then I couldn't help but sneak another peek.

"Wow, it's painted by hand," I said after clearing my throat. "Isn't that interesting?"

"Yeah, it's all about the strokes." She snickered. "Paint strokes, I mean. Beautiful."

We both began to giggle. It must've been the wine.

Robin let out a deep breath. "Well, hey, speaking of sex ..."

"Were we?"

She laughed. "Sort of." She waved her hands as if to get rid of that thought. "And I'm not talking about the sex you're having. It's about me. I met a man."

Chapter One

Hello, my name is Brooklyn Wainwright and I am a book addict.

It was Friday morning and I was on my way to the Covington Library to sniff out my personal version of crack cocaine: books. Old, rare, and beautiful.

I didn't need a twelve-step program; I just needed more bookbinding work to keep me off the streets. That was why I'd driven over to Pacific Heights to see my good friend, Ian McCullough, head curator of the Covington Library in San Francisco. He'd called earlier to let me know he had a job for me.

I found a lucky parking spot less than half a block away. Lucky was the perfect way to describe how I was feeling that day. As I walked up the broad concrete steps of the imposing Italianate mansion, I took a moment to appreciate this beautiful building, its setting here at the highest point of my favorite city, and this glorious, early fall day.

A few months ago, after coming within striking distance of yet another callous criminal bent on killing me and a few close friends, I had made a vow to be grateful for every wonderful thing in my life. My family; my friends; my gorgeous, exciting lover; the career I enjoyed so much; my books; pizza—I was grateful for them all. Life was good.

So now I stopped to breathe the crisp, clear air; smile at the colorful sight of newly planted pansies lining the sidewalks; and savor the stunning view of San Francisco Bay in the distance.

The moment passed and I strolled up the last few steps. Pushing open the heavy iron doors, I walked through the elegant foyer of the Covington, with its broad checkerboard marble floor, coffered ceiling, and sweeping staircases. Those stairs led to the second and third floors, where dozens of rooms held priceless artwork and countless collections of the greatest books ever written throughout history. In almost every alcove and nook, a visitor would find a comfortable chair with a good light for reading. It was the most welcoming place for a book lover I'd ever known and I loved it as much now as I did the first time I came here when I was eight years old.

I bypassed the main exhibit hall and headed straight for Ian's office, down the wide corridor that led to the inner sanctum. I was eager to get hold of the book he was so excited about and envisioned myself rushing home, tearing it apart, and putting it back together again. With utmost love and care, of course.

Yes, life was good indeed.

That thought was snuffed out as a sudden, cold sense of dread permeated the very air around me. I shuddered in dismay. In any perfect apple, a worm might be found.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Shudders rippled through me at the shrill voice of Minka LaBoeuf, my archenemy.

My stomach bubbled and roiled in revulsion and I instantly regretted the Spanish omelet I'd eaten for breakfast. I turned to face her and was sorry I had. Chartreuse-and-fuchsia-striped leggings appeared to have been sprayed onto Minka's ample lower body. As God is my witness, the leggings were topped by a matching tube top (a tube top!) and a pixie band (a pixie band!) in her hair. She looked like a demented barber pole.

I couldn't make this stuff up.

"I was invited to come here today," I said, shielding my eyes from the glare. "I know you can't say the same, so you should leave. Be sure to let the door hit your ass on the way out."

Baring her teeth, she snarled and said, "You're such a bitch!"

I smiled with concern. "Really? Is that the best you've got? Pitiful."

She moved in close, so close I could smell her new perfume—Eau de Goat—and hissed at me. "If you don't stop trying to take away my jobs, I'll make sure you never work in this town again."

You'll never work in this town again? Had she really said that? Of course she had. Minka was the queen of the tattered cliché.

"Threats, Minka?" I backed away from her, knowing she had an unruly left hook. "Ian won't like hearing that you threatened me."

She sniffed imperiously. "Ian is a jerk."

"I'll be sure to tell him you said so."

"You're a jerk, too."

Feeling disappointed, I shook my head. "Have you been sick or something? Your comebacks are so lame, it's pathetic." I didn't stick around to hear her answer, but turned and hurried off. I didn't look back, either—possibly a tactical error where Minka was concerned, since she was the master of the sneak attack. But honestly, I couldn't take another violent shock to my nervous system.

"You'll be sorry!" she shrieked.

I rubbed my arms against the chill but kept moving. Minka had the kind of aura that stirred up all the frigid, stagnant chi that existed in any space. Or maybe auras and chi had nothing to do with it. I just knew she scared the hell out of me. Once I turned the corner and was out of her eyesight, I breathed easier. It was warmer now. The spell was broken.

I knew that sounded a little wacky, but I'd been stalked and harassed and, yes, punched in the face by Minka LaBoeuf. I wasn't about to question the possibility that she could cast spells with those evil eyes of hers.

Strolling briskly down the wide hall, I entered the suite of business offices and greeted Wylie, Ian's current assistant.

"He's waiting for you, Ms. Wainwright. Go right in."

"Thanks, Wylie."

I knocked, then opened Ian's door.

"Hey, you," Ian said, jumping up from his chair and rushing to greet me with a hug. "I'm glad you're here. I've been itching to get your opinion on what to do about this book."

Shaking off the last of my Minka-induced negativity, I smiled and hugged him back. "I can't wait to see it."

"I'll warn you beforehand that the outside of the book is less than impressive. Well, actually, it's in horrible shape, but I know you can make it shine. The inside is exquisite." He led the way across the room to his lovingly restored Chippendale conference table. We sat, and I watched him slowly unwrap several layers of white tissue paper to reveal a rather nondescript book.

The book was big, probably twelve inches tall by nine inches wide, but it was less than one inch thick. The leather cover was green, or it had been at one time; now it was faded to a dull gray. The front cover was badly frayed along the inner edges and outer hinge, where it would probably break apart at the least jarring movement.

And it was disturbingly familiar. I frowned and chewed my lip as I reached for it.

"I know it's ugly," Ian reiterated, misreading my reaction. "But the paper is still in excellent condition, and just wait until you see the illustrations."

"Okay." I picked it up cautiously, not only because it was old and falling apart, but because I was afraid of what I would find when I opened it. I stared at the spine. Beauty and the Beast, it read, though the letters had lost most of their gilding.

I opened the book, bypassed the flyleaf, and turned to the front illustration across from the title page. It was colorful and sweet and classically Victorian. A tea party for two. Beauty wore a regal red cape and her golden blond hair flowed in waves down her back. She sat at a table, pouring tea for the Beast, who was depicted as a huge brown bear. His appearance was hairy and scary, yet he seemed dignified and well mannered. The tea set was blue. I could've described it blindfolded.

I paged back to the inside flyleaf and stared at the inscription written there. My throat tightened and the pressure building in my chest began to ache.

"It's very rare," Ian said in a rush. "First edition. Look at the interior pages. They're fantastic. I just need you to fashion a new cover and do some cleanup, and we'll have a masterpiece to display in the children's gallery."

I ran my fingers over the dried ink and reread the sentimental inscription. The scrawled penmanship had a beauty all its own.

"Earth to Brooklyn," he snapped. "What's going on? Can you do the work or not?"

I shook myself out of my melancholy and glanced up at Ian. "I'm not sure I can."

"What do you mean, you're not sure? You could do this restoration in your sleep."

"Oh yeah, I can do the work." I turned the book over to see if the damage extended to the back joint, but it was still smooth and unfrayed. "But . . . I don't think I can do the work."

He scowled, shoved his chair back from the table, and stood over me. "You're speaking in riddles. What's wrong with the damn book?"

"Nothing's wrong with the book," I said, and met his gaze directly. "Except that it was stolen."

"No, it wasn't." He stared at my expression, then shook his head vigorously. "No way. What the hell are you talking about? I bought it from Joseph Taylor, the most reputable bookseller in the city. It was a clean deal."

"I believe you." Joe Taylor was an old acquaintance of mine. My mentor, Abraham, had known him forever, and over the years we'd done a lot of bookbinding work for him.

I touched the crisp, deckled edges of the paper and fought to stay calm. "But I'd like to find out who sold it to Joe, because I know they weren't the rightful owner."

Frustrated, Ian scratched his head, causing his hair to spike wildly. "What aren't you telling me, Brooklyn? How do you know this book was stolen? Who did it belong to?"

Awash in memories, I didn't realize until too late that I had tears in my eyes. I brushed them away with a fierce swipe of my hand and faced him. "Me, Ian. Once upon a time, this book belonged to me."

Chapter Two

"You?" Ian shook his head in confusion. "So what happened? You sold it to someone?"

"No." Reluctantly, I pushed the book away and stood. "No, I gave it away."

"Well, then, there's no problem."

I laughed, but the sound was empty. "Believe me, there's a problem."

"I was afraid you'd say that," he muttered, and began to pace back and forth between the conference table and his massive antique mahogany desk.

Confused and unsure what to do, I leaned my hip against the table and glanced around the office, trying to distract myself by admiring Ian's latest artwork. He still had the Diebenkorn painting of a woman drinking coffee prominently displayed behind his desk, but there were three miniature Rembrandt engravings on the wall closest to the door that I didn't remember seeing before.

As always when I visited Ian, I thought how nice it would be to borrow from the vast Covington collection to furnish one's office. And if the artwork didn't impress a visitor, one could always enjoy the incomparable view of the Golden Gate Bridge seen through the big picture window by the conference table. I turned and stared out at the wide expanse of the bay and tried to appreciate the amazing vista.

"You want to tell me what happened?" Ian asked from close behind me.

I sighed and slowly turned around. "It's a long story. Are you ready to hear it?"

He folded his arms across his chest. "I suppose I'll have to."

I smiled. "Did Austin ever introduce you to Max Adams?"

"Max? Sure. Didn't he die a few years ago?"

"It was almost three years ago," I said. But thanks to the reappearance of Beauty and the Beast, I was reliving the day as if it were yesterday.

I'd had a crush on Max Adams from the first day I'd laid eyes on him when I was ten years old. Max's family had followed Avatar Robson Benedict—otherwise known as Guru Bob—to the Sonoma commune he'd established, just as my family had a few years earlier. So we all grew up together in Dharma. Max was my oldest brother Austin's best friend until they each went away to different colleges.

While at Stanford, Austin met Ian and brought him home for Thanksgiving dinner. That's how Ian and I met, way back when. I was long over Max by then and started dating Ian, who made me laugh and shared my love of books and art and Monty Python movies. Our relationship got serious for a minute or so when Ian proposed marriage, but it didn't take long for us to realize we weren't meant for each other. Happily, we'd remained close friends and book-world colleagues.

Ian had recently proven correct my decision to end our engagement by coming out of the closet. But that was a whole other story.

Chapter One

"We call it the Library Suite," my hostess said, beaming with pride as she led me into the spacious bedroom that would be all mine for the next six days.

"I can see why." As I looked around the room, I hoped my expression remained calm despite the volatile mix of shock, fascination, and trepidation coursing through me as I took in the mad proliferation of books.

I love books, but this is crazy, I thought. That funny old cliché about the walls closing in on you? It wasn't so funny anymore. On the other hand, there were so many books, I wouldn't be able to see if the walls were getting closer or not.

"Isn't it marvelous?" Grace said, tugging to smooth out the pale sage duvet cover on the king-sized bed. "Ruth teases me about my book obsession, but I have a good time with it."

"I'm stunned," I muttered. It was the truth. The number of books she'd managed to cram into this spacious bedroom/sitting room was astounding.

I'm Brooklyn Wainwright, book-restoration expert and lover of books, good food, and wine, and lately, doughnuts. I had driven up to Lake Tahoe that morning with my two favorite neighbors, Suzie Stein and Vinnie Patel, to spend the week at the home of Suzie's wealthy, eccentric aunt Grace Crawford. We were here to celebrate Grace's birthday. It was the Big 5-0, and Grace wanted to do it up in style.

Grace's good friend, Ruth Kinsley, had convinced Grace to celebrate her fiftieth birthday with an old-fashioned house party on the lake. In her engraved invitation, Grace had promised her guests that this weeklong party would be the most delightful, most fabulous shindig ever, the sort of party we'd all still be talking about for the next fifty years.

I was looking forward to the party atmosphere, but I also hoped I might get some quiet relaxation time. After all, I was about to spend seven long days in a gorgeous home with little else to do all day but sit around and enjoy the beauty of its idyllic lakefront setting. Sounded good to me. I'd been working too hard lately and the long hours were starting to catch up with me. In fact, watching Grace refold the cashmere throw at the end of the bed made me want to lie down and take a nap.

"I looked over my list of guests," Grace said, fluffing one of the pillows. "And I couldn't think of anyone who would appreciate this room more than you."

"That's sweet, Grace," I said, hoping she could hear the sincerity in my voice as I parked my rolling suitcase near the foot of the bed. "You know how much I love books."

"You and me both," she said, laughing as she glanced around. "I guess that's pretty obvious."

I laughed with her. It would be rude not to, right? I continued my slow turn, gazing at the four walls that were covered in bookshelves crammed with books. There was the occasional window, thank goodness, and a few pieces of necessary bedroom furniture: an elegant dresser and mirror; a small but comfortable love seat that faced two matching chairs at one end of the large room; and a sumptuous bed with an ornate, paneled headboard filled with—you guessed it—more books. Other than those items of furniture and the windows, it was bookshelves that occupied every inch of wall space. Even the dresser held a row of books lined up beneath the matching mirror.

"I had no idea you had so many," I said.

She lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "I can't seem to quit collecting."

Time to seek professional help, I thought, not unkindly, as I continued to survey the room. I knew Grace was a book lover. That was how we'd met. About a year ago, Grace had mentioned to her niece, Suzie, that she wanted some of her favorite books rebound, so Suzie had recommended me. Since then, Grace and I had done business several times. I'd visited her home once before and we'd had afternoon tea in her grand salon.

Grace Crawford was nothing like what I'd expected. I had imagined a genteel, gray-haired granny type who knitted quietly, surrounded by her twelve cats. For excitement, she might play a mean game of canasta.

Instead, Grace was down-to-earth and fun. A ball of energy, she was petite, like Suzie, and wore her dark brown hair cut in a sassy bob. She favored bright, loose clothing, long dresses and flowing tops that billowed dramatically when she walked into a room. The first time I met her, I'd had the instant impression of a colorful, tropical bird in perpetual motion. I liked her.

Except for this massive home perched on twenty private acres overlooking Lake Tahoe—well, and the gazillions of valuable books and all the lovely, expensive furniture and furnishings and artwork inside the house—you would never know that Grace Crawford was a self-made billionaire. She had amassed a fortune in the computer-gaming industry and was recognized among her family and friends and most of the world at large as the original geeky game girl. In personality and demeanor, she was the oddest blend of Old World elegance, laid-back sixties cool, and nerdy earnestness. I liked all those aspects of her. And Grace's quirky sensibilities—such as putting a suit of armor in the powder room, or serving bite-sized Twinkies next to the delicate cucumber sandwiches at afternoon tea—never failed to make me smile.

Plus, she'd given me a lot of business lately. I liked that about her, too, naturally.

Vinnie had often referred to Grace as a book hoarder, but I'd dealt with a true hoarder recently and couldn't agree with Vinnie's assessment. When I walked through the rooms of Grace's home, I didn't get the same closed-in, claustrophobic, unstable feeling that I'd felt inside the hoarder's house. Grace was an unconventional collector, for sure, but a hoarder? I didn't think so. But now, seeing this room, this Library Suite in which I would be living for the next seven days, I was beginning to think twice.

Still, the room was beautifully furnished, large, and, most of all, clean. There was no scent of mustiness, either. A hint of mustiness could be charming in a hole-in-the-wall used bookstore on Green Street in San Francisco, but not in a bedroom in which I would be sleeping for a week.

So here I was in a clean, charming bedroom with lots of books and even a small couch where I could relax in quiet comfort. Why am I complaining? I wondered. And right then and there I made a decision to be grateful and enjoy this room with all its books and nooks and crannies and quirkiness.

When Grace had called to invite me to her birthday party, she'd asked if I wouldn't mind doing some bookbinding work while I was here. I had immediately agreed and had packed my travel set of tools and repair supplies. I was always happier when I was busy with books. Grace not only wanted some repairs made, but she had also asked me to check out and oversee the library archivist she'd hired recently to catalog her extensive collection of books.

Glancing around the room now, I realized what a huge job it would be. Heck, it would take more than a week to catalog this one bedroom alone. The archivist and I had our work cut out for us.

Grace was watching me, so I flashed her a genuine smile as I gave the walls one more glance. "Thank you so much. I know I'll have a wonderful time here."

She seemed pleased as she nudged her glasses up her nose. "Now, the library is just down the hall, so you can come and go without disturbing anyone else in the house. Most of the other guests are in the second- and third-floor bedrooms, but I didn't think you'd mind being on the first floor."

I was determined to ease her mind. "I don't mind at all. This couldn't be better. You know me. Can't get enough books, right?"

She laughed, a sweet trilling sound completely incongruous with her geek-dynamo personality, but charming. "I'll let you get settled. And I'll tell you what I've told everyone else. I want you to feel free to explore the whole house. I know you've been here before, but you've never had the full tour. You've got to see some of the other rooms. There are many surprises."

"I can't wait. I've heard about some of them," I said. On the drive earlier, Vinnie had given me a hint of some of the more bizarre features of this gigantic fun house.

"Oh, good." She rubbed her hands together gleefully. "If I were you, I would start with the conservatory. We have a marvelous collection of exotic flora and it's such a soothing, pretty space. But when you get tired of all that peace and quiet, the game room is not to be missed. It's so much fun."

"That's what Suzie said."

"Suzie loves the game room. And the Music Room is pretty special if you're into musical instruments. We have a three-hundred-year-old harpsichord that still sounds beautiful. And we can supply a complete wind and brass section for anyone who's in the mood to jam. And percussion, of course. Every noisemaker you can think of." She laughed, then added, "Or you can just have a seat and watch things happen. There's a player piano, but I've also rigged some puppets to play saxophone and guitar. It's a total blast."

She had morphed into an excited young gamer. "It sounds awesome," I said. "I can't wait to do some exploring."

"It's an adventure, for sure." She took a breath and appeared to remember she was a grown-up. Grabbing my arm, she strolled with me to the bedroom door. "We're all meeting for cocktails at five o'clock in the Gold Salon. That's up the grand stairway. Turn left and go halfway down the hall. It's on the north side of the house, overlooking the lake. I drew a map for everyone and left one on your nightstand."

"Oh, thanks. I think I remember how to find the grand staircase, but after that I'm lost."

