

WICKED APPETITE



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CHAPTER ONE

My name is Elizabeth Tucker. I'm Elizabeth to my mother, but for as long as I can remember, I've been Lizzy to everyone else. And for as long as I can remember, I've baked cupcakes. I enrolled in the culinary arts program at Johnson & Wales in Rhode Island right out of high school, hoping to someday get a job as a pastry chef. I graduated J&W in the top ninety-three percent of my class, and I would have graduated higher, but I flunked gravy. My gravy had lumps in it, and that pretty much sums up my life so far. Not that it's been all bad; more that it hasn't been entirely smooth.

I grew up in Virginia and when I was in third grade, Billy Kruger gave me the nickname Buzzard Beak, and I carried it with me all through grade school. I got my brown eyes and distinctive nose from Grandpa Harry, and while the nose

JANET EVANOVICH

wasn't great, I told myself it could have been worse, because Billy Kruger's nickname was Poop Pants.

And then when I was in eighth grade, during a moment of misguided curiosity, I made out with Ryan Lukach, and the jerk told everyone I wore a padded bra. I mean, give me a break here. I was a late bloomer. Anyway, the truth is, my bra was so padded I didn't know I was getting felt up.

I got engaged to fellow classmate Anthony Muggin while I was at Johnson & Wales. Two weeks after graduation and a week before the wedding, Anthony and his Uncle Gordo were caught hijacking a refrigerator truck loaded with sides of beef. It turned out to be a lucky thing, because after I visited Anthony in jail and returned the ring, I sobbed myself through a couple tumblers of vodka, fell off the toilet in a drunken stupor, crashed into a sink, and broke my nose. When they patched me up, I was no longer Buzzard Beak.

So here I am with the cutest nose in town, and I've finally grown breasts. They're not huge, but they're better than a poke in the eye, and I've been told they're perky. Perky is good, right?

In January, three days after my twenty-eighth birthday, I inherited a house from my eccentric Great Aunt Ophelia. The house is in Marblehead, just north of Boston and south-east of Salem. I emptied my bank account to pay taxes on the house, quit my job at a downtown New York City restaurant, and I moved into Ophelia's money pit. Probably, the smart

WICKED APPETITE

thing would have been to sell the house, but no one could accuse me of always doing the smart thing. Truth is, New York wasn't working for me anyway. The restaurant hours were horrible, the kitchen politics were toxic, and the executive chef hated cupcakes.

For the past five months, I've been living in my new Marblehead house and working as a pastry chef at Dazzle's Bakery in Salem. The bakery has been owned and operated by a Dazzle since Puritan times, and is now managed by Clarinda Dazzle. She has an apartment above the bakery, she's twice divorced, approaching forty, and looks like Cher on Cher's day off. At 5'5", she's the same height as I am, but Clara looks taller. I think it's the hair. Clara's hair is black and shot with gray. If it were straight, it would be shoulder length. As is, Clara's hair is a huge mass of out-of-control energy coming to just below her ears, sometimes pulled back into a half-assed knot. She has piercing blue eyes and a nose and mouth said to have come from Wampanoag Indian blood on her mother's side. I'm not nearly so exotic, having Austrian and Danish ancestors who left me with wimpy blond hair and a body that looks more athletic than it actually is.

It was Tuesday morning, the June sun was shining bright over Salem, and Clara and I had been baking since five A.M. I was in my usual outfit of running shoes, jeans, T-shirt, and white chef coat. I had my hair pulled back into a ponytail, and I was dusted with flour and powdered sugar. Everything was good with the world, except Clara was in a state. It was

JANET EVANOVICH

eight o'clock, time to open for business, and we were missing the counter girl, Gloria Binkly.

“For crying out loud,” Clara said. “It’s not like I’m a factory. It’s just you and me and Glo. How are we supposed to finish baking when we have to keep running out to the front to sell a muffin? Where the heck is she?”