She chuckled. "Ruth dubbed it the grand stairway when she first saw it and we've called it that ever since. It's just the main staircase off the front door."

"I remember. It is pretty grand, now that you mention it."

She smiled. "If you get lost, just look out any window. If you can see the lake, you're looking north. We have two main hallways running the length of the house: one in the front of the house and one in the back. Two side halls, the east and the west. If you can remember that your room is off the back hall, closest to the lake, you'll always find your way."

"I think I've got it," I said, utterly confused.

She laughed again. "Oh, you'll get lost once or twice, but that just makes it all the more fun. Now, don't be late for cocktails. I can't wait for all my favorite people to meet and mingle."

"I'll be there," I assured her as we waved good-bye to each other. I stood at the doorway and watched her walk down the wide, wood-paneled hall and turn a corner. Grace didn't know me very well yet, but suffice to say I wouldn't miss a cocktail party for the world. I decided I would scout out the Gold Salon on my tour this afternoon. That way I wouldn't get lost and be late for cocktails. That would be rude.

Twenty minutes later my suitcase was emptied and stowed in a corner of the walk-in closet. I had hung up my dressy clothes and folded everything else in the dresser drawers. All my toiletries were arranged along the counter in my private bathroom, and I'd placed the books I'd brought with me on the table next to the love seat under the pretty bay window. As it turned out, bringing a few books along wasn't quite as necessary as I'd thought when I packed them. But how was I to know Grace Crawford owned every book ever written?

"Are you all settled?"

I glanced up and saw Vinnie standing in the open doorway. Suzie stood behind her, wearing a curious grin as her gaze swept my room. "Wow."

"Tell me about it."

"Holy kebabs, Brooklyn," Vinnie whispered, her voice tight with alarm as her eyes goggled at the sight of all those books. Abruptly, she whipped around and wagged her finger at Suzie. "This is exactly what I was afraid of." Then she whirled back to me, wearing a look of regret. "I'm sorry. Why don't we try to find you another room?"

"I'm okay here," I insisted. "I like it."

She turned back to Suzie. "You must apologize to Brooklyn for your aunt's crazitude."

"I'm not sure that's a word, babe," Suzie said.

"It should be," Vinnie said darkly. "It describes Grace perfectly."

"I think this is cool," Suzie said, walking into my room and looking around. "Besides, Brooklyn's met Aunt Grace before and knows she's a book nut. And she's been to the house before, too. So what's the big deal?"

"I never saw this room before," I muttered. "If Derek were here, he'd laugh his ass off. Me, entrapped by books. Obviously, my book-obsessed karma has come back to bite me on the butt."

"Wow, two butt mentions in less than ten seconds." Suzie gazed at me. "You must miss him a lot."

"I do, but I didn't know there was a correlation between Derek and, you know, butt references."

"Derek has a very attractive backside," Vinnie said. The words were even more humorous when said in her lilting Indian accent.

Suzie waggled her eyebrows. "Guess you can tell we take the subject of Derek's bum very seriously at our house."

"I appreciate that," I said, smiling. "I do, too. And I do miss him. But I'm happy to be here with you guys. And I know Derek would be happy to hear I was here with you guys for the week."

"He doesn't know you're here?" Vinnie asked.

I shrugged. "He left on assignment three weeks ago and I didn't have a chance to remind him."

"Can you call him?" Vinnie asked.

"I suppose I could if it were an emergency," I said. "But I'd rather not bother him otherwise."

"Don't worry. I'm sure he'd approve," Suzie said, and chuckled. "There's a lot less chance of you getting into trouble if you're with us."

"Not that we believe there will be any trouble," Vinnie said quickly, rapping her knuckles against the smooth wood top of the dresser. "But I'll knock wood just in case."

"Good thinking," I said, and tapped the wood frame of the bathroom door. I can use all the good-luck rituals and charms I can get.

It had been only a few months since trouble had last found me. I'd been at the mercy of someone who wanted to kill me, and that wasn't the first time it had happened. I'd tried to make light of it, but the jokes were losing steam. The fact was, I had an alarming tendency to find dead people, followed by an ineffable need to see that justice prevailed on their behalf. Invariably, I would end up in a face-to-face confrontation with the dead person's killer.

Chapter One

These be words I truly wrote from my own experience and in my own style, not borrowed from another nor glossed over with fancy words I cannot abide.
– from The Cookbook of Obedience Green

I don't mind admitting I'm a little obsessed with food. A childhood spent competing with five brothers and sisters at the dinner table will do that to you. I grew up loving good food as much as I love old books, which is saying a lot since I'm a bookbinder and old books are my life's blood.

My current food fixation is cheeseburgers, but I'm not picky; I love everything. Last month I was hooked on doughnuts. Before that, it was tamales. Chocolate is a constant, of course. I get happy chills when I see a new building going up in my neighborhood because it means that food trucks will start showing up every morning to feed the construction crew. And me. I love food trucks.

So given my deep admiration for all things foodie, it seems a cruel joke that the universe declined to endow me with even the teensiest smidgen of cooking talent. Damn you, universe! You can be a real bully sometimes. And never was your cosmic cruelty more evident than the day my oddball sister Savannah received her Grand Diplôme from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, France. Savannah, a chef? It wasn't fair!

Let's break it down. There are two kinds of people in the world: the ones who claim they "forgot to eat lunch," and the ones (like me) who have never missed a meal. Savannah has been forgetting to eat lunch throughout her life. How she wound up in the Wainwright family is a question for the ages. Equally perplexing is how she ended up in charge of a world-class gourmet kitchen. The girl forgets to eat!

Don't get me wrong; I love Savannah. I love all of my siblings. My peacenik parents always encouraged us kids to treat each other with infinite kindness and unconditional love, even while we were pulling each other's hair and stealing Barbie dolls and Legos.

So a few months ago when Savannah returned to Dharma, our hometown in the Sonoma wine country, and opened Arugula, a high-end vegetarian restaurant, I was thrilled for her. I marveled at her innovative menus and wine pairings. I cheered her fabulous reviews. I was in awe of her divine ability to create a chanterelle glaze that could so perfectly complement a heavenly pillow of delicate, hand-shaped ravioli, thus providing the perfect juxtaposition of taste and texture on the tongue.

But come on, universe! What about me? You couldn't even give me a heads up on how long to boil macaroni? Because I'm telling you, those instructions on the box are always wrong.

"This shouldn't be so difficult," I muttered, tossing the empty cardboard pasta box into the trash. I stood alone in my kitchen and stared in disgust at the mushy pasta draining in the colander. I'd been so careful this time, followed the directions to the letter, but once again the universe was out to get me.

I grabbed my wine glass and took a fortifying sip before reaching for yet another test noodle, biting into it and sighing in dismay. Yup, this one was just as soggy as the others. I turned the colander over and tossed the entire batch of pasta down the garbage disposal.

"What a waste." I was debating whether to torture another package of pasta or just call for a pizza when my doorbell rang. I dried my hands on a dishtowel, then jogged around the kitchen bar, down the hall and into my workshop where my front door was located.

Months of strange comings and goings in my building had me checking the peephole before unlocking the door and throwing it open.

"Speak of the devil," I said by way of greeting Savannah.

"Me? The devil?"

As she entered my home, she pushed her raincoat hood back and I blinked. It was still startling to see her smooth, shaved head instead of her usual mop of curly hair, but I had to admit that the bald look worked for her. Her facial features were petite and refined and she seemed to radiate healthy living. And if you were going to go eccentric, why not go bald?

"Yes, you." I took her damp coat and hung it on the back of one of my tall workshop chairs. "I was just thinking of you as I threw another batch of disgusting, overdone pasta down the drain."

She wiped away an imaginary tear. "That's so sweet. I think of you that way, too."

"Sorry, but I'm frustrated." I led the way back to the kitchen. "It's just not fair that I am completely incapable of boiling water, and then there's you. I don't get it."

"Ah." She smiled. "Well, look on the bright side. I destroy books."

"True." My sisters and I had always been voracious readers, but none of us would read a book after Savannah was finished with it. Not only did she scribble in the margins, but she would mark where she'd left off by dog-earing the page. It was barbaric. She liked to sadistically crack the spine to keep a book splayed open. If you valued a book, you never loaned it to Savannah.

As a professional lover of books, I felt my stomach clench whenever I had to see her slapdash bookshelves.

Without bothering to ask, I reached into my cupboard for another wine glass and poured her some of the 2009 pinot noir I'd been sampling.

"This is good," she said after taking a sip. "Light yet jammy with earthy undertones."

I smirked. "Much like yourself."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"What are you doing here? I mean, I'm happy to see you, but I can't remember the last time you visited."

"I know it's been awhile." She perched her butt on one of the barstools at my kitchen counter. "I came into town for a meeting this afternoon and decided to take a chance that you'd be home."

I sat down across from her. "Do you want to stay for dinner?"

She barely resisted a sneer. "Only if you're having takeout."

"Definitely."

"Will Derek be here?"

"He should be home any minute."

She grinned. "Okay, I'll stay."

That was an easy decision. I reached for the phone. "Let me call in the order, then we can talk."

After ordering enough pizza and salad for a family of eight, I hung up and poured us both more wine. My cell phone buzzed and I checked the text message. "Derek says he'll be here in twenty minutes."

"Good. That gives me just enough time to ask a favor."

I watched her dig into her oversized tote bag and retrieve a small, colorful bundle. I was pretty sure I recognized the wrapping. "Is that a Pucci?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes. Do you remember when I bought these for everyone?"

"Of course. I still have mine." The Christmas she'd spent in Paris while attending the Cordon Bleu, she had sent each of us girls a wildly vibrant French silk scarf. We'd all thought she'd been terribly extravagant until I visited her and discovered that they sold the scarves on every street corner in Paris.

She handed me the motley bundle. "Can you fix this? It's pretty old, but maybe you could clean it up and stick a new cover on it or something? I want to give it as a gift."

I slowly unwrapped the silky material and found an old book inside. Casting a quick frown at Savannah, I bent to study the book more carefully.

It wasn't just old; it was really, really, really old. Its faded red cover was made of a thin, supple French Morocco leather, the type that had been used for centuries to make personal bibles and religious missals. The binding style was known as limp binding, which made it sound sort of sad and saggy, but in reality, the slim, flexible construction allowed the book to be left open flat for easy reading without someone having to hold it.

I examined the spine and found it rippled in some spots and thinning in others. The gilding, while faded, was still readable. Obedience Green, it said.

"Obedience Green?" I rubbed my fingertip over the pale golden letters. Was that the title of the book or the name of its author? Maybe it was the name of the bindery that produced it. I opened the book, taking note of the dappled endpapers before I turned to the title page – and gasped. "It's handwritten. In ink."

"Yeah," she said, swirling her wine glass. "It's kind of hard to read in places, but it's cool, isn't it?"

I stared at the book's impressive title. The Cookbook of Obedience Green: Containing Three Hundred Curious and Uncommon Receipts and Including Miscellaneous Articles of Useful Domestic Information and a Brief History of My Life, by Obedience Green, many years Cook and Housekeeper to the Eminent War General Robt. Blakeslee.

Curious and Uncommon Receipts? I had no idea what that meant, but if Obedience had been a housekeeper, perhaps she'd recorded her household grocery receipts or something. I turned a few more pages to read an introduction written in the same fancy handwritten script as the title page. It was slow going, especially since every "*s*" looked like an "*f*."

I had no idea what the author meant when she promised to offer the most modern receipts presented in the most elegant manner. It wasn't until I reached the Table of Contents page that I realized what the author meant by receipts. My clue was at the top of the page where the author had written, Herein a bountiful listing of receipts and a practical bill of fare for every season, every month of the year.

"Recipes!" I looked at Savannah. "It's a cookbook."

"Duh," Savannah said, her eyes rolling dramatically as only a sister's could. "Can you fix it up or not?"

"Of course I can fix it, but I'm not sure I should."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The book might be too important."

"Oh, for goodness sake." Clearly annoyed, she stood and folded her arms across her chest. "It's just an old cookbook, Brooklyn."

"It's not just old, Savannah." I returned to the title page and searched for a date. I finally found it scrawled at the end of a long, run-on sentence that listed various contributors' names. MDCCLXXXII. I dug back into my grammar school brain and did a quick translation of the Roman numerals. M was one thousand, D was five hundred, and C was one hundred. So, one thousand five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred. Seventeen hundred. L was the Roman numeral for fifty. X was ten, so three X's after the L made it eighty. Plus two I's.

1782. Yikes.

I took a few fortifying breaths until I could finally scowl sufficiently at her. "It's over two hundred and thirty years old." I showed her the date, then clutched the book to my breast. "That makes it extremely valuable just on its surface, never mind its historical or cultural value. And it's written by hand! It's beyond rare. Where did you find it? What are you going to do with it?"

Her shoulders slumped and I felt mine sinking, too. My sister could be so clueless sometimes. And right then, it was obvious that she thought the same of me. "What does it matter to you? Why do you always have to ask so many questions? Can't you just do as I ask? Just—" She fluttered her hand at me. "You know, do that thing you do. Dust it off and put a pretty cover on it."

I glared at her. "Do I tell you how to make a soufflé?"

She laughed a little as she held up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. But if you could ... I don't know. Just fix it. I'll pay you whatever it costs if that's what you're worried about."

"You know I don't care about the money," I muttered, still too fascinated by the book to get completely riled up at her. I was used to people undervaluing books, especially these days when you could download a classic novel onto your phone for free. But it was frustrating to know that my own sister couldn't recognize the book's value. Savannah was many things: chef extraordinaire, bald as a baby, free spirit, vegetarian. But book lover? Nope, not Savannah. Not in this lifetime.

Ignoring her, I inspected the book's Table of Contents and couldn't help smiling at some of the old-fashioned terms used for the various chapters:

Mutton Flesh: A Primer;
Drying and Salting of Flesh and Fyshes;
Tongues and Udders;
Collaring, Potting and Pickling;
Fricasees;
Syllabubs and Jellies.

I thumbed carefully through the pages, but stopped abruptly when I saw the words: I delivered a baby today. My first experience and possibly the only time I'll ever do such a thing, for it was frightening and messy.

"Hey, looks like part of the book is a journal." I paged to the beginning of the section.

8 March 1774. In high spirits. Today we set sail for America. Through the good graces of Miss Ashford at Budding House, I have obtained an apprenticeship with Mrs. Branford, cook and housekeeper to his Lordship General Robert Blakeslee, lately appointed Royal Governor of Massachusetts. Mrs. Branford has vouchsafed to instruct me in the art and science of food preparation, of which I confess to know little.

11 March 1774. Today Mrs. Branford scolded the ship's cook for adding garlic to the dishes. While happily employed by the French, she advised, garlic is nonetheless better suited to the medicine chest than to the kitchen.

17 March 1774. Storm coming. Ship rocking violently and I am unable to eat.

18 March 1774. Overcome with grief. Mrs. Branford has been swept overboard in a savage gale.

"Oh, no!" I closed the book. "This is amazing." Skimming my hand across the aged leather cover, I felt a sense of the author's trepidation. She didn't know how to cook! I could relate to that, but not to the fear and awe she must have experienced traveling across the ocean to live and work in a strange land in the middle of a revolution. I couldn't wait to read more.

And I wondered again how Savannah had come into possession of this odd, intriguing cookbook. On the spot, I decided I would swing by the Covington Library tomorrow and show the book to Ian McCullough, my old friend and the Covington's chief curator. I so enjoyed making him drool with envy.

"Earth to Brooklyn."

"What? Oh, sorry." I closed the book reluctantly and set it on top of the Pucci scarf. "Okay, look, I'll clean and repair it and I'll tighten these joints and hinges that have come loose, but I won't give it a pretty new cover." I held up my hand to stop her from saying something more snotty than she already had. "It wouldn't be ethical. This book is bound to be historically significant, which makes it extremely valuable in its present state."

Chapter One

My mother always warned me to be careful what I wished for, but did I listen to her? Of course not. I love my mom, really, but this was the same woman who liked to recommend espresso enemas to perk me up. The same woman who performed magic spells and exorcisms on a regular basis and astral traveled around the universe with her trusted spirit guide, Ramlar X.

Believe me, I'm very careful about taking advice from my mother.

Besides, the thing I was wishing for was more work. Why would that be a problem?

I'd been in between bookbinding jobs last month and was telling my friend Ian McCullough, chief curator of the Covington Library, that I wished I could find some new and interesting bookbinding work. That's when Ian revealed that he had submitted my name to the television show, This Old Attic, to be their expert book appraiser. I was beside myself with excitement and immediately contacted the show's producer for an interview. And I got it! I got what I wished for. A job. With books.

That was a good thing, right?

Of course, I didn't dare tell my mother that I considered her advice a bunch of malarkey. After all, some of those magic spells she'd spun had turned out to be alarmingly effective. I would hate to incur her wrath and wake up wearing a donkey's head—or worse.

"Yo, Brooklyn," Angie, the show's stage manager said. "You look right into this camera and start talking, got it?"

"Got it," I lied, pressing my hands against my knees to keep them from shaking uncontrollably. "Absolutely."

"Good," the stage manager said. "No dead air, got it?"

"Dead air. Right. Got it."

She nodded once, then shouted to the studio in general, "Five minutes, everyone!"

I felt my stomach drop, but it didn't matter. I was in show business!

This Old Attic traveled around the country and featured regular people who wanted their precious family treasures and heirlooms appraised by various local experts. The production was taping in San Francisco for three whole weeks and I was giggly with pleasure to be a part of it.

And terrified, too. But the nerves were sure to pass as soon as I started talking about my favorite topic, books. I hoped so, anyway.

Today was the initial day of taping and my segment was up first. My little staging area was decorated to look like a cozy, antique-strewn hideaway in the corner of a charming, dust-free attic. There were oriental carpets on the floor. A Tiffany lamp hung from the light grid that was suspended high above the set. Old-fashioned wooden dressers, curio cabinets, and armoires stood side-by-side, creating the three walls of my area. I sat in the middle of it all in a comfy, blue tufted chair, at a round table covered with a cloth of rich burgundy velvet.

Seated across from me was the owner of the book we would be discussing. She was a pretty, middle-aged woman with an impressive bosom and thick black hair styled in the biggest bouffant hairdo I'd ever seen. She wore a clingy zebra-print dress with a shiny black belt that cinched in her waist and emphasized her shapely hourglass figure.

She had excellent posture, though. I'd give her that much. My mother would be impressed.

Between us on the table was a wooden bookstand with her book in place, ready to be appraised.

"Are you Vera?" I whispered. I'd already seen her name on the segment rundown but wanted to be friendly.

She smiled weakly. "Yes. I'm Vera Stoddard."

I smiled at the sound of her high-pitched, little-girl voice. "I'm Brooklyn. It's good to—"

"Settle down, people!" Angie shouted, and everyone in the television studio instantly stopped talking. Angie listened to something being said over her headset and then added loudly, "First on camera today is the book expert. It's segment eight-six-nineteen on the rundown, people! Stand by!"

"I'm so nervous," Vera whispered.

"Don't worry, we'll have a good time." I could hear my voice shaking but I smiled cheerfully, hoping she wouldn't notice. It wasn't like me to be this anxious. All I had to do was talk about books, something I was born to do. It was a piece of cake. Unless I thought about the millions of people who would be watching. It didn't help that several zillion watts of lighting were aimed down at me and the stage makeup I wore, while it made me look glamorous, was beginning to feel like an iron mask.

"So stop thinking about it," I muttered, and plastered a determined smile on my face.

Angie caught my eye and pointed again at the television camera to her right. "Don't forget, this camera here is your friend. This is Camera One. When you see the red light go on, it means you're on the screen." She turned and pointed to another camera a few feet behind her on the left. "Camera Two will get close-ups of the book and the owner's reactions."

"Got it," I said, nodding firmly. "I'm ready."

"Good." Angie glanced around, then bellowed, "Here we go! Quiet, please! We're live in ... Five! Four! Three! Two!" She mimed the word "One!" and waved her finger emphatically at me.

I took a deep breath and tried to smile at the friendly camera. "Hello, I'm Brooklyn Wainwright, a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration and conservation. Today I'm talking with Vera, who's brought us a charming first edition of the beloved children's classic, The Secret Garden, written by Frances Hodgson Burnett."

I smiled at the older woman and noticed her lips were trembling badly and her eyes were two big circles of fear. Not a good sign, so instead of engaging her in conversation, I gestured toward the colorful book on the bookstand.

"This version of The Secret Garden was printed as a special limited edition in 1911."

I touched the book's cover. "The first thing you'll notice about the book is this stunning illustration on the front cover. The iconic picture of a blond-haired girl in her red coat and beret, leaning over to insert a key into the moss-covered door that leads to the secret garden, is famous in its own right. There are some wonderful details, such as this whimsical frame around the picture, painted in various shades of green with thick vines of pink roses."

"I didn't even notice that," Vera muttered in her odd, sexy-baby voice.

"It's subtle," I said. "The artist was Maria Kirk, known professionally as M.L. Kirk. She was never as famous as her illustrations were, but she did beautiful work. Isn't this lovely?"

"I think so," Vera said softly.

I picked up the book and stood it on the table near me, keeping the cover turned toward the camera. "What makes this even more outstanding is that this illustration is actually an original painting on canvas."

"It is?"

"Yes," I said. "You can see that it's been signed by the artist here in the lower left corner."

Vera blinked in surprise and leaned closer. "Oh. And look, there's a robin in the tree."

I grinned at her, happy that she was getting into the spirit of things. The show's director had urged us to keep the owner in the conversation so I hoped Vera would play along. "Yes, that robin has a role in the story."

"I like birds," she said with a sigh.

Uh-oh. I shot a quick look at her. Was Vera going spacey on me? My smile stayed firmly in place as I spoke to the camera. "Another unusual feature is that the painting has actually been inlaid into the leather cover. You can see how the edges of the leather have been beveled so nicely." For the camera, I ran my fingers along the edge of the beveling and gave silent thanks to my friend Robin who had insisted that I get a manicure before the show.

"I've never seen anything like that before," Vera said, her spacey moment apparently past.

"It's really quite rare," I agreed. "The bookbinder was clearly an artist, too, in the way he chose a rich, forest green leather to blend with the painter's softer green frame. And the intricate floral gilding on the leather is patterned after the vines and roses on the painting." I glanced at Vera. "Do you have any idea what the book might be worth?"

"I don't have a clue," she said, shaking her head. "It cost three dollars at a garage sale last Saturday."

I choked out a laugh. "Wow. I don't think I'm giving too much away if I tell you it's worth a little more than that."

"Oh, good." She pressed her hands to her remarkable chest, obviously relieved by the news. Maybe now she would be able to carry on a normal conversation. Her voice was high yet sultry, but it seemed to suit her personality. I wasn't sure why I thought that. I'd never met her before this moment.

I opened the book and showed the frontispiece illustration to the camera. "There are eight color plates throughout the book, all in excellent condition and each with tissue guards intact."

I angled the book toward Vera. "They're charming illustrations, aren't they?"

She nodded politely. "They're very nice."

Nice? I thought. Was she kidding? They were spectacular. The entire book was fantastic. I couldn't believe it had been allowed to molder away in someone's garage. But I wasn't about to criticize Vera's lackluster response aloud.

I should've been used to that sort of attitude by now. Nobody gushed about books as much as bookbinders did. I would've loved to have mentioned how rare it was that a children's book printed in 1911 was this beautifully preserved. Children were not generally known for their ability to treat books gently.

I sighed inwardly and changed the subject. "Now, obviously not every copy of this book could be printed with original artwork attached to its cover. So let me explain briefly about this particular edition. Back in 1911 when this book was printed, a publisher would occasionally release two versions of the same book. A regular edition and a limited, more expensive edition. This version is obviously one of the limited edition copies."

"How limited?" Vera asked, her gaze focusing in on the book.

"Very." I turned to the next page. It was almost blank except for two lines of print in the middle. "This is called the limitation page. It states here that only fifty copies of this numbered edition were printed. And the number six is handwritten on the next line. So this particular book is number six out of fifty copies made. It's beyond rare."

Vera gulped. "And ... and that's good, right?"

"Yes, that's very good. And, of course, you will have noticed that on the same page we see that it's been authenticated with the date and original signature of the author, Frances Hodgson Burnett."

"I did notice that." She bit her lip, still nervous, though this time I figured it was from excitement, not fear.

Now that she was finally showing some emotion, it was time to bum her out. Earlier at rehearsal, Jane Dorsey, the show's director, had advised us to balance things out by mentioning a few negatives. So I flipped to a page in the middle. "I should point out a few flaws."

Vera's expression darkened. "No, you shouldn't."

I chuckled. "I'm sorry, but the book isn't without its imperfections." I faced the page toward the camera and pointed at some little brown spots. "There's foxing on a number of pages. These patches of brownish discoloration are fairly common in old books."

"Eww." She drew the word out as she leaned in to get a good look. "Are those bugs?"

"No. They're microscopic spores, but that's not important. Sometimes foxing can be lightened or bleached, but you should always hire a professional bookbinder to do the work."

Turning to the inside front cover, I said, "There's also an additional signature on the endpaper, right here." I made sure the camera could see what I was referring to, and then I took a closer look at it myself. "It doesn't look like a child's handwriting. It was probably a parent signing for the child. I can't quite make out the name, but I assume it's the signature of one of the book's first owners. They used a fountain pen and it's faded a bit."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Writing one's name in a book can diminish its value, but that's another topic altogether."

"But—"

"Let's not dwell on the negatives," I hurried to add, "because other than those items and a few faded spots on the leather, it's in excellent condition and—"

"And what?" Vera demanded, interrupting what was about to be my rapturous summary of the book's qualities.

I pursed my lips, thinking quickly. I had been given six minutes to talk about the book, but the director had warned me that as soon as I revealed my appraisal amount, my segment would be over, even if I had minutes to spare.

I wasn't ready to stop talking about the book, big surprise. But Vera was finished listening and it was time to put her out of her misery. More importantly, I noticed Angie hovering. And Randolph Rayburn, the handsome host of the show, stood next to her looking ready to pounce into the camera shot and cut me off.

"And for a book of this rarity," I continued hastily, "in such fine condition and with the author's original signature included, it's my expert opinion that an antiquarian book dealer would pay anywhere from twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars for this book."

"Wha—?" Vera's eyes bugged out of their sockets. "Twenty ... say that again?"

"Twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars," I repeated, happy I'd finally gotten a reaction out of her. The producers were going to love that look on her face.

I turned the book over again to examine the rubbed spots on the back cover. "Frankly, Vera, it would only take a few hundred dollars to have the book fully restored to its original luster. Once you did that, you could probably add another three to five thousand dollars onto the value."

"Another five thou ... holy mother of pearl!" Vera slapped her bountiful chest a few times as if to jumpstart her heart. "Oh, my God. Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"But that's freaking—"

Angie shoved Randolph forward and he rushed to stand in front of our table.

"Indeed it is!" he said nonsensically to camera, grinning as he blathered cheerfully about some of the items coming up later in the show. He finished with, "We'll be right back."

"And ... we're clear!" Angie shouted.

Ripped from the Pages

Chapter One

"Won't this be fun?" My mother squeezed me with painful enthusiasm. "Two whole months living right next door to each other. You and me. We'll be like best girlfriends."

"Or double homicide victims," my friend Robin muttered in my ear.

Naturally, my mother, who had the ultrasonic hearing ability of a fruit bat, overheard her. "Homicide? No, no. None of that talk." Leaning away from me, she whispered, "Robin, sweetie, we mustn't mock Brooklyn. She can't help finding, you know, dead people."

"Mom, I don't think Robin meant it that way."

"Of course she didn't," Mom said, and winked at Robin.

Robin grinned at me. "I love your mom."

"I do, too," I said, holding back a sigh. Mom had a point, since I did have a disturbing tendency to stumble over dead bodies. She was also right to say that I couldn't help it. It wasn't like I went out in search of them, for Pete's sake. That would be a sickness requiring immediate intervention and possibly a twelve-step program.

Hello, my name is Brooklyn, and I'm a dead-body magnet.

Robin's point was equally valid, too, though. My mother and I could come very close to destroying each other if Mom insisted on being my BFF for the next two months.

Even though she'd raised her children in an atmosphere of peace and love and kindness, there was a limit to how much of her craziness I could take. On the other hand, Mom was an excellent cook and I could barely boil water, so I could definitely see some benefit to hanging around her house. Still, good food couldn't make up for the horror of living in close proximity to a woman whose latest idea of a good time was a therapeutic purging and bloodletting at the new panchakarma clinic over in Glen Ellen.

I focused on that as I poured myself another cup of coffee and added a generous dollop of half and half.

A few months ago, my hunky British ex-MI6 security agent boyfriend, Derek Stone, had purchased the loft apartment next door to mine in San Francisco. We decided to blow out the walls and turn the two lofts into one big home with a spacious office for Derek and a separate living area for visiting relatives and friends. Our reliable builder had promised it would only take two months to get through the worst of the noise and mess, so Derek and I began to plan where we would stay during the renovation. I liked the idea of spending time in Dharma where I'd grown up, but live in my parents' house? For two months? Even though there was plenty of room for us? Never!

"It would be disastrous," I'd concluded.

Derek's look of relief had been profound. "We're in complete agreement as usual, darling."

"Am I being awful? My parents are wonderful people."

"Your parents are delightful," he assured me, "but we need our own space."

"Right. Space." I knew Derek was mainly concerned about me. He'd be spending most weeks in the city and commuting to Sonoma on the weekends. His Pacific Heights office building had two luxury guest apartments on the top floor, one of which would suit him just fine.

I could've stayed there with him, of course, but that would've meant renting studio space at the Covington Library up the hill for my work. This would entail packing up all my bookbinding equipment and supplies, including my various book presses and a few hundred other items of importance to my job. Those small studio spaces in the Covington Library basement, while cheap, were equipped with nothing but a drafting table and two chairs, plus some empty cupboards and counters.

I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare-book restoration, and I was currently working on several important projects that had to be delivered during the time we would be away from home. The original plan of staying with my parents, while less than ideal, would've allowed me access to my former mentor's fully stocked bookbinding studio just down the hill from my parents. Abraham Karastovsky had died more than a year ago, but his daughter, Annie, who lived in his house now, had kept his workshop intact. She'd also given me carte blanche to use it whenever I wanted to.

For weeks, Derek and I had tossed around various possibilities, including renting a place somewhere in the city. That seemed to be the best alternative, but at the last minute, we were given a reprieve that made everyone happy. My parents' next-door neighbors, the Quinlans, generously offered up their gorgeous French-style cottage for our use. They were off to Europe for three months, and we were welcome to live in their home while they were gone.

We offered to pay them rent, but all they required from us was that we take good care of their golden retriever, Maggie, and water their plants. When Mom offered to take care of the plants (knowing my tendency to kill them), it was too good a deal to pass up. I was hopeful that sweet old Maggie and my adorable kitten, Charlie (aka Charlemagne Cupcake Wainwright Stone, a weighty name for something so tiny and cute), would become new best friends.

So last weekend, Derek and little Charlie and I had moved out of our South of Market Street loft and turned it over to our builder, who promised to work his magic for us.

And suddenly we were living in Dharma, next door to my parents, in an adorable two-story, French-style cottage that was both elegant and comfortable. The floor of the wide foyer was paved in old, smooth brick, giving the space a natural, outdoor feeling. The spacious living room was more formal, with hardwood floors covered in thick area rugs and oversized plush furniture in browns and taupes. Rustic wrought-iron chandeliers hung from the rough-hewn beams that crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling. The sage-toned kitchen was spectacular, with a twelve-foot coffered ceiling, pizza oven, and a wide island that provided extra space for food preparation as well as seating for six. Off the kitchen was a small library with built-in bookshelves, a wood-burning fireplace, and two overstuffed leather chairs. I could already picture the two of us sitting there reading books each night by a cozy fire.

And in every room on the ground floor, dark-wood-panelled French doors opened onto an interior patio beautifully landscaped with lush plants and flowers.

Once we were unpacked and exploring the kitchen, Derek and I watched Maggie and Charlie sniff and circle each other for a few minutes. Finally, they seemed to agree that they could live in peace together. At least, I hoped so. Maggie ambled over to her bed and settled herself down on the fluffy surface. Charlie followed right behind her, clambered up and perched directly on Maggie's big paw. Maggie stared at the tiny creature for a long moment and I prepared myself to whisk the cat away. But then Maggie let out a heavy sigh and closed her eyes. Charlie snuggled up against the big dog's soft, warm fur and was asleep several seconds later.

Derek and I exchanged smiles. I had a feeling we would all be very happy here.

And now here I was, sitting in my mother's kitchen on a bright, Monday morning, drinking coffee with Robin and listening as my mother tried to brush past the fact that I did indeed have an alarming tendency to come upon dead bodies in the strangest places. Luckily, that wasn't likely to happen in Dharma anytime soon.

As I watched Mom bustle around her sunny kitchen, I wondered how I'd ever thought I could avoid seeing her every day simply because we weren't together in the same house. Not that I minded visiting with her on a regular basis. I joked about it, of course, but in truth, my mother was great, a true original and a sweet, funny woman with a good heart. All my friends loved her. She was smart and generous. But sometimes . . . well, I worried about her hobbies. She'd been heavily involved in Wicca for a while and recently had been anointed Grand Raven Mistress of her local druidic coven. Some of the spells she had cast had been alarmingly effective. She would try anything once. Lately she'd shown some interest in exorcisms. I didn't know what to expect.

I supposed I didn't have much room to criticize Mom's hobbies, given that my own seemed to revolve around crime scenes.

"Do you want some breakfast before we leave?" I asked Robin. We'd made plans to drive over to the winery this morning to watch them excavate the existing storage cave over by the cabernet vineyards. It would eventually become a large underground tasting room. Cave tastings were the hottest trend in Napa and Sonoma, and our popular Dharma winery was finally jumping on the bandwagon.

Robin pulled out a kitchen chair and sat. "I already had breakfast with Austin. He had to be on-site at seven."

"Derek left the house about that time, too. I thought he'd be driving into the city today, but he decided to hang around to watch the excavation."

"Austin was so excited, he could barely sleep last night." Robin lived with my brother Austin, with whom she had been in love since third grade. She and I had been best friends since then, too, and I loved her as much as any of my three sisters. I didn't get to see her as often as I used to when she was living in San Francisco, but I knew she was blissfully happy with Austin, who supported her sculpting work and was clearly as much in love with her as she was with him.

Austin ran the Dharma winery, and my brother Jackson managed the vineyards. My father did a great job of overseeing the entire operation, thanks to his early experience in the business world. Decades ago he'd turned his back on corporate hell and gone off to follow the Grateful Dead. Ironically, these days, Dad and four other commune members made up the winery's board of directors. He was also part of the town council, but this time around he loved all of that business stuff. It probably helped that Dad had always been remarkably laid back and still was. I sometimes wondered if Mom had cast a mellow spell on him.

I checked the kitchen clock. It was already seven thirty. The cave excavation was scheduled to begin at eight. "I'll just fix myself a quick bowl of cereal, and then we'll go."

Robin glanced at Mom. "Becky, are you coming with us?"

"You girls go on ahead," she said, pulling a large plastic bin of homemade granola down from the cupboard. "I want to put together a basket of herbs and goodies for the cave ceremony. I'll catch up with you later."

"What cave ceremony?" I asked as I poured granola into a bowl and returned the bin to the cupboard.

She looked at me as though I'd failed my third grade spelling test. "Sweetie, we have to bless the new space."

"Oh." I shot Robin a wary glance. "Of course we do."

Robin bumped my shoulder. "You haven't been away so long that you'd forget about the sacred cave ceremony."

"I've been busy," I mumbled. She was teasing me, but still, I should've known that my mother would want to cast a protection spell or a celebration spell to commemorate the groundbreaking of our winery's newest venture.

I could picture Mom doing a spritely interpretive dance to the wine goddess. She would chant bad haiku and sprinkle magic sparkles on the heavy tunneling machines and equipment. It would be amazing, and the heavy equipment would turn our dark storage cave into a large, magical wine tasting space where all would be welcome.

"Oh, sweetie," Mom said, hanging a dish towel on the small rack by the sink. "While you're here, you should go to lunch at the new vegan restaurant on the Lane. They serve a turnip burger that is to die for."

I swallowed cautiously, hoping I didn't lose my breakfast. "I'll be sure to check that out, Mom."

She glanced at me and laughed. "Oh, you should see your face. Do you really think I'd be caught dead eating something so vile?"

"I . . . Okay, you got me." I shook my head and chuckled as I carried my bowl to the sink. "I was trying to remember when you turned vegan."

"I tried it once for a day and a half and vowed, never again. And even then, did I ever serve my children turnips? No, never."

"You're right and I appreciate it. But I haven't seen you in a while. I was afraid maybe you'd turned into Savannah." My sister Savannah was a vegetarian now, but she'd gone through several austere phases to get there, including a few months when she would only eat fruit that had already fallen from the tree.

"No, I was just pulling your leg."

I smiled at her. "You still got it, Mom."