We were standing in the large front room that constituted the retail part of the bakery. The floors were wide plank pine and the plaster walls were uneven. It was in decent shape, considering it pre-dated the witch trials. The display cases were old-fashioned glass and dark wood trim, and they were at the moment home to a batch of cinnamon rolls, four different kinds of muffins, almond tarts, and apple strudels. The breads were against the wall in wire baskets. The remaining space behind glass was about to be filled with my cupcakes. The cash register was from 1920. The credit card swiper was state-of-the-art.

A sexy, low-slung black car pulled to the curb in front of us and a man got out. He was maybe six foot tall, with glossy shoulder-length black hair swept back from his face in a wave. His skin was unearthly pale. His eyes were as black as his hair. He was dressed in a perfectly tailored black suit and black dress shirt.

He approached the bakery, and my skin prickled and a hot flash ran through my chest. “Holy moly,” I said to Clara.

“There’s nothing holy about him,” Clara said.

The man stopped inches from the front door and stared in

WICKED APPETITE

at me. His mouth was sensuous and unsmiling. He looked to be my age, and he was eerily handsome. He crooked his finger at me in a *come here* gesture.

“Do you suppose he wants a muffin?” I asked Clara.

“Either that or your soul.”

I stepped up, opened the door, and peeked out at him. “Can I help you?”

“That remains to be seen,” he said. “I’ll return for you when I need you. Until then, you’ll remember me.”

He touched his fingertip to the back of my hand, and when he removed it, there was a burn mark beginning to blister. I stumbled away and slammed the door closed between us. The guy in black turned on his heel, got into his flashy car, the engine growled, and he drove off.

“What the heck?” I said to Clara, staring at my hand.

“I’m freaked,” Clara said. “And when you live in Salem all your life, it takes a lot to freak you.”

Personally, I hate being freaked. I avoid it whenever possible. “I’m going to convince myself this is a bug bite,” I said to Clara. “Probably a very small spider with a lot of venom.”

“Yeah,” Clara said. “That’s probably it. You just didn’t see it.”

At ten minutes after nine, the front door banged open and Glo rushed in all breathless.

“I know I’m late, but you’ll never believe what I’ve got!” she said, plunking her black canvas tote bag down on the

JANET EVANOVICH

glass countertop. “I was passing by that creepy store on Essex Street, the one that sells enchanted fry pans and jars of newt eyeballs, and this weird feeling came over me. It was like something was calling me into the store.”

Glo is single, like me, four years younger than I am, and she’s an inch shorter. She has curly red hair chopped into a short bob, freckled skin, a trim, perfectly average body, and her wardrobe runs heavy to black-and-olive drab. Today, she was dressed in black ankle boots, black tights, a short, twirly black skirt, an olive T-shirt, and a denim jacket.

Clara cut her eyes to Glo. “Last time you were late, you said you got mugged by a bridge troll.”

“Okay, so it was actually Mr. Greber, and he fell into me in a drunken blackout, but this is different. I swear! It’s *destiny*. You know how I’ve always thought I might be special? Like, you know, magical?”

“No,” Clara said.

“Well, for one thing, I have a scar on my forehead that looks like a lightning bolt. Just like Harry Potter.”

Clara and I examined Glo’s forehead.

“I guess it could look a little like a lightning bolt,” Clara said. “How did you get it?”

“I crashed into the coffee table when I was six years old.”

“I don’t know if that qualifies,” Clara said.

Glo ran her finger along the scar. “An evil spirit could have pushed me.”

Clara and I rolled our eyes.

WICKED APPETITE

“And then there was that time I told you I saw a green aura around Mrs. Norbert,” Glo said. “And a week later, she hit the jackpot at Foxwoods.”

“That’s true,” Clara said. “I remember.”

“Anyway, this is *big*,” Glo said, pulling a weather-beaten, leather-bound book out of her tote bag. “This book called me into the shop. I was meant to have this book.”

Clara and I looked over Glo’s shoulder at the book. The leather was cracked with age; hard to tell if the aging was man-made or natural. The front cover was hand-tooled, with scrollwork that bloomed into flowers and leaves and tiny dragons. The book was secured with a hammered-metal clasp.