"I sure do." She grabbed me in another hug, and it felt good to hold on to her. "Oh, Brooklyn, I'm so happy you're here."

"So am I."

She gave me one last squeeze, then let me go. As I washed out my cereal bowl, she left the kitchen.

"Let's get going," Robin said after I put my bowl away in the cupboard. "I don't want to miss anything."

"Wait a second, girls," my mother called from her office alcove off the kitchen. She walked out, holding two tiny muslin bags tied with drawstrings, and handed one to each of us. "I want you both to carry one of these in your pocket," she said, her expression deadly serious. "It'll keep you safe."

Chapter 1

The air inside the old bookshop was thick with the heady scents of aged vellum and rich old leathers. Heaven. I breathed in the lovely, pulpy odors as I climbed the precarious rolling ladder up to the crowded top shelf to start cataloging books.

The aisles of the shop were narrow, barely three feet wide, which meant I could reach out and touch the volumes on both sides of the aisle—if I was willing to let go of the wobbly handrail, which I wasn't.

I had spent the last week helping my friend Genevieve Taylor conduct an inventory of the thousands of books that had been crammed onto these shelves over the last forty years. It was a dirty, back-straining, mind-numbing job, yet I didn't mind too much. It was fun to visit with Genevieve, a fellow book nerd; plus I was surrounded by old books. How could that be bad?

My name is Brooklyn Wainwright and I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration. I hadn't been back to visit Taylor's Fine Books since Genevieve's father was murdered here almost a year ago. I hated to think of that moment when I found his body, tucked in a corner behind one of the brocade wingback chairs in the antiquarian book room. His throat had been slashed with a type of knife used in papermaking and bookbinding. Naturally, there was blood. A horrifying amount of blood. I'm a pathetic wimp when it comes to blood and tend to faint dead away at the slightest hint of a paper cut. For Genevieve's dad, though, I managed to keep it together, but it was a close call. Not something I was proud of.

Recalling that image, I had to clutch the ladder rail, feeling woozy all over again at the picture of all that blood seeping into the faded Oriental carpet beneath poor Joe Taylor's body. With all the dead bodies I'd come across since then, you would think I'd matured enough to at least maintain consciousness at the sight of blood oozing from an unfortunate victim. But it was still touch-and-go for me.

"I just found another first edition," Genevieve announced from the next aisle over.

I was grateful for the distraction. "What is it?"

"Bram Stoker's Dracula. Printed in 1897. Boards are slightly soiled, but the hinges are intact. Slight foxing. Spine's a little faded."

She said the words as though she were reading from a bookseller's brochure.

"A faded spine's to be expected," I said philosophically. "If it's in good condition otherwise, it's still probably worth ten thousand."

"Oh, wait," she said. "The pages are untrimmed."

"And the price just shot up to fifteen thousand."

She laughed. "That's what I like to hear."

I glanced down at the short stack of books on the floor. "So that makes what?" I wondered aloud. "At least a dozen first editions we've found just today."

"Fourteen by my count," she said, but seconds later I could hear her "tsk-tsking" in dismay. "I'm excited to find them all, but I'm also a little flipped out that they were just sitting here on the shelves. I love my dad, but he had a real humdinger of a filing system. I just wish I could figure out what it was."

I smiled. "At least he kept the books in alphabetical order. Sort of."

"Sort of," she muttered. "I found the Dracula crammed in with a bunch of paperback Charles Dickens novels."

"Well, they all start with D. Sort of."

She laughed, but I detected a bittersweet tone and I couldn't blame her. It had to be difficult going to work every day in the same shop where her father had died. But Genevieve was determined to carry on her dad's legacy as the premier antiquarian and rare bookseller in San Francisco. And given the dearth of good neighborhood bookstores out there, I wanted to support her in any way I could.

Besides the obvious disarray on the shelves, the shop had suffered at least three burglaries over the past few months. The thieves hadn't stolen money from the cash register; they had stolen books. Genevieve knew what had been taken, but she couldn't find a record of the books in her father's hopelessly antiquated filing system, which meant she couldn't file an insurance claim. That was when she decided it was time to do a major inventory.

All day long customers came and went while we kept working. They usually took their time, perusing the shelves and picking out a book or two. Some quietly minded their own business while others chatted away with Genevieve or her assistant, Billy. The store was busy, thanks to its location on Clement Street, a popular, ethnically diverse shopping and dining area in the heart of the Richmond District.

I continued to write down titles on the inventory form Genevieve had created for the task. Besides the book title, she wanted the author's name and the aisle and shelf numbers. The work was slow but steady and when I finished with one shelf, I climbed a few steps up the ladder to work on the next one. I knew I'd reached the top shelf when my head skimmed the ceiling. I felt a little sorry for these books on the top shelves. A reader would have to be willing to risk an almost certain attack of acrophobia to explore all the way up here.

Hours later, I checked my watch and realized how late it was getting. "I'd better call it a day," I announced, and started to descend the ladder—but stopped when something caught my eye on the opposite shelf. With one arm looped around the ladder's edge for safety's sake, I leaned over and reached for the book, easing it out of its cramped spot. The title and splashy dust jacket was what had captured my attention.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. It was one of my mother's favorite books. After taking a minute to admire the almost pristine condition of the dust jacket—which proclaimed the price to be four dollars and ninety-five cents—I looked inside and found the author's flamboyant signature scribbled in blue marker on the front free endpaper. Ken Kesey. Was the autograph for real? I turned to the copyright page—1962.

"I think I found another first edition," I murmured, tingling with excitement at the find. Call me a weirdo, but books could do that to me.

"Cool," Gen said from the next aisle over. "What is it?"

"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. And guess what. It's signed."

"Are you kidding?" she asked, her voice rising two octaves.

"Nope. The author's signature is right here on the flyleaf."

"Is the book a mess?"

"No, it's in beautiful condition except for a small rip in the dust jacket, but that can be fixed."

Gen didn't answer right away, probably pausing to calculate. "It's got to be worth ten or twelve thousand dollars."

"At least." I closed the book and turned it around to study it from all angles. "I mean, it's in really good shape."

"Will you fix the rip?"

"Sure." Was she kidding? I would kill to work on this book! Even if it was something as simple as fixing a measly little tear in the jacket.

Instead of sliding the Cuckoo's Nest back onto the shelf, I scurried down the ladder and placed it on the short stack of books destined for the antiquarian room. That was where Genevieve, like her father before her, showcased the pricier volumes that would appeal to collectors and other booksellers.

Before I left for the day, Genevieve went to the computer and ran some comps on the seventeen first editions we'd found that day. I stood next to her and we both took guesses as to which book we thought was the most valuable—and we were both wrong. It turned out that a sweet little copy of The Maltese Falcon she'd discovered earlier that morning was similar to one that had sold recently for ninety-five thousand dollars.

Holy moly. I had to catch my breath. "I know someone who might be interested in The Maltese Falcon."

"Please let them know about it," Genevieve said. "They can call or come by anytime to look at it."

"I'll call them tomorrow." I had to laugh at her expression. "You look gobsmacked."

"I'm beyond thrilled," she exclaimed, tossing her long, dark braid off her shoulder. "Can you believe all these beautiful books were buried in the stacks? I can't thank you enough for helping me out, Brooklyn."

"I'm having fun," I said, giving her a hug.

She snorted. "I wouldn't call it fun, exactly. But I appreciate everything you're doing."

"I'll be back Friday to help some more."

"I won't hold you to it."

"I'll be here," I said firmly, and started to leave, but then remembered something. "Hey, are you going to the Covington opening tomorrow night?"

The Covington Library was unveiling their new Audubon exhibit, the centerpiece of which was the massive Audubon masterpiece, Birds of America. The Covington was like Mecca for book lovers, so I was hoping Genevieve would be there.

Her eyes brightened. "I wouldn't miss it."

"I'm glad. So I'll see you there."

As I walked to my car, I had to admit I was pretty thrilled to be walking out with eight wonderful books to refurbish, including a battered copy of The Grapes of Wrath, a charming hardcover edition of The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood of Great Renown, the signed Cuckoo's Nest, Dracula, and The Maltese Falcon. It was a win-win for both me and Gen and a nice reward for all my hard work.

It was a minor miracle that I was actually pulling into my apartment garage half an hour later. Driving from the Richmond District across town at this hour of the day when traffic was at its worst should've taken much longer, but I wasn't going to argue about my good luck. I parked the car and took the freight elevator up to the sixth floor. The noisy old wood-planked elevator was one of the wonderful holdovers from the 1900s, when this building had been a flourishing corset factory. It had sat empty for decades until recently when it was refurbished and converted to trendy artists' loft-style apartments. The smart builders had kept the elevator intact, along with the original brick walls, the beautiful hardwood floors, and the large, double-paned wire-reinforced windows.

Officially, we lived in the area of San Francisco known as SOMA, or South of Market, but since we were only a few blocks from AT&T Park where the hometown Giants played baseball, some people considered the area more China Basin adjacent than SOMA. I wasn't too picky about these things, but San Franciscans took their neighborhood differentiations very seriously.

As soon as I closed and locked my front door, I sagged in relief. I usually worked at home, so being gone all day was unusual for me. But after a moment, I perked up, knowing Derek was already here; I'd seen his car parked in the space next to mine.

Derek Stone was my fiancé and . . .

Fiancé. I had to stop and breathe in the word. It was still so odd to say it aloud, let alone think it. But it was true. It was real. We were getting married, and how crazy was that? The two of us had almost nothing in common. I'd been raised in a peace-love-and-happiness artistic commune in the wine country and wore Birkenstocks to work. Derek had been a highly trained operative with England's military intelligence and he carried a gun. Think James Bond but more dangerous, more handsome, more everything. I was crazy in love with him. I figured that the old adage that opposites attract had to be true, because he loved me right back.

He had proposed two months ago, the night my friend Robin married my brother Austin. Of course I said yes. Duh! Since then, we'd barely had a chance to talk about a wedding or anything else related to getting married. We'd been living temporarily in Dharma in the Sonoma wine country, next door to my parents. Derek had been commuting to the city while our apartment in town was being remodeled. The reason for the remodel was that Derek had purchased the smaller apartment next door to mine for the purpose of joining the two places together to make one very large residence.

Now the work was done and we had been back in town a week. Our place was still in a state of flux, to put it mildly. We'd been rearranging furniture and picking out new stuff and doing all those things you do when you suddenly have two extra bedrooms and a much bigger living room. It was fun and time-consuming and a little bit mind-boggling. I occasionally had to stop and pinch myself.

So no, there hadn't been much time to discuss wedding plans. We'd get around to it one of these days.

With a happy sigh, I slid the case that held my bookbinding tools under my worktable and set my satchel on the counter.

"Derek, I'm home," I called, even though he probably knew it already. He was preternaturally aware of everything that went on around us. Besides, our freight elevator tended to shake the entire building when it rose from the basement parking garage, thus acting as an early warning signal. I liked to think the noisy contraption made it more difficult for bad guys to sneak up on us, and yet they still tried it every so often.

"I've got books to show you," I shouted, excited to share my project with Derek.

"We are in here, darling," he called from somewhere in the vicinity of the kitchen.

We?

I heard a burst of male laughter, confirming that Derek was not alone. So much for showing him my stack of fabulous books from Genevieve's shop. I hung up my pea coat in the small closet by the door, trying to recall if we had made plans to see friends tonight. I was pretty sure we hadn't.

Not that I was paranoid, but I had to find a place to hide the books. Okay, maybe I was paranoid. I'd taken elaborate precautions before leaving Genevieve's shop, tucking the books away in a zippered compartment inside my satchel, which I wore strapped across my torso and clutched all the way to my car. I never took chances with books. Especially rare, valuable books. Our home had been broken into on more than one occasion by unscrupulous people who were determined to steal a book from me.

Chapter 1

Lately, I have resorted to stalking. Not a person, but a book.

For weeks now I'd been visiting the book almost daily. It was a little embarrassing to continually beg the bookstore owner to let me hold it, page through it, study it. I just wanted to touch it, stroke it, and once when he wasn't looking, sniff it. But he didn't seem to mind my fixation. He's as big a book nerd as I am.

The owner kept the book inside a clear, locked glass case displayed on the shop's front counter, so it was pretty obvious he didn't want people touching it. And who could blame him? The book was exquisitely bound in vibrant red morocco leather. Rich gilding swirled along the spine, spelling out the title, author's name, and year of publication in fancy gold script. More gilding outlined the thick raised cords that lent gravitas to the already weighty tome.

In the center of the front cover was a brightly gilded rabbit wearing a topcoat.

The well-dressed creature glanced down at a watch he held at the end of a chain, and he appeared nervous, as though he might be running late for some important event.

The fact that a gilded illustration could convey real emotion was pretty awesome, above and beyond the binding work. The first time I saw it, I checked the inside cover for the bookbinder and was thrilled to find the name George Bayntun of London. Favored by the late Queen Mary, Bayntun's bindery in Bath, England, was world renowned and was still operating to this day. I'd visited once and had come away starstruck.

On the back cover of the book was another elaborately raised figure in gold, an odd-looking woman wearing a crown and carrying a scepter. The red queen. She appeared headstrong and irate, as though she might order someone's head lopped off at any moment.

The book was Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, of course. This copy was a fairly hard-to-find version in excellent condition, with dark green-and-red-marbled endpapers and virtually no foxing on its clean white pages. It contained dozens of classic illustrations by the famous artist John Tenniel. The binding was tight and even. And I wanted it.

My name is Brooklyn Wainwright, and I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare-book restoration. I love books of all kinds, and I love my job. It was exciting to know that I could give tired, torn, droopy, bug-bitten books a brand-new life that would allow them to continue to bring enjoyment for hundreds of years to come. It might have sounded boring to some, but in my career so far I had saved dozens of treasured childhood favorites from being thrown away, rescued any number of priceless, museum-quality books from being carted off to the used-book store, and even solved a murder or two—or ten—while I was at it. Just in case you thought bookbinding sounded like a yawn-fest, trust me, my life was rarely dull.

This particular copy of Alice didn't need restoring, though. It was pristine. I wanted it because I had a fascination—okay, call it an obsession—with the iconic Alice and her creator, Lewis Carroll.

I gazed longingly at the book on display near the front counter of Brothers Bookshop. The store was a book nerd's dream: a cozy, tome-filled haven for people like me who were content to while away an entire day browsing the shelves in hopes of discovering the perfect little gem of a book to sink into.

The shop carried both new and used books along with all sorts of charming gifts and cards and paper goods. There were comfy chairs in every corner of the store, and a small section along one side was devoted to antiquarian books.

A magazine section was located at the back of the shop. At the front, a wall of windows looked out onto the neighborhood, and from there I could see my vintage apartment building on the other side of the street.

Derek Stone and I had decided to walk over here to do a little book browsing on our way next door to shop for vegetables for dinner.

The bookshop was part of a group of small stores located in a charming three-story Victorian-era building across the street from us. The building, known as the Courtyard, formed a large square, with four shops on each side. Above each shop were two floors with one spacious apartment on each floor. In the interior of the square was a delightful little courtyard overflowing with flowers and trees and several groupings of chairs and small tables. It was the perfect place to enjoy a caffe latte and read a book.

"Hi, Eddie," I said to the bookshop owner as I inched closer to the display.

"Hey, Brooklyn," Eddie Cox said without glancing up from his perch at the front counter. He knew it was me. Probably had seen me hovering nearby for the last few minutes. "I suppose you want to get another look at the book."

"I do," I said. "How did you know?"

He chuckled. "Just a lucky guess. Might have something to do with the fact that you show up here every other day and beg to see it."

All too true. But at least so far I hadn't drooled on the glass case. "And here I thought I was being so subtle."

"Subtle. Right." Still chuckling, he opened the drawer beneath the cash register and pulled out a small set of keys. I had known Eddie Cox and his brother-in-law Terrence Payton for almost four years, ever since I'd moved in across the street from Brothers Bookshop. The two men owned the charming shop together, and yes, I was there almost every other day because, you know, books.

Eddie carefully handed me the Alice, and it was all I could do not to clutch it to my chest in excitement. Instead, I put it down on the counter and ran my finger across the smooth leather cover.

Eddie raised an eyebrow. "I don't do this for everyone, you know."

"I know you don't, and I really appreciate you doing it for me. I'll be careful."

"I know you will." He winked at me. "Otherwise, I wouldn't allow it anywhere near your greedy little hands."

With a quick laugh, I scanned the store and spied Derek at the end of the middle aisle, where the latest mysteries and thrillers were displayed. He appeared to be involved in one particular book, so I knew I had a few minutes to enjoy the Alice. I opened it slowly, turning as always to the title page, where the publication date was posted: 1866.

This copy was considered a first edition, but actually it wasn't. The original version of the book had been published the year before, in 1865, but those books had been taken off the market by Lewis Carroll when his illustrator, John Tenniel, stated that the quality of his drawings had been poorly reproduced.

That earlier, 1865 version was known as the "Suppressed Alice" or the "Sixty-five Alice." All of those books were returned to the publisher except for fifty author copies that Lewis Carroll had kept for himself.

Eventually, most of those author copies had ended up in others' hands. Very few remained on the market today, and any that did were considered beyond rare. One had been auctioned off recently for almost two million dollars.

I would probably never get my hands on such a rare treasure as that, but I was perfectly happy with the one I currently held in my hands. This book was as fine as any I'd ever seen.

"Hello, Brooklyn."

I turned and saw Eddie's brother-in-law standing nearby. "Terrence. Hello."

"Is he going to sell you the book this time?" Terrence asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"I don't know." Glancing at Eddie, I bit back a smile. I knew he wouldn't sell it to me, since I'd tried to buy it a few hundred times before. But no harm in trying again. "What about it, Eddie? Will you sell me this book?"

"Never," Eddie insisted, as always. Then he added, "It was a gift from a very special friend."

"Wow." He'd never mentioned that before. I gazed at the book in my hand. "Must be a nice friend."

"I had a book just like that," Terrence grumbled. "But someone stole it."

"Are you kidding?" Did I look as confused as I felt? "You had a copy of this same book?"

Eddie barely suppressed an eye roll. "Terrence always claims that, but where's the proof?"

"I said it was stolen." Terrence's eyes narrowed in on Eddie, and I suddenly wondered if he suspected his own brother-in-law had taken the book from him.

Eddie shrugged. "That's why I keep mine locked inside this shatterproof case, right here in plain sight where everyone can see it, which means no one can steal it. I'm no fool."

"I'm not a fool, either." Terrence huffed, clearly insulted. He turned to me. "I'll have you know, my copy was locked inside the safe in my closet upstairs. Fat lot of good that did me," he added, muttering.

"You're just not as lucky as I am," Eddie said with a crooked grin as he flexed his biceps. "Or as manly."

I laughed, but Terrence was not amused. He continued to glower, shaking his head. "You're the fool. I'm as lucky as anyone else. Except when it comes to in-laws."

They were both ignoring me now. Over the last few years, I'd realized that the two men butted heads more often than not. Family was never easy, but still . . . If you didn't get along with your brother-in-law, why go into business with him?

The two men were in their forties and fairly nice looking in different ways. Eddie had a classic runner's physique, tall and slim, with silver hair and a rakish goatee, which suited him. Terrence was a few inches shorter and bulkier, but most of his girth was muscle. He looked as though he might've been a boxer in his youth.

The two men had married sisters who divorced them within weeks of each other and moved to Florida together. I got the feeling that Eddie and Terrence didn't miss their ex-wives too much. They were both book fanatics who spent all of their time in the bookshop. I'd never known them to take a day off.

Handing the book back to Eddie, I tried to veer our conversation around to the original subject. "Not that you both don't deserve the very finest things, but who in their right mind would give up such a beautiful book?"

Eddie wiggled his eyebrows and grinned slyly. "A generous person who recognizes greatness, I suppose."

It was Terrence's turn to roll his eyes. I started to grin, but something bumped into my ankle and I jolted. Glancing down, I saw Furbie, the bookshop cat, staring up at me with his teeth clenching a stuffed mouse. Stuffed with catnip was my guess, if Furbie's lazy gaze meant anything.

"Hello, Furbie," I murmured, and reached down to scratch the soft gray fur around his ears. "Aren't you a pretty kitty?"

In response to the flattery, he dropped the toy at my feet. I picked it up and tossed it a few yards down the nearest aisle, expecting the frisky cat to pounce after it. Instead, he gave me a censorious look, tossed his head imperiously, and sidled awkwardly after the mouse.

"I think Furbie's drunk," I said.

"It's Terrence's fault," Eddie claimed. "He's an enabler."

"You're just jealous," Terrence retorted, "because Furbie likes me best."

"Of course he does, because you feed him catnip and empower his bad behavior."

Eddie turned to me. "I'm the disciplinarian."

"You're just a meanie," Terrence muttered, and they were off on another squabble-fest, this time over the cat. These two would tangle over anything!

After letting them go off for a few more seconds, I tried to steer them back to the topic of Terrence's missing book.

"When did you lose your copy of Alice?" I asked Terrence as Eddie unlocked the glass case and gingerly slipped his Alice back inside.

"I didn't lose it."

"Sorry. When was it stolen?"

Terrence thought for a moment. "I guess it's been about six months."

In the grand scheme of tragedies, I knew this would come in low on the list. But as a book person, I really felt bad for him. "I'm sorry, Terrence."

"Yes," he said pointedly, still glaring at Eddie. "So am I."

Eddie put the key to the case back in the drawer and turned to Terrence. "You should be more careful."

"Oh, shut up."

Eddie grinned at me, a silent acknowledgment that he had just won this little argument. Their bickering was usually more good-natured, but this time Terrence looked truly offended, which worried me a little. It seemed like they might have quarreled over the stolen book before.

Derek approached and placed a short stack of books on the front counter.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

"I found a few spy novels I thought my father might enjoy."

"Oh. That's nice." But my stomach gave a little twist at the mention of his father. Derek's parents were going to be visiting from England for the first time the following week, and I still wasn't ready to meet them.

Derek and I had been together three years, and the one time I'd traveled to England with him, his parents had been away on an anniversary cruise around the Mediterranean. Now that he and I were getting married, it seemed ridiculous that I'd never met them. But as Derek arranged for their whirlwind trip to San Francisco, I found myself growing more and more uneasy about our first encounter.

Would they like me? It sounded so neurotic to worry, but these were my future in-laws! Of course I was worried. But still, I was sure they were wonderful, and I knew we would all love one another. They had to be the nicest people in the world because Derek was simply a delightful man. But they were English. I had lived in London for a short while years ago, and I truly loved the people, but there was a reserve to some of them that I didn't always understand. I had been raised in a thoroughly American peace-and-love commune founded by fans of the Grateful Dead, and I still wore Birkenstocks to prove it. My family was boisterous and fun loving. I simply couldn't imagine what they would think of me. And Derek, while awesome, could be intimidating to others when he wanted to be. At times it was one of his best attributes. But it made me wonder if his parents might be intimidating as well.

Chapter 1

"The name is Wainwright," I said to the conference volunteer seated at the registration table before me. "Brooklyn Wainwright."

The young woman gave an absent nod and began to skim the thick stack of envelopes standing upright in the box in front of her. Not exactly the friendliest greeting, but the crowd was huge and the woman was probably feeling overwhelmed. Halfway through the row, she stopped suddenly and gaped up at me. "Wait. You're Brooklyn Wainwright? Wow. I signed up for your workshop."

"Oh." I smiled. "I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I know it'll be fantastic," she said brightly. "I'm, like, your biggest fan."

"That's so nice." I peered at her badge to catch her name. "Thanks, Lucy."

For the fifth year in a row, I had been asked to present the bookbinding workshop for the annual National Librarians Association conference. It was a real honor to be asked because there had to be hundreds of talented bookbinders among the librarians who attended every year. I was doubly thrilled that the conference was being held in San Francisco this year so I wouldn't have to lug all of my supplies and equipment halfway across the country.

Sighing inwardly, I admitted that I would've been looking forward to the workshop a lot more if I hadn't botched up my schedule so badly. But nobody here needed to know that.

Lucy flipped her pink-streaked hair away from her face and continued to stare at me as though I were a rock star. Her former boredom had turned into wide-eyed excitement. It was fun, but also a little intimidating. She knew me and my work. What if she hated the workshop?

"I saw your Alice in Wonderland pop-up display at the Covington Library," she said. "It was amazing."

"Thank you." I sensed the people in line behind me getting antsy to move things along. I turned and flashed an apologetic smile.

But my new biggest fan didn't seem to notice the impatient crowd. Instead, she leaned forward and whispered loudly, "Everyone says you're going to dish about the murders during the workshop. I'm so psyched!"

"Uh . . . what?"

She nodded eagerly. "Is it true you found a body inside the Covington? What a rush!"

"Umm, no, I . . ." I had no words. The fact was, I had found a body inside the Covington. More than once, to be honest. But I wasn't about to discuss the details with a stranger.

She frowned at me, clearly confused by my reticence. Then she began to nod slowly as if she and I were in on a secret together. "Ah, I get it. You're saving the gory details for the workshop. I understand. Don't worry. I can wait."

Snapping back into work mode, she pulled a manila envelope from the stack and handed it to me. "Here you go. This envelope contains your badge and your program book. It's got all the events listed, as well as the speakers' bios. And there's a map of the convention center inside the back cover. This place is huge, so we don't want anyone to get lost." She pointed toward the opposite side of the massive hall. "You can pick up a book bag at the south end of the auditorium."

"Okay. Thanks, Lucy."

"Enjoy the conference, Brooklyn." She gave me a conspiratorial wink. "See you at the workshop."

"You bet." A little dazed and a touch breathless, I stepped away from the registration table feeling like I'd just run a sprint. Pulling my rolling briefcase behind me, I began the long trek across the crowded room.

An enormous woman in pink bumped into me and kept walking, obviously in a hurry to get her conference bag. My head was so filled with questions, I hardly noticed.

Was someone spreading the word that I would be talking about murder? Seriously? I didn't even like thinking about the bodies I'd stumbled across, let alone using them as filler in my workshop program. It wasn't going to happen. Which meant that there were going to be some disappointed people—like Lucy, for instance. I sighed and shook my head. The conference just gotten more complicated.

I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration, which means I make my living refurbishing old books. I also enjoy creating handmade books when I'm feeling particularly artistic. Unfortunately, in connection with my work, I happened to have stumbled across more than a few dead bodies over the past several years. And yes, the victims were all connected to the various books I had been working on at the time.

But that didn't mean I was an expert on the subject of murder! I absolutely refused to draw attention to myself or to these crimes simply because of my weird proclivity for finding dead people. Why would anyone think I would take time out of a bookbinding class to talk about murder?

When it came to any connection between rare books and murder, the only bit of information I was willing to offer was this: If you thought that books weren't worth killing for, you were dead wrong.

I scanned the enormous hall, noting that in the time it had taken me to register, hundreds more people had arrived for the conference. Dozens were waiting in line to register. Some peered around anxiously, trying to get their bearings. Others were gathered in small groups chatting and laughing and, in the case of the cluster of five women closest to me, shrieking.

I did a quick mental calculation as I studied the diverse crowd. There had to be at least eight hundred people milling around this cavernous space. Probably closer to a thousand. No wonder the noise level was deafening.

The racket didn't bother me. These were my people. Librarians. Book nerds. "And apparently a few murder fans," I muttered to myself.

I headed toward the south end of the convention center, asking myself all the way: Did I really need a book bag?

More importantly, did I really need to be here at all?

The organizers had called me months ago to ask if I would give a bookbinding workshop during the conference. I had said yes because I loved giving that workshop and it was a real thrill to be asked. Then somewhere along the way they had also roped me into giving a speech on book conservation. And if that wasn't enough, I had also agreed to donate a raffle prize. I was all for fundraising for librarians, but I had to ask myself why I couldn't have simply given a basket of books or a gift card. No, I had offered to take twenty lucky librarians on a three-hour "Book Lovers' Tour" of San Francisco. We were renting a bus and everything. Good grief. What had I been thinking?

Of course, all those months ago, I had never dreamed that I would be getting married to Derek Stone this weekend.

My gaze softened and I sighed happily at the thought of marriage to Derek—and almost crashed into a gray-haired man minding his own business reading the program booklet.

"Sorry," I stammered, and kept walking. It wasn't the first time I'd spaced out and almost injured someone lately. Whenever I thought of Derek and our upcoming wedding, I sort of lost consciousness for a few seconds.

I had considered cancelling my conference events this week, but after talking it over with Derek, we decided that it would be a good idea for me to keep to my original conference schedule. Because amazingly, every last detail of the wedding was taken care of. And Derek had pointed out that attending the conference would—hopefully—distract me from any pre-wedding jitters I might be susceptible to. He had a good argument there, seeing as how I was more than a little overwhelmed by the fact that his entire family—including his parents, four brothers and their spouses and children, and various aunts and uncles—had arrived from England several days ago. They had gone directly to Sonoma to visit my family so I wouldn't see them until the day of the wedding, but that didn't mean I would be worried about them.

Derek had insisted that his family would be fine in the wine country without us and that my family would provide them with plenty of fun and friendship. It all sounded good in theory. But now that I was here, staring at this massive convention space and all of these people, I began to wonder if there wasn't something I should've been doing to welcome his family more personally. And what about the rest of the wedding preparations? Had I really completed everything on my list of bridal duties? I checked my watch. Would it be wrong to leave the conference after I'd just arrived?

Not just wrong, but stupid, I silently lectured myself as I made my way through the crowd toward the book bag counter. Attending this conference would be great for my business, my career, I reminded myself. I would make new contacts, possibly acquire some new clients, and reacquaint myself with old friends.

So I was here to stay. At least for a few hours. As I wound my way through the crowd, I realized that despite my neurotic compulsion to check all of my wedding lists on an hourly basis, I was happy to be here. I had always enjoyed this conference and I was grateful to the organization for all the good things I'd received by being a part of it. Besides, being among all these librarians made me feel nostalgic for my post-graduate years. Those were good times.

Even though I had never planned to work as a librarian, I knew that starting out with a degree in Library Science was one of the best routes to a career as a bookbinder. Consequently, everyone I knew in school had been working feverishly toward their master of library science degrees back then. I had to admit it had been daunting to be surrounded by all of those highly intelligent, compulsively organized, overwhelmingly detail-oriented people. I used to cope by wearing T-shirts that said things like: How many times have you washed your hands today? and Do you spell anal retentive with a hyphen?

Instead of the quick laugh I always expected when I showed up wearing one of my dumb T-shirts, my gifted friends would actually spend an hour or two seriously discussing whatever statement I was displaying.

"It's simple really. You spell it with a hyphen when it's used as a descriptive. For instance, if you said, 'I hate my anal-retentive professor,' that would require a hyphen. But if you said 'I'm feeling rather anal retentive today,' no hyphen is necessary."

I chuckled at the memory. God, I missed them!

I finally snagged my book bag, a sporty navy blue backpack that everyone around me agreed was highly impressive. Especially compared to last year's offering, a cheap beige fiber tote that barely held up for the length of the event. Free conference bags—and free books—were an important part of the conference experience and clearly a contentious issue.

I tested the weight of the book-laden backpack and then slipped my arms through the straps. I decided to head for the coffee kiosk, when I heard someone call my name.

"Brooklyn? Is that you?"

I whirled around and frowned at the red-haired woman standing a few feet away. "Yes?"

She laughed and ruffled her short red hair self-consciously. "I know it's been years and I've changed a few things, but I don't look that different, do I?"

I blinked. "Oh my God. Heather? Heather Babcock?"

"Yes!" She squealed and grabbed me in a crushing hug. "I was so afraid I wouldn't find you!"

"I was just thinking about you," I said. It was the absolute truth. She had been one of my favorite people back in the day. "I didn't realize you were coming. Why didn't you call me?"

"I didn't know I was coming until two days ago and then it was like a whirlwind trying to get ready for the trip."

"Wow. I'm stunned. But it's a good feeling," I added quickly, grinning to hide the fact that I was in complete shock. Heather had been one of my roommates in graduate school and a best pal from the good old days. She was so beautiful and petite, with a delicate bone structure and short-short hair. She always looked like an adorable pixie to me, but today she looked almost . . . haggard. Like maybe she hadn't slept in a week.

"Gosh, it's been . . . how many years?"

"Ten, maybe? You look fantastic."

"So do you." It had been twelve years, but who was counting?

"Yeah, right." She chuckled ruefully. "I do own mirrors, let's not get carried away."

"Don't be silly, you're beautiful," I insisted, but quickly changed the subject. "Do you have time for a cup of coffee?"

"Of course."

I bought two café lattes and two biscotti and we found a small table in the far corner. Within seconds we were talking and laughing like the old friends we had been, as if twelve long years hadn't passed since we'd last seen each other.

Heather and I, along with our best friend, Sara Martin, had been roommates back in library school. We had clicked from the get-go and became so inseparable that our classmates took to calling us the Three Musketeers. Sadly, though, a few weeks before graduation, Sara and Heather had a major falling-out when Heather found out that her boyfriend, Roderick, had been cheating on her—with Sara.

Heather had been inconsolable, especially when news filtered back that Sara and Rod had run off to get married. About a year later, I heard through the grapevine that Sara had caught Rod cheating on her. This was not a big surprise to anyone since Rod was adorable, but very shallow and prone to believing his own hyped-up PR. But in the end, Sara forgave him and they were still together, as far as I knew.

Heather and I avoided the dreaded subject of Sara and Roderick. Instead, Heather talked about her fulfilling job at the local library in her small town, and I told her all about my adventures in bookbinding and my relationship with Derek. I didn't mention the wedding, worried that my happiness would make her feel even worse. After thirty minutes of chatting and catching up, we both sat back and smiled.

"It's really good to see you," I said wistfully.

"You, too." Heather's smile turned enigmatic. "So, are we ever going to mention the big fat bitchy elephant in the room?"

I reached across the table and grabbed her hand. "I didn't want to ask."

She raised an eyebrow. "But you're dying to know."

"Sorry," I said, wincing. "But yeah, I would love to know if you've had any news or run-ins with . . ."

"No." Heather inhaled quickly, as if she were about to take some horrible-tasting medicine. "I haven't seen Sara in twelve years. But I have a friend who has a friend who knows her, so I hear things."

"I hope you intend to share what you've heard."

She chuckled. "Absolutely."

I frowned. "Do you think she'll be coming to the conference?"

"I sure hope not," Heather said. Her jaw tightened and her eyes narrowed in unrepressed fury. "Because I swear, if I ever see Sara Martin again, I'll kill her."

Chapter 1

It was our last day in Paris.

My husband (and yes, I was really loving that word—a lot) Derek and I had breakfast on the private terrace of the hotel suite, enjoying the spectacular view of the city that was spread out before us. Nearby, the tall, thin spire of the American Cathedral speared up into the sky like a javelin. The immense Eiffel Tower loomed impressively in the distance. There was a smattering of fluffy white clouds dotting the blue sky and the early morning sunshine reflected brightly off the windows of the surrounding buildings. The air was still cool but I could already feel it beginning to warm up. Lovely Paris was pulling out all the stops for our last day.

Derek watched me grab a thin slice of delectable Iberico ham from the small plate of charcuterie and I couldn't help but smile. Not because of the ham, which was utterly delicious and melted in my mouth, but because it had been three weeks since our wedding and I still felt a tingle up my spine whenever I saw his stunning face and thought about those three little words: my husband Derek.

I shook my head. Honestly, on any normal day I wouldn't be so consumed by such sappy, besotted thoughts. But who could blame me? He's so gorgeous, I thought. With those dark blue eyes, so intense, so intelligent. And his mouth, whew. His lips could twist into a sensual, roguish smile when least expected. He was tall, dark, and dangerous, and he was all mine.

Maybe I was suffering from some kind of honeymoon fever, because lately, with just the right look or tilt of his head, Derek could render me light-headed and woozy.

Who was I kidding? I'd been ridiculously smitten from the very first time we met. And oddly enough, according to Derek, the feeling was entirely mutual.

That first time had occurred about two years ago during a fancy charity gala at the Covington Library. It was the night my mentor was found—by me—dying in a pool of his own blood. Murdered. Derek had been in charge of a security detail guarding the priceless books and antiquities on display. I had seen him stalking the crowded floor, studying faces, observing body language, watching reactions, looking completely isolated despite the crowd. He was lean and muscular in a gazillion-dollar charcoal suit; his eyes were darkly compelling as he scanned the room. And when our gazes met, he frowned at me. Frowned! It was annoying, to say the least.

Days later, though, he had explained his reaction by saying that I had taken him by surprise.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I'd asked, still a little put out.

He had shaken his head, then grabbed hold of my arms and kissed me. "That's what it means," he had murmured.

"Ah."

I exhaled slowly at the memory of that first kiss and, still a little dizzy, reached for a slim slice of buttery Brie and a chunk of fresh baguette. Gazing around the terrace, enjoying the sight of dozens of cascading purple orchids trailing over the wrought iron railings, I sighed. Honeymoon fever or not, the man could still turn my insides to jelly.

Derek touched my arm. "What shall we do today?" With a grin, he added, "As if I didn't know."

"I'm so predictable," I said, smiling self-consciously. "But yes, I'd really like to visit the Bouquinistes one more time. I have a feeling that there's a fabulous old book just waiting for me to pluck it out of obscurity and make it my own."

The Bouquinistes were the bookstalls that lined both sides of the Seine River for several miles. And when your life revolved around old books as mine did, those bookstalls were like a siren song. I had to pay them one last visit before I left Paris.

My name is Brooklyn Wainwright and I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration. I considered the bookstalls my own version of panning for gold.

"I'm in the mood to do some browsing, as well," Derek said, his normally clipped British accent sounding sexy and mellow in the morning sunlight. "Perhaps I can find more of those tacky souvenirs you discovered. I'd like to bring some back to the office."

"Ooh, good idea. I'll need more of those, too." As if I hadn't already collected a few dozen, I thought.

He took a last sip of his café au lait. "We can walk along the river, hold hands, and watch the world go by. We don't have to be anywhere until dinnertime."

"That sounds wonderful." I reached my arms out in a big, lazy stretch, then relaxed and smiled at the man sitting across the breakfast table from me. "I love my life. And I love you."

"And I love you, too." He leaned over and kissed me, then ran his fingers along my cheek. "I see you also loved your French toast."

"It was delicious." I popped the last bit of Brie and baguette into my mouth, then rubbed my full stomach and frowned at all the empty plates on the table. "I can't believe we ate so much. But this was my last chance to try the French toast. I've been craving it for weeks, but I never saw it on a menu until, well, you know."

I'd had to learn the hard way that the French referred to French toast as something entirely different. Derek had taken pity on me yesterday morning and revealed the secret French code.

"They call it pain perdu," he had said. "Or 'lost toast,' because it's made with very dry bread."

It was mortifying to have made that typically American mistake. After all, I had visited Paris at least four times before this and naturally thought I knew everything. One of those visits had been to see my sister Savannah, who had been studying at the famous Cordon Bleu cooking school. With a fancy chef in the family, you would've thought I would know what pain perdu was.

But no. I sighed again. You learn something new every day, as my father always said.

We strolled down Avenue George V to the Pont de l'Alma, stopped to marvel at the Flame of Liberty monument and check out the lingering tributes to Princess Diana—who was killed in that very tunnel under the bridge—and then crossed over the Seine to the Left Bank. Staring down at the water, watching the tourist-filled Batobus cruise near the shore, I was surprised at how cold the river looked and how fast the current traveled.

The sudden chill had me rubbing my arms briskly. Despite the sunny skies, the air was cooler and breezier here by the river and I snuggled up close to Derek for warmth. He didn't mind, and wrapped his arm around me. We walked a little more quickly until we'd made it to the other side.

We ambled along for another mile, maybe two, gazing at shop windows and chatting easily about everything we had seen and done over the past three weeks. We had originally planned to spend only two weeks away, but as friends and family learned of our honeymoon destination, we began receiving requests to run an errand here, or pick up or deliver an item there, or look up someone of importance elsewhere. One or two requests turned into four or five. But only if we had time, everyone insisted, or only if we were in the area. No big deal. Except several of the requests turned out to be quite a big deal. So we extended the trip for a week. I couldn't say that I minded very much.

Walking along the river, we gazed at the expansive grassy park that led up to the imposing Hôtel des Invalides, where Napoleon was entombed in stately splendor under the grand Dôme des Invalides. I had been inside on a previous trip and had to admit that it was the most spectacular setting for a tomb I'd ever seen. Set on a green granite pedestal and placed on a mosaic tile floor that illustrated the main battles of the Empire, the highly polished red stone sarcophagus was surrounded by marble columns, statuary, and bas-relief sculptures that told the story of his many achievements. Years ago, one of my tour guides had called it "a simple soldier's tomb." They couldn't have been more wrong.

On the next block we passed the stately Palais Bourbon, constructed for one of Louis XIV's daughters and now the home of the National Assembly; and then the Musee d'Orsay, an old train station transformed into a popular art museum. On the opposite side of the river were the pretty trees of the Jardin des Tuileries, which led up to the impressive and historic buildings of the Louvre.

"If you'd like, we can stop for a light lunch at Cocorico." Derek pointed toward the next street. "They're right around the corner."

"I'd love to." I had fallen for the quirky little bistro the other day. Their onion soup was positively addictive.

Finally we came to the place on the Quai Voltaire where the Bouquinistes, or bookstalls, began. The tingle I felt was the same one I experienced whenever I got up close and personal with old books and the people who loved them.

"You know I'm going to look at everything," I confessed to Derek.

"Of course you are," he said lightly. "I'll move along at a faster pace, but I'll wait for you at the next corner."

"Is that Rue Bonaparte?" I asked, taking a quick glance at my foldout street map.

"Yes." He ran his hand across the back of my neck and kissed me. "Take your time."

Watching him walk away, tall and lean and confident, I let out a jagged breath. The man was compelling, no doubt about it.

Each of the bookstalls—as well as their owners—had their own personality and style. Some of them specialized in older classics with worn leather covers, their gilded titles fading but still readable. Other stalls were dedicated to paperbacks, many of them pulp fiction and noir mysteries with fabulously garish covers. Some owners sold wonderful posters that they clipped to their roofs and allowed to blow in the breeze. These mainly featured those familiar art deco French ad campaigns hocking everything from milk to gin, but there were also lots of stock studio photographs of famous movie stars. Marilyn Monroe was still especially popular.

The bookstalls were uniformly dark green in color and were highly regulated in terms of size, shape, hours of operation, and occasionally, content. Some historians claimed that they had been in existence since the seventeenth century and some of the stalls—and the merchandise—appeared to be about that old. When the simple green boxes were closed up at night and chained to the stone walls that overlooked the river, they looked almost coffin-like.

But for now, the bookstalls were very much alive and open for business. The avenue was crowded with cars, and the traffic noises mixed with the pedestrians' shouts and murmurs in French. The sounds made me smile with fondness. I loved this city. And I absolutely adored the Bouquinistes. After all, books are my life. My name is Brooklyn Wainwright—um, Stone. Brooklyn Wainwright Stone—and I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration.

I stopped at the very first bookstall and began to browse through the rows and rows of books on every subject known to man. I glanced up and noticed Derek moving down the sidewalk. He turned and I waved, knowing I would catch up eventually.

I was captivated by the collection of classic mysteries on display in the second stall. Most were written in French, but I still checked every title, hoping to be inspired, hoping to find just the right little treasure to take home with me. Every so often I would pull a book out from the stack to examine the cover and see what sort of condition it was in. These were mostly used paperbacks, but each had been carefully wrapped in plastic, so their condition remained fairly decent. There was also the occasional hardcover and I examined those even more closely.

The bookseller approached after having allowed me to peruse on my own for a while. "Bonjour, madame ."

"Bonjour, madame ," I replied in kind, and took a quick look at her. She was probably fifty, wore a thin white sweater over black pants with little black flats. Her dark hair was short and straight. To me, she was quintessentially French.

"Ah," she said. "You are American."

I gave her a rueful grin. "Oui, madame." Even the best French accent couldn't fool a French person, and mine was so far from being the best as to be laughable. Or as the French would say, ridicule.

She gazed at the row of books I was going through. "You like the detective stories," she said in her thick accent.

"Yes." I liked them as much as the next person, I supposed. The fact that they were simply books had been enough to snag my attention. But to be honest, the long row of Agatha Christies had definitely perked me up.

"I don't know quite what I'm looking for," I explained lamely, "but I'll know it when I see it."

"Ah." She nodded in understanding and brought a little stepstool out from under the stall. "You will stand on this. You can see the books more easily from above."

I was touched by her thoughtfulness. "Merci ."

She waved her hand at the books. "Please enjoy your search."

The stalls were high enough that the stepstool did make it much easier to look down and see the titles. I started on the next row and was intrigued to find several James Bond books written in French. I picked one up.

"Vivre et Laisser Mourir," I murmured. I had a feeling I knew what it meant, but just to be sure, I pulled out my cell phone to use my translator app.

"Live and Let Die," I said, delighted. "Cool."

The book next to that one was Casino Royale. No translation necessary, although the French version spelled it Royal, minus the "e" on the end.

I glanced around to see how far Derek had wandered. Much like the fictional James Bond, Derek had been a commander in the Royal Navy and had gone on to work for British military intelligence before opening his own security company. Also like James Bond, Derek was dashing, sexy, brave, and daring. One of these books would make a perfect, slightly silly, gift to give him as a memento of our time in Paris.

But which one? I continued to skim through the books, trying to figure out which title would be best. I leaned farther over to catch a glimpse of the books stacked near the back of the stall. There were hardcovers back there and it was always exciting to discover a hardcover gem.

And that was when I saw it. I reached out, lifted the book gingerly, and stared at it. I had to admit I was shaking with excitement. "It's too perfect."

The book was a hardcover English edition of The Spy Who Loved Me. Many years ago, I had stolen my brother's cache of Bond books and read them all. Since I was only about twelve years old at the time, I probably missed some of the nuances, but I distinctly remembered that this one had been one of my favorites. I vaguely recalled that it had been different from the others because it was told partly from the woman's point of view. I would have to look that up, though, because I couldn't be sure if I was recalling it correctly.

If nothing else, the title of the book made it the perfect choice for Derek.

Chapter One

"It's good to be back in Dharma," Derek said, breathing in the crisp fall air.

We stood on the balcony outside the master bedroom of the home we'd be living in for the next two weeks and took in the gorgeous scenery. I felt all of my stress dissipate as I gazed out at the green terraced hills. As far as the eye could see, thousands of sturdy grapevines grew tall and lush, their leaves turning golden brown in the autumn sun. Even from this far away, I could see the clusters of ripe fruit more than ready for the coming harvest.

"This view never gets old," I said with a happy sigh, smiling up at him.

Derek pulled me close and kissed my temple. "Beautiful."

"It's been way too long since we were here." I rested my head on my husband's shoulder. Actually, it had only been a few months, I realized with some amazement. But so much had happened in that time, it seemed longer. First I had attended a national librarians' convention and faced down a deadly librarian or two. Then Derek and I had gotten married and we'd flown off to honeymoon in Paris. It had been an incredibly romantic time. And then we had come home to find dangerous goons with guns, a vicious assassin, and more than one victim of cold-blooded murder.

Sudden shivers skittered across my shoulders at the memory. You would think I'd be used to finding dead bodies by now. But no, it shocked me to my very core, every time.

With determination, I shook off the chills. We were in Dharma now. We could relax and enjoy our families and friends. This coming weekend was Dharma's first annual Book Festival and the following week we would stay to help with the grape harvest. I took a few more deep breaths to get rid of the last of those shivers. I didn't want anything to interfere with my excitement over the upcoming book festival. There would be books everywhere—and no dead bodies!

Yes, it was good to be back in Dharma with Derek. It was good to be back in this place where my family and I had lived since I was eight years old, before there even was a town called Dharma. Back then, there were only Airstream campers and tents and grapevines. I had been very unhappy that our parents had forced us to move from San Francisco out to the boondocks, until I climbed down from the family van and spotted a little dark-haired girl. She defiantly clutched her bald Barbie doll and looked just as pissed off as I felt. That was Robin. We clicked instantly and everything was okay after that.

Our parents were part of a group of Deadheads and seekers of wisdom who had followed their spiritual leader Avatar Robson Benedict—or Guru Bob, as my siblings and I called him—to the wilds of Sonoma County, where they created the Fellowship for Spiritual Enlightenment and Higher Artistic Consciousness.

Now, of course, most members of the commune lived in beautiful homes that dotted the hills and valleys around Dharma. They worked for the winery or in the vineyards or contributed in other ways to the busy, thriving community of shops, tech firms, restaurants, and wineries scattered around Dharma. Thanks to plenty of canny advice from Guru Bob and the lucrative profit-sharing plan that he'd established early on, his followers had learned to invest wisely. And now, twenty-five years later, our people were thriving and our town had become one of the most popular destination spots in the wine country.

And lately some of Derek's family had bought homes in the area, so for me, Dharma kept getting better and better.

"Is everything out of the car?" I asked.

"Yes." Derek grinned. "Including all of your bookbinding supplies. And Charlie."

I reached out and squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

Just that morning Derek and I had driven here from San Francisco with our cat Charlie. The drive itself had only taken an hour, but it had taken even longer to move our clothes and essential items from the car into the house. Now it was time to take a minute and enjoy the quiet.

I felt a whisper of movement and glanced down to see Charlie winding herself around and between my legs, brushing her thick, creamy white tail against my ankles. "Well, look who ventured out of her crate."

After a few more sweeps of her tail, Charlie slinked over to Derek, who stooped down and picked her up in his arms. "We'll have to be extra cautious that she doesn't wander outside."

Despite being a mecca for sophisticated wine enthusiasts, Dharma was still rustic and woodsy, so there were plenty of hawks and coyotes to worry about. And even though Charlie was a full grown cat now, I still imagined her to be a defenseless little kitten and would be heartbroken if anything happened to her.

"Yes, we will." I reached over to stroke Charlie's soft back and give her a scratch between her ears. "We don't want to lose you," I murmured. Our girl was an indoor cat, having spent most of her life inside our San Francisco apartment. I knew there were any number of wild animals out there looking for a tasty snack in the form of a fluffy, well-behaved housecat. I was always reading stories in the paper about small animals being carried off by red hawks or attacked by raccoons. Lately I had even seen reports of a mountain lion sighting nearby. I wasn't about to let Charlie roam outside with predators like that skulking around.

Derek led the way back inside and I carefully closed the door behind us. The cat was precious to both of us, ever since Derek had brought her home as a surprise for me.

Footsteps sounded from behind us and I turned to watch Annie walk into the master bedroom where we were standing.

I gave her shoulder a soft squeeze. "Thank you for letting us stay."

"It's your house, too," she said lightly.

It was a long story, but basically, this house had once belonged to my old bookbinding mentor Abraham Karastovsky. He'd never known he had a daughter until the last few days of his life and he was looking forward to getting to know her better after their first brief meeting. Sadly, he was killed before that could happen and consequently, he left his entire estate to me, including his sumptuous Mediterranean-style house with its amazing views, along with the equally amazing, fully-stocked bookbinding workshop out beyond the pool. Plus six million dollars, but that's a whole other story.

So legally the house belonged to me, but after my family and I got to know Annie—and after the required paternity test results came through proving that Annie was indeed Abraham's daughter—I asked the lawyers to write out a joint tenant agreement that gave half of the property to Annie. We also set up a trust that would pay Annie a generous allowance until she could determine what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

Annie's mother—the woman who had never told Annie or Abraham about their connection to each other—had passed away during that same period. So with no more attachments, Annie moved to Dharma where she was welcomed by my mother with open arms.

After a very short time, Annie figured out exactly what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. She had taken her money and opened a cute kitchenware shop on Dharma's fashionable shopping lane. Since then, she had become an integral member of Dharma's business community and now she was truly thriving. But I could still picture the grief-stricken Goth girl she had been when we first met.

"Does everything look okay?" she asked now, giving the bedspread a minute tug to straighten it. "This room is pretty nice, isn't it?"

"It's fabulous," I said. "The whole house is amazing and the view from the balcony is wonderful."

Annie sighed and glanced around the master bedroom. "I could never bring myself to move into this room. I've replaced all the furniture and painted the walls, but it still reminds me of Abraham." Her eyes clouded, then she seemed to shake herself out of the mood. "Besides, I prefer staying on the first floor. It's easier and, you know, it suits me."

"It's kind of you to open up your home to us," Derek said.

"Oh. Gosh, Derek, it's really no problem." Her eyelashes fluttered and she gave him a sappy smile, clearly charmed. Derek had that effect on people, especially women. It might've been his elegant British accent that did it, or maybe it was his amazing good looks. Either way, I, too, found myself charmed daily.

"We really do appreciate you letting us stay here," I added.

"To be honest," she admitted, "having you here gives me a good excuse to stay with Presley for the next two weeks. We've been talking about moving in together so this'll either make us or break us."

I grinned. Annie's boyfriend Presley was the son of an old friend of my mother's. "In that case, we're happy to help you out."

"It's a win-win." Annie headed for the stairway. "I'm about to take off and leave you guys alone, but first I want to go over a few things in the kitchen."

"Sounds good."

Derek and I followed her downstairs with Charlie keeping up alongside us.

Annie gave us quick lessons on using the coffeemaker and the toaster oven. "You're welcome to drink my coffee and eat anything you find in the pantry or the fridge. Oh, and I have an unopened package of English muffins in the freezer if you want any of those. And cupcakes. Help yourself."

"You're leaving cupcakes?" I said, my eyes lighting up.

"Presley won't eat them." Her frown was sorrowful. "He gives me grief whenever he sees me eating sweets."

I narrowed my eyes. "Hmm. You sure about this guy?"

"I know what you're thinking." She grinned. "But hey, he's cute."

"That makes all the difference," I said with a quick laugh. "But anything we eat, including the cupcakes, we'll be sure to replace."

"That works for me." She glanced across the room. "Oh, let me show you how to work the television."

"Good thinking." We tagged along and got the easy instructions for operating the remote control.

Heading back to the kitchen, Annie glanced down at the clear plastic crates I'd set on the floor near the door leading to the laundry room and into the garage. It was easy to see the stacks of books and papers inside. "Looks like you're ready for the book festival."

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

I snapped the lid off the top crate and surveyed the contents. "I brought along a few dozen demonstration books and a ton of bookbinding supplies, just in case."

I had thought about leaving these items at home because I had a complete bookbinding shop behind the house. Abraham's supplies were still stored there so why would I need to bring more? But I wanted my own things. I was comfortable with my tools. I would definitely make use of his supplies of bookbinding glue and his heavy duty book press, but otherwise, I was happier with my stuff.

"Probably a good thing. Your mom says you've got back-to-back presentations lined up on all three days."

I rolled my eyes. "That's what happens when your mother is co-chair of the festival committee."

She leaned against the kitchen counter, folded her arms across her chest, and smiled indulgently. "Your mom's really proud of you. And it doesn't hurt that you're the book guru of the western world."

I chuckled. "Book guru. I like that."

"It suits you," Derek said with a grin.

The first annual Dharma Book Festival was the main reason we had moved in for the next two weeks. I'd been campaigning for years to have a book fair in Dharma, had taken time to visit every bookstore owner in the wine country in hopes of convincing them to take part in the project, and now it was finally happening. It was my very own dream come true and I had big hopes that the festival would bring lots of smart new visitors to the area. You know, the kind of visitors who liked to read books.

And yes, my mother had signed me up for at least a dozen events on all three days of the festival, but it didn't bother me one bit. I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration. Books are my life, so why would I mind?

When the idea of putting on a book festival first came up, Mom had researched the subject with single-minded determination. She signed up for extension classes at the local college and even took several online courses. She formulated a budget and obtained some big local sponsors including three popular radio stations, a number of the larger Dharma wineries, the Sonoma Institute of the Arts, the Friends of the County Library, and four area bookstores. She established a working timeline and solicited an enthusiastic group of residents to help form a committee.

The committee members divided up the responsibilities of contacting vendors, booking authors, presenters, and other participants. There was someone assigned to promotion and someone else working out an elaborate schedule of events and activities. A beautiful program was designed and posters were displayed in every shop in town. Mom was relentless in her desire to put on the best festival ever.

In her research, she had learned that the latest trend with book festivals was to designate a classic novel as the official "book of the festival." After a lot of wrangling, the Dharma Festival Committee had chosen Little Women to be that book. Apparently there had been some serious arguments over the choice. Some of the men on the committee balked at the "girlie" choice. They wanted Call of the Wild, a more "manly" read. It made some sense to choose that one because Jack London had lived in Sonoma County and his sprawling property in the hills above Glen Ellen was a famous historical landmark. But seriously, was it important to choose a "manly" book? Mom had pointed out that statistically, women bought more books and did more reading than men, and it didn't hurt that the biggest proponent of Little Women was Mom's male co-chairman, Lawson Schmidt, whose mother had been a big fan of the book. Ultimately the decision came down to the fact that there were simply more women on the committee than men, so Little Women had won out in the end.

The entire town and anyone planning to attend had been encouraged to read the book in anticipation of the various events and workshops that would celebrate the story and the author. The committee had invited a Louisa May Alcott scholar to take part in several panel discussions. But the biggest and most exciting event of the entire festival promised to be the one-time performance of Little Women, the musical.

Chapter One

The black book arrived in the mail on a quiet Saturday afternoon.

My husband Derek walked into my workshop balancing a large bundle of letters and parcels in his arms. "We've quite a backlog of mail, darling."

I glanced up and smiled at him. We had been married less than a year so I could forgive myself for wanting to sigh dreamily. I would never grow tired of looking at his ruggedly handsome face with those dark blue eyes and dangerous smile. I simply loved everything about him, even the way he occasionally aimed one inquisitive, raised eyebrow in my direction—how did he do that?—or the way his voice could go all cold and upper-class Brit when dealing with some knucklehead trying to pull a fast one over on him. Of course, that same voice turned rich and warm when he was talking only to me. He was tall and lean and tough and sexy. And he made me laugh every day, which made him even sexier in my book.

He was just plain perfect for me.

And somehow, he felt the same way about me.

"Darling?"

I blinked. "Oh." Whew, what brought that on? "Um, yeah, looks like the mail really piled up while we were gone."

Late last night Derek and I had returned home to San Francisco from Dharma, where we had spent the last ten days enjoying the wine country, visiting our parents and friends, and checking on the final phase of construction on our new home away from home-away-from-home. It was no wonder we had so much mail.

And so much work to catch up on, I added mentally, staring at the fractured copy of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer spread out in pieces in front of me.

He was still staring at me, his lips twisted in a wry grin. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh yeah, I'm dandy." But I had to take a quick breath and let it out slowly.

Sometimes it hit me just how much I loved this guy. And what made it even better was that he loved me right back. I'd probably get used to it in a few hundred years or so. "I guess I'm still a little tired from the trip. And now I've got to finish this book before I do anything else."

"You'll get it done." He kissed the top of my head and we leaned into each other for a brief moment. Then he stepped away and I shook my head to clear my errant thoughts. It was time to concentrate on my work.

I carefully separated the ragged covers of the old Tom Sawyer copy I'd been asked to restore. I planned to replace the faded cloth cover and spine with a sturdy new cloth in deep forest green and then add new endpapers to the inside front and back. The textblock itself was remarkably undamaged, the pages still crisp and clean. Clearly the book had been lucky enough to have escaped the ravages of any children who, in general, had an overwhelming tendency to love their favorite books to death. With a sturdy new outer shell and a little help from me, these pages might last a few hundred more years.

Derek walked around to the opposite end of my worktable and set the piles of mail down. Then he proceeded to sort them into smaller piles.

"Lots of bills," he muttered. "And plenty of junk. Ah, here's a postcard from Douglas and Delia. They're in Santorini."

"I hope they're having fun," I said. Douglas was Derek's oldest brother and a general in the British Royal Army. His wife Delia was lovely and had a wonderful dry wit.

"It seems they are," he said, giving the card a quick scan.

"I'm glad."

"Alex is doing well, by the way," he said, speaking of our down-the-hall neighbor. "She promises she'll be by shortly with cupcakes in honor of our homecoming."

That got my attention. "Cupcakes? For real?"

"I saw them with my own eyes."

Alex Monroe had offered to collect our mail while we were gone and also to keep an eye on our place. As a former CIA operative, she was handy when it came to security issues. She was also the high-powered head of her own company and enjoyed baking cupcakes to relax. She really was the best kind of neighbor in every way.

Derek set the postcard down on one of the piles he'd created and continued perusing the stack. "Someone sent you a book."

He walked around to my end of the table and placed the excessively taped and padded manila envelope down in front of me.

"A book for me?" I grinned. "Why would anyone send me a book?"

He chuckled because I was joking, of course. I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration. I received books in the mail from clients all the time.

I was thankful the envelope was padded because the back was scuffed and dirty and slightly dented from traveling. I turned it over to see who it was from, but there was no individual's name on the return address. Just a company, Quinn Gwyneth AntiquitiesImports , located in Oddlochenin Inverness, Scotland.

Scotland? "Where's Oddlochen?"

Derek whipped out his phone, tapped a few icons. "It's a village near Inverness."

Then I focused in on stared at the addressee. "Derek, this isn't for me. It's addressed to you."

"Me?" It was his turn to frown. "How odd. I didn't even look. I could tell it was a book and naturally assumed it was for you."

"I did, too." I held out the package. "But it's got your name on it."

He took it and glanced around for some way to cut through the layers of packing tape.

"Scissors in the top drawer," I said helpfully, pointing toward my desk.

"Of course." Once he had it opened, he slid the book out onto the worktable. Looking at the title, he said, "Now I'm doubly sure it was meant for you."

I picked up the book. The cloth cover was a stark black. The only thing on the front of the book was the one-word title printed in faded gold and slanted in the upper left-hand corner: Rebecca.

"Rebecca." I flashed him a bright smile. "One of my favorites." I had always been a sucker for gothic novels. The plucky heroine doomed to live a life of drudgery, rescued by the handsome stranger—or is he a killer? Dark and moody, romantic and suspenseful., I had spent my preteen years gobbling them up.

I chuckled at my own thoughts, then naturally turned to the book itself to examine the condition of the front and back covers. That's my job, after all, so it was second nature for me to check out the spine, which showed the same elegantly styled title and the author's name below in simple block letters. I ran my hand along it. The cloth covers of old books had a tendency to separate and sag away from the stiff material underneath, but this spine was still firm and smooth.

I turned the book over again. "Outer corners are slightly rubbed. Spine has a bit of wear at the bottom edge." I pointed out the discoloration. "See?"

"I do, and it thrills me." He leaned over and kissed my cheek.

I laughed. "You need to get out more."

He picked up the book and studied the cover. "Can you fix the discoloration?"

"Of course. But I won't do anything until we find out who sent it to you and why."

"Yes." He handed the book back to me. "Why, indeed."

"Do you know anyone named GwynethQuinn?"

"I do, yes. Someone I worked with years ago. But why would she…well, it doesn't make sensedon't think so."

Opening the book to the title page, I studied the information written there. "Derek, it's a British first edition. First printing. 1938." I turned the page. "And look. It's signed by Daphne du Maurier." I looked up at him. "Wow."

"That is impressive," he said with a nod.

"I'll go through it more closely later, but overall the book appears to be in very good condition. And that signature raises its value significantly." I smiled. "Someone must like you a lot."

"I'm a likeable fellow." But his eyes narrowed slightly and that wonderful mouth turned grim as he pondered where the book had come from. He pushed the sleeves of his navy sweater up to his elbows and leaned against the table. "Is there a card or something inside the book that indicates who sent it? And why?"

"Good question."

While Derek studied the front of the manila envelope, I carefully leafed through the book, then held it upside down, gently fanning the pages open so that anything that might've been slipped inside would fall out. But there was nothing. "Is there anything else inside the envelope?"

He checked it thoroughly. "Nothing."

"So it's a mystery," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "Just what we need. Another mystery."

"It's been months since the book festival," I said with a shrug. "We're about due, don't you think?"

"Bite your tongue, darling."

The Dharma Book Festival last October had been a huge success and garnered lots of publicity, no thanks to the two murders that had taken place only days before it all began. Happily though, the killer had been caught before a third murder could be committed, and eventually all of our lives had settled back down to normal. Or as normal as we could ever be, given my tendency to attract evil killers and their ilk.

So yes, mysteries and murderous intentions did seem to follow us wherever we went, but it wasn't all my fault. My dear husband was one of the world's top security experts and after all, the book had been sent to him. So for once, this little puzzle was on him. Which was, no doubt, why he was staring at the mysterious book with such a thoughtful expression.

The doorbell rang and we stared at each other.

"Cupcakes?" I wondered.

"Let's hope so."

He took my hand and we walked over to the door.

"Welcome home," Alex declared, and strolled in carrying a large, sturdy, plastic cupcake carrier. She looked ridiculously elegant in simple black leggings, black- and-white sneakers, and a sage- green tunic. Setting the carrier on the kitchen island, she turned and grabbed me in a fierce hug. "So glad you guys are home."

"We are too," I said. "Thanks so much for taking care of Charlie and for holding our mail. And for cupcakes and for everything else you always do. We really appreciate it."

"It's no prob." She glanced around. "Charlie was right behind me."

"Charlie?" I called.

Hearing her name, our little beast dashed through the door and immediately begin winding herself around my ankles and mewing loudly.

"Aww. Hello, sweetie," I said, and picked up the cat. Charlie gave my cheek a light head butt. "So good to see you."

Alex smiled. "I think she missed you."

"I missed her, too." After another minute of cuddling, I set Charlie on the floor and got down to business. "Now about these cupcakes."

She laughed. "Twelve. Three flavors."

Derek joined us. Reaching down, he lifted the pretty white and orange cat into his arms, much to Charlie's delight. "Alex, honestly. We should be the ones bringing you cupcakes. We owe you."

"Don't be silly." She reached over to scratch Charlie's neck. "I got to play with Charlie for ten whole days so that's more than a fair trade. Besides, you know I'm compelled to bake. If I didn't give some to you, I'd have to eat them all by myself."

"So we're doing you a favor?" I said.

She grinned. "Exactly."

"Well, then, how can we refuse?" I glanced up at Derek. "Guess we should have a cupcake."

"It's about time." For a sophisticated international man of mystery, he pretty much turned to putty when it came to cupcakes.

The three of us clustered around the cupcake carrier and Alex snapped off the lid.

"Wow," I said.

"My thoughts exactly," Derek said.

I recognized her red velvet cakes with their tall swirl of cream cheese frosting. The chocolate chip cupcakes were slathered in glistening white icing with tiny chocolate chips scattered on top. The third row looked like a yellow cake with white frosting. I desperately wanted them all.

Alex said, "This one is something I've been experimenting with. I think you'll love it."

"Of course we will," Derek said, examining the new treat. "What is it?"

"It's a lemon meringue cupcake."

"Oh," I whispered in awe. "I've heard you talk about this."

"I didn't want anyone to try it until I'd perfected it." She wiggled her eyebrows gleefully. "And now I have."

"They're so pretty." The frosting was a towering swirl of shiny white with lemon and lime zest sprinkled on top.

"They taste even better than they look," she assured us.

I glanced at Derek. "We could split one. For starters, I mean."

"That works for me."

We both took a bite and discovered a surprise. Inside the cake was a pocket of rich, lemony curd, sweet and slightly tart. The meringue icing was light and fluffy and melted in my mouth.

"This is heavenly," I said, when I could speak again. "It's like eating lemon meringue pie."

"Only it's cake. Moist and delicious." Derek surreptitiously brushed a crumb off his sweater. "I believe your talents are wasted running that silly corporation of yours."

Delighted, Alex laughed and tossed back her long, dark, silky hair. "Thanks."

"It's true," I insisted. "Why sell your soul to high finance when you could be selling cupcakes out on the street?"

The three of us spent a few more minutes laughing and talking and gossiping before Alex headed back home.

Derek went to his office to return some phone calls and I went back to work on the Tom Sawyer. Even knowing that Derek was just down the hall, it was easy for me to become consumed by my work. Books—especially old, decrepit books—had always been a major part of my life and I looked at each one like a dedicated surgeon beheld a suffering patient. How can I make you whole again? How can I improve your life?

The interior pages of the Tom Sawyer were actually in pretty good shape, except for some tears and mild foxing in various sections of the book. I went ahead and separated the cover from the textblock in order to clean the gutters thoroughly and eventually re-sew the pages with a stronger new thread.

As usual, I got lost in my work and it wasn't until several hours later that I emerged, ready to call it a day. I straightened my work space and laid a white cloth over the separated sections of the old book to protect them from any dust particles or gusts of wind that might come through the room.

I hadn't realized that Derek had left the copy of Rebecca on my worktable, but now I saw it and a dozen questions popped into my head. Who had sent it to Derek and why? Why no return address? Was it from someone who simply wanted their book to be refurbished? What was this all about?

Chapter 1

"San Francisco is a city of startling events. Happy is the man whose destiny it is to gather them up and record them in a daily newspaper!"

- Mark Twain's letter to the Territorial Enterprise, dated Dec. 23, 1865

Joseph Cabot was a multi-billionaire, an entrepreneur, a technological genius, and a social media superstar. He had his creative fingers in dozens of the most lucrative pots, as well as a few that weren't so lucrative—but they made him happy so he didn't care. Real estate development, aeronautics, restaurants, manufacturing, and computer design, you name the industry and Joseph's name was invariably connected to all the top performers.

He was a gregarious man who loved people. He was a sportsman, too, and enjoyed everything from basketball to fly fishing.

When something intrigued him, he would immerse himself in the subject. His latest obsession was windmills.

And he was a voracious reader. He loved books. He had amassed an impressive library of hundreds of rare antiquarian volumes as well as thousands of bestsellers in every genre known to man. It was Joseph's love of books that made him a superstar in my book.

But more than anything else he'd accomplished, Joseph considered himself a newspaperman. It was an old-fashioned term, but that was why it appealed to him. He loved being the owner and publisher of the San Francisco Clarion Press, along with its affiliated nationwide network of television and radio stations that specialized in the basics: news, weather, and sports. He loved the idea of keeping people informed.

The ladies of San Francisco high society adored Joseph, for obvious reasons. He was tall and strong and video-star handsome, with thick, graying hair and a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

And he just happened to be one of my husband Derek's best friends.

The two men had met fifteen years ago when Derek and his Stone Security team carried out a daring operation to rescue Joseph from a group of militant kidnappers who had stormed an elegant conference room in Mindanao and forced him at gunpoint off the stage and into a van. They had transported him blindfolded to their lair in the middle of some jungle where they threw him into a cage and then began the negotiations for his release.

Joseph refused to allow his company to pay a ransom to these hooligans, deciding instead to take his chances on escaping on his own. He had spent seven years in the military as an Army Ranger and was pretty sure he could outsmart his captors. But Joseph's business partners had balked at this plan and instead contacted Derek Stone to aid in liberating the stubborn man.

With negotiations falling through and the militants threatening to kill Joseph, Derek decided that their only choice was to overwhelm the captors, storm the lair, and rescue the prisoner themselves. And that was what he did. He led the raid himself and the operation was successful.

Once Joseph was back home and safe, he contacted Derek to say thanks. The two men began a friendship that had lasted to the present day.

Soon after Derek and I started dating, he insisted on introducing me to his friend Joseph. The three of us met for dinner and I found the older man to be smart and kind, with a good sense of humor. I liked him. When I learned that he was a book lover, as well as a major contributor to the Covington Library, I liked him even more. I knew we would be great friends for life.

My name is Brooklyn Wainwright and I'm a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration. Anyone who loved books as much as I did was destined to be my new best friend.

"Almost ready, Brooklyn darling? We don't want to keep Joseph and the Covington crew waiting."

I jolted at the sound of his voice. Glancing up, I saw Derek leaning against the doorway of my workshop, smiling at me. I couldn't help but smile back. We'd been married almost a year now, and every day spent with him was even better than the day before.

"You're home," I said lamely.

"Yes. And you're still working."

"This book is so badly damaged," I began to explain, then stopped. "But I'm finished for the day. I'll have it cleaned up in no time." As I organized my work space, I wondered if my heart would always give a little jolt when I heard Derek's voice. His tone was deep and masculine with a whisper of the Oxfordshire countryside, along with a twinge of wry humor that always brought me instant pleasure. Added to that were his ruggedly handsome face and rock hard body. The man had bewitched me from the first moment we met, despite the fact that he had used that first tender moment to accuse me of murder.

Ah, those were good times.

Derek studied the bedraggled pieces of book that I'd placed on top of a white cloth. "This is the book that Lisa Chung found?"

"Yes. She found it in the gutter."

Lisa and Henry Chung lived down the hall with their three adorable young children. I had been repairing the children's books ever since they moved into the building a few years back.

"In the gutter." Derek frowned. "No wonder it's such a mess."

"I wish I knew how it happened." I sighed. How could one of the biggest bestsellers of the year have ended up splayed and torn in the gutter along Brannan Street? The book was the latest by Michael Connelly and I might've given up on rescuing it, except that he was one of Derek's favorite authors—and one of mine, too. I simply didn't have it in me to throw it away.

"I just need another minute," I said. "Then I'll change my shoes and we can go."

He glanced down at my feet and I watched his eyebrow quirk, but he said nothing.

"Unless," I began, "you're thinking my Birkenstocks would be the perfect party shoes?"

"They would ... make a statement," Derek declared after pondering for a moment. "They're really quite fetching, but..."

I had to laugh. His British accent, along with his choice of words, tickled me sometimes. "Fetching? Really?" My friends and family members were always giving me grief about my personal choice of work shoes, but what could I say? They were ridiculously comfortable. However, I would've never called them fetching—unless maybe I were a cave woman. The thick, clunky sandals definitely gave off a "Fred Flintstone" vibe.

"Don't worry," I assured Derek. "I plan to wear a pair of glittery yet painful stilettos for the occasion."

"That's my brave girl," he said with a smirk.

I snorted politely, then watched Charlie the cat slink out from under my worktable and saunter over to weave around Derek's ankles as her way of welcoming him home.

"And here's our Charlie." Derek leaned down and scooped her up, much to the cat's delight. As Charlie purred in his arms, I had to wonder if there was anything in the world more appealing than a big strong man cuddling a sweet little cat. I didn't think so.

Dragging myself back to my task, I finished arranging the pieces of the Connelly book on the white cloth. When my neighbor first brought it to me, the book had been dirty and wet from its time spent in the gutter. It was dry now, but there were skid marks on the cover, plenty of torn and creased pages, and the spine was dragging badly. Despite its haggard condition, I was determined to bring it back to its former luster, because that's what I did. I'm a bookbinder and I fix books.

I spread a second protective white cloth over everything, then pushed my chair back from the table.

Still clutching Charlie in one arm, Derek wrapped his other arm around my shoulders and kissed me warmly. Together we walked out of my workshop and into the living room.

"Give me two minutes," I said, "and I'll be ready to go."

Despite Friday night traffic, we made it across town in plenty of time. At the top of Pacific Heights we were able to snag a space in the parking lot of the magnificent Covington Library which stood in all its elegantly Italianate glory overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and the dark blue water of the Bay. At the front entrance, I stopped and took a deep breath of anticipation. The outside of the building was impressive, but walking inside was like stepping into another world. The foyer itself was dramatic with its gorgeous Tiffany chandeliers, black and white checkerboard pattern on the marble floor, and wide, sweeping stairways that led up to the second and third floors.

But then you stepped into the massive main hall and simply had to stare. I can still picture my little eight-year-old apprentice-bookbinder self, walking into this space for the first time. I had been mesmerized by the walls that were covered from floor to ceiling in gorgeous leather bound books. At intervals across the room, glass display cases were filled with gorgeous antiquarian books and historically significant ephemera: a letter from Walt Whitman; symphony notes from Mozart; a baseball card signed by Babe Ruth.

Looking up, I was impressed as always by the coffered ceiling three floors above me. The top two floors of the library opened onto the main hall and decorative wrought-iron railings lined the narrow aisles.

On occasions like tonight, there would be musicians playing up on the third floor. Guests could gaze up at the players and be treated to the performance itself as well as the amazing acoustics of the room. Usually it was a string quartet or trio playing a classical concerto or sonata, but tonight, because of the nature of this all-American event, there was a fiddler and a ragtime piano player. The tunes were what I would call old-fashioned, down-home Americana.

Standing behind the musicians tonight were four men in matching striped jackets and handlebar mustaches. I smiled at the thought that a barbershop quartet would be singing the most popular songs of the 1860s and 70s. It wasn't the usual type of musical offerings, but the crowd seemed ready for it. It would set the tone for the gala opening night of the first annual Mark Twain Festival.

Underwriting this entire five-day event was none other than our good friend Joseph Cabot, whose literary hero was another American newspaperman, Mark Twain.

To organize the five-day event, Joseph had called upon the Clarion's own very talented events coordinator, Ashley Sharp. The young woman had gone into overdrive planning the numerous Twain-centered activities that would take place at the Covington and various sites all over the city for the next five days. It was shaping up to be one of the most ambitious, wide-ranging Festivals the Covington had ever presented.

Just reading the schedule of events had sent shivers up and down my arms. If I attended every activity, I wouldn't have a free minute to call my own until the day the festival ended. But that was okay, right? It would be fun. And it was only for five days. I mentally waved away my concerns because it promised to be a total blast. Or utter chaos. Either way, it would be memorable. And I would play a role in it.

A month ago, Ian McCullough had called and asked me to come by his office. Ian was president and head curator for the Covington Library and one of my oldest and dearest friends. He wanted to talk about the two workshops he hoped I would conduct as part of the Festival activities. Naturally, one of the workshops was all about bookbinding. The other was connected to my fledgling interest in paper arts. I was to give a workshop in the Children's Museum on newspaper art. I agreed to that one immediately. It sounded like pure fun, especially since kids were involved.

"The bookbinding workshop is a little more involved," he said, then told me that I was to refurbish, rebind, and re-gild a vintage edition of The Prince and the Pauper, one of Mark Twain's many great novels.

Then he had handed me the book. It was a mess, to say the least. "I can barely read the title. The gilding is gone. These pages aren't bad, but the whole thing is catawampus." I held it up and we watched the entire book tilt dangerously. "And you're only giving me four days to finish it?"

"Come on, you can do it in your sleep," Ian had enthused. "First of all, the bones of the book are fabulous, and the rest of it will be, too, when you're finished with it. And here's the best part. We're going to set you up in the main hall with a live audience. You'll be holding court while you turn a pauper of a book into a prince."

I had to admit it was kind of a clever play on words.

"You're going to be on public display," Ian had continued. "You won't mind, will you? It's going to be a very popular event. We're setting up a few rows of bleacher seats for people to watch you work."

"Good thing I'm not shy," I had muttered. But seriously? Bleacher seats? In the main hall? This would be a first.

"You're talking to yourself," Derek murmured as we wound our way through the opening night crowd to find one of the three cocktail bars before the lines grew too long. "It's a sure sign you're nervous. What is bothering you?"

I frowned, a little annoyed to realize that I had an obvious "tell," while I couldn't read him at all. "You need to stop being so perceptive."

"I beg your pardon, love." He laughed, but quickly sobered. "Come now, darling. Are you nervous about this evening or about your bookbinding work this week?"

"Nervous? Me?" I thought about it. "Yes, I am. But it's not about either of those things. And I'm too embarrassed to talk about it."

He stopped me, holding my arms so he could study my expression. "Surely you can tell me."

He was right again. I could tell him anything, even if it was humiliating. "Okay, fine. There's a couple of things. First, I was thinking about the bookbinding job I've been assigned to for the Festival. It's not exactly glamorous."

"Glamorous?" Puzzled, he frowned at me. "But it's what you do, darling. Your work is fascinating. And despite your choice of footwear, you do it better than anyone else in the world."

I smiled and squeezed his arm. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, but it's simply the truth." He gave me a quick glance. "So what are you really bothered about?"

My shoulders sagged. It was useless to try and hide my feelings from him. "Okay, here's the deal. You know I really like Joseph and I'm totally psyched that I'm going to be working the Festival with him. Even if I'm not doing anything very glamorous."

Derek ordered our wine and after leaving a nice tip, he handed me my wineglass. "Now, spill. Not the wine. Tell me what's bothering you."

Chapter One

I stared out the wide kitchen window as a black stretch limousine pulled to a stop in front of our new second home in Dharma. Less than two minutes later, another limo arrived and I had to take a few bracing breaths. "Have we done the right thing?"

My darkly handsome husband Derek quirked an eyebrow. "Regrets already, darling?"

"God, yes." I tried to laugh, but the sound bordered on hysterical. "We couldn't settle for a cozy dinner for four, could we? No way. We had to invite thirty-four people for dinner on Christmas Eve. Thirty-four people! Or is it thirty-five?" Did it really matter? Either way, we were about to be besieged in our brand new house. With family and friends, but still. "Are we crazy?"

"Of course not," he said, his distinguished British accent lending extra credibility to the statement. "It's a perfectly respectable thing to invite favorite friends and family members over for Christmas Eve dinner."

"Is it?" I wondered. "We're likely to cause a frenzy."

He laughed. "Would that be so bad?"

I gaped at him.

"Maybe they won't all show up," he said, but he was still laughing.

"Oh, please," I said. "You know they'll all be here."

He gently rubbed my shoulders. "All the people we love best."

His kind words calmed me down a smidge, as they usually did. It would all work out and we would have a good time. After all, this was the reason we'd built our second home in Dharma, the small town in the Sonoma wine country where I'd grown up. We wanted to be close to family, so now we were about to welcome my parents, two brothers, three sisters, various spouses and lots of children to spend Christmas Eve with us. Derek's parents were coming too, along with several of his brothers, their wives, and more children. We were also expecting our good friends, Gabriel and Alex, along with my parents' guru, Robson Benedict, and his Aunt Trudy. It was going to be an interesting evening.

"It'll be lovely," Derek insisted.

"It'll be chaos."

He chuckled and rubbed his hands up and down my arms. "As it should be, darling. After all, it's Christmas."

I tried to remember to breathe. "Christmas. Right." I watched another limo drive up and park. It sounded extravagant, but we had gone ahead and ordered a number of limousines so our friends wouldn't have to drive through the hills after a long night of good food and lots of wine. It just made sense.

Derek kissed me, then slowly let me go and gazed out the window. "Look on the bright side. At least you don't have to cook."

"Good point." I was the absolute worst cook in the world and everybody knew it. Happily, the entire evening was being catered by my sister Savannah's fabulous restaurant in downtown Dharma. Most of her staff had been here all day, prepping and cooking a huge feast, using our brand new clean garage as their backstage area. Across the living and dining rooms, tables had been beautifully set for dinner. Tasting stations had been arranged outside on the terrace where Savannah's staff would serve cocktails, wine, and a number of yummy hors d'oeuvres and munchies before the dinner began.

The entire house looked festive and smelled wonderful. Our Christmas tree was magical with flickering fairy lights and at least a hundred handmade ornaments covering its boughs. I had to admit I'd gotten carried away with crafting dozens of tiny three-dimensional books—with tiny first-chapter pages included!—that we would be giving to our guests as Christmas ornament takeaways. As a bookbinder specializing in rare book restoration, I considered it my duty to always give books as gifts and I tried to be creative about it.

Scattered under the tree and spreading nearly halfway across the living room were oodles of beautifully wrapped gifts. Most were for the children and yes, we had gone overboard, but why not? This was our first time hosting Christmas Eve and we wanted it to be special.

When the front doorbell finally rang I took a few more seconds to silently freak out, then rested my head on Derek's strong shoulder. Smiling bravely, I said, "I'll get it."

He reached for my hand. "We'll go together."

An hour later, the chaos that I'd warned Derek about was upon us. But okay, it wasn't quite as horrifying as I'd imagined. People were chatting and laughing while enjoying the wine and appetizers. Christmas carols were playing in the background and the children were sneaking peeks at all the goodies under the tree. For the most part everyone was having a lovely time.

My oldest friend Robin held court on the living room couch with baby Jamie, my darling new nephew. There was some minor controversy brewing since Jamie's dad—my brother Austin—had taken to calling the little guy Jake. But whatever they decided to call him, the wee one was constantly being whisked away by anyone with an urge to cuddle an adorable baby boy. And who didn't have that urge once in a while? He was such a good baby and just one more reason why Derek and I had decided to build a home here in Dharma. I loved all my brothers and sisters and their kids, but I'd especially wanted to be near Robin when she had her first child. Derek and I both wanted to be a part of their lives and that wasn't always easy to do while living and working in San Francisco. This way, we could have the best of both worlds.

A few years ago, Derek's parents had surprised us all by buying a vacation home in Dharma after we'd introduced them to my parents before our wedding. Now the four of them were best friends and part-time neighbors, too.

My sister China, who was seven months pregnant with her second child, sat down next to Robin and the two began exchanging childbirth horror stories. Anyone was welcome to join in, but seriously? I loved them both, but I was steering clear. Mainly because I'd heard the worst of their stories before, but also because, yuck. Am I right?

From across the room, I met Robin's gaze and her eyes gleamed with mischief, knowing that all the childbirth talk tended to make me a little queasy. I was pretty sure she did it on purpose, but I loved her anyway. Even when she regularly warned me that "you're next," which was often followed by a spine-chilling, blood-curdling laugh .

I regularly assured her that I wasn't next, but she still enjoyed taunting me with all the grisly details of her labor pains as though that might be some kind of temptation. I personally thought she spiced up the stories just for me. We had been besties from day one when my family and I arrived in Dharma and I first saw her, a skinny little eight-year-old, clutching her bald Barbie doll. Even at that early age, I recognized a fellow misfit when I saw one.

I smiled at the memory, took a sip of champagne, and nibbled on a melted brie mini-quesadilla as I made my way across the room, checking that everyone was enjoying themselves. I savored the brie as well as the eclectic bits of conversation I overheard as I moved through the crowd. I couldn't wait for everyone to open their presents, especially the ones I'd made. In the past my sisters had given me some grief for always giving books as gifts. But what did they expect? Books were my life. I made my living by restoring rare books. What else would I give as a special gift to the people I love ?

I was happy to hear that this was the year that everyone finally wanted books again, especially the parents of the youngsters who were just learning to read.

Both Derek's and my family members were voracious readers so they had made it clear that books as gifts were once again in vogue.

Still, I had decided to venture a bit farther afield with my gift giving, especially for the adults in the family. It had taken me months to complete everything, but I had managed to make every gift by hand, mostly using recycled books, and I was excited to see the reactions they got.

A few of my sisters would be receiving something I called a Butterfly Book—an old book that when opened, revealed dozens of delicate paper butterflies flitting out from the pages. It was charming , if I did say so myself.

For each of my brothers, I'd fashioned a nightlight taking pages torn from an old book, singeing the edges, and placing a red light in the middle so that when it was turned on, it looked like the pages were on fire. I knew they would love it.

For Robin, who had every intention of returning to her sculpting work eventually, I had taken an old Barbie doll and manipulated it into a sitting position, then used my old decoupage training to cover the doll entirely with text from the pages of another old book. The final touch was to give Barbie her own little book to read. Again, it was book-oriented, but whimsical enough that I thought Robin would get a kick out of it.

I stopped at one of the food mini-stations and a waiter poured me another glass of champagne. I took a sip and happened to glance at the front door, which was standing open to let in the cool evening breeze. I saw my mother perched on the railing of the front porch talking to her friend Ginny Morrison. I'd only met Ginny twice, but I liked her. A little girl with curly blonde hair was huddled against Ginny's legs and I wondered if she was too frightened to venture inside to meet anyone else.

"Oh, Brooklyn," Mom said, waving me over. "You remember my friend Ginny?"

"Of course." I walked out to the porch and gave the woman a brief hug. "Merry Christmas, Ginny. And who is this?"

The three of us stared at the little girl clutching Ginny's legs. "This is my daughter, Charlotte," she said, stroking the child's hair.

"Hi, Charlotte," Mom and I said in unison.

She gazed up at both of us. "Hi."

"Merry Christmas," I said.

Her smile was tentative. "Yesterday was my birthday."

"My goodness," Mom said. "Happy Birthday, sweetie."

"Happy Birthday, Charlotte," I said. "How old are you?"

"I'm five years old." She held up five fingers.

"Isn't that wonderful?" Mom said softly.

"Would you both like to come inside and sit by the Christmas tree?" I asked. "It's so pretty and it smells really good. And we have lots of tasty food if you'd like something to eat."

Charlotte said nothing, but stared up at her mother. I could tell she was intrigued.

"That's sweet of you," Ginny said quickly. "And I think Charlotte is very tempted. But we really can't take up any more of your time. I just wanted to stop by and give your mother a little Christmas gift."

"And I love it." Mom whipped out a skinny little tree branch and whisked it back and forth through the air. I figured it had to be some kind of a wand, since Ginny was a fellow member of Mom's local druidic Wiccan group. Mom had recently been re-elected Grand Raven Mistress of the coven and Ginny had been elected Treasurer.

I had no idea what the treasurer of a coven did, but I suppose it meant that she was good with numbers.

"It's pretty." I reached out and touched the wand. "It feels good. Stronger than I thought it would be."

"It's cherry wood," Ginny said. "It has a warm, feminine energy and it's good for healing."

"And it's especially excellent for detecting other magical properties," Mom added, and her eyes narrowed. "Can't wait to put that to the test."

Ginny smiled at me. "And a cherry wood wand doesn't mind being shared."

"Yeah?" I said, my tongue planted firmly in my cheek. "Maybe I'll take it for a spin sometime."

"That would make me very happy," Mom said. "But I know you're just teasing me."

I gave her a one-armed hug. "Sorry, Mom. You know it's not my thing."

She kissed my cheek. "I love you anyway." Then she turned back to Ginny. "Now we have plenty of room at the table and lots of food. We would love to have you join us."

"That's very sweet," she said. "But I think we're just going to go home. We've had a long day."

Gazing up at me, Charlotte whispered, "My daddy went to heaven."

"Oh, no." Tears instantly filled my eyes and without another thought, I knelt down and met the little girl on her level. "I'm so sorry, honey."

She said nothing, simply wrapped her arms around my neck and began to cry.

I was well-known for my sympathetic tear ducts, but even my tough big brothers wouldn't have been able to withstand this little girl's pain.

I wondered how her father had died, but now wasn't the time to inquire.

Ginny placed her hand on my shoulder and quietly explained, "We picked up Hank's ashes today. Charlotte wants to buy a pretty box to put them in."

"She's a sweet little girl," I murmured.

Mom gave her friend a hug. "Why don't we all go inside and warm up around the Christmas tree. Just for a few minutes."

After another sniffle, Charlotte loosened her grasp and looked up at me. "Mommy said you have a cat."

I smiled. "I do. Would you like to meet her?"

"It's a girl cat?"

"Yes. Her name is Charlie."

She managed a watery giggle. "It sounds a little like my name, except Charlie is for a boy."

I smiled at her. "I think some girls might like the name, too."

She thought about it and nodded. "Maybe so." Without consulting her mother, Charlotte took my hand and we walked into the house and headed for the stairs. I took a quick look back at her mother and got a nod of approval.

"Your cat isn't coming to the party?" Charlotte asked.

"No, she's pretty shy. She likes to stay upstairs when there's a lot of people in the house."

"I can stay with her," she whispered.

"Okay. Let's go find her." In the bedroom, I sat down on the floor next to the bed and whispered Charlie's name.

"Is she under there?" Charlotte asked.

I nodded. "This is where she usually hides."

"Do you think she'll come if I call her?"

"Maybe," I said. "Give it a try."

Charlotte nodded, then whispered, "Charlie? Hello? Charlie?"

Sure enough, after a few seconds the cat peeked out from under the bedspread. "There she is."

She flashed me a tremulous grin. "She came out."

"She must like you," I said, then reached for the cat. "Come on, sweetie. I want you to meet my friend Charlotte."

Charlie came into my arms and draped herself bonelessly over my shoulder. I stroked her soft fur, then angled her toward Charlotte. "Charlie, this is Charlotte. She wants to say hello to you."

The little girl tried to follow my lead by patting Charlie's back. It was an awkward move, but the cat didn't seem to mind.