Glo slipped the clasp and opened the book to an elaborately inked frontispiece. On the page facing the frontispiece someone had written in perfect old world penmanship *Ripple’s Book of Spells*.

“Who’s Ripple?” Clara wanted to know.

“No one in the store knew,” Glo said. “But the book is dated June 1692. That was right in the middle of the Salem witch trials.”

“Turn it over and see if it says ‘Made in China’ on the back cover,” Clara said.

Glo looked at Clara. “You, of all people, shouldn’t be so cynical about this book. Everyone knows the Dazzles aren’t normal.”

I was new to this. I’d moved to Marblehead five months ago and wasn’t up to speed in the rumor department.

JANET EVANOVICH

“How so?” I asked.

Glo dropped her voice to a whisper. “The Dazzles have always had special abilities. I heard some of them could fly.”

I cut my eyes to Clara. “Can you fly?”

“Not without a plane.”

Glo thumbed through a couple pages in the book. “I bet I can find a flying spell in here.”

“How about finding a *working* spell,” Clara said. “There are six trays of cookies that need to be transferred to the display case.”

I turned to go back to the kitchen and slammed into over six feet of hard muscle and bad attitude. He reached out to steady me, and I sucked in some air.

“Jeez Louise,” I said. “Where the heck did you come from?”

“Bangkok. Not that it matters.” He looked around. “I’m in Dazzle’s, right?”

We all nodded, taking him in. His hair was thick and dark blond, somewhere between wind-blown, just woke up, and untamable. His skin was beach bum tan. His eyebrows were fierce and darker than his hair. His eyes were brown and assessing. His posture was confident. His body language was intimidating. His boots were dusty. His jeans were on their last legs but molded nicely to all the good parts. His navy T-shirt was splashed with flour from my chef coat.

He glanced down at his shirt and brushed at the flour. “I’m looking for Elizabeth Tucker.”

WICKED APPETITE

It was my second encounter of the day with a big, sort of scary man, and I was on guard.

“That’s me,” I told him, taking a protective step back.

He gave me the once-over. “Figures.”

I didn’t think *figures* sounded entirely complimentary. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He blew out a sigh. “It means you’re going to be trouble.” He looked around. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“We can talk here.”

“I don’t think so.”

I folded my arms across my chest and narrowed my eyes.

“Lady, I haven’t got a lot of patience right now,” he said. “Mostly, I just want to get on with it. Cut me a break and come outside where we can talk in private.”

“No way.”

He grabbed my wrist, yanked me to the door, and Glo and Clara rushed at him.

“I’m dialing 911,” Glo said, cell phone in hand.

“As if that would help,” he said to Glo. “Put the phone down and *stay*. This’ll only take a minute.”

He whisked me out of the shop, and we stood on the sidewalk, blinking in the sun’s glare.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m looking for a guy. His name is Gerwulf Grimoire. Wulf, for short. My height, shoulder-length black hair, pale skin, evil.”

“Evil?”

“Yeah. Have you seen him?”

JANET EVANOVICH

“Maybe. He didn’t give his name.”

I inadvertently looked down at the fingertip burn on my hand. The scruffy guy’s eyes followed mine and he gave his head a small shake.

“Wulf’s work,” he said.

He reached under my coat, unclipped my cell phone from my jeans waistband, and punched some numbers in.

“Hey!” I said. “What are you doing?”

“I’m giving you my number. Call me if you see Wulf.”

“Who are you?”

He smiled down at me, and when he smiled, his teeth were white and perfect, crinkle lines appeared at the corners of his eyes, and my heart did a little flip in my chest. “I’m Diesel,” he said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

He crossed the street and disappeared behind a van stopped at a light. When the traffic moved, he was gone.

“Whoa,” Glo said when I returned to the shop. “That’s the most amazing hunk of raw testosterone I’ve ever seen. What was that about?”

“He’s looking for a guy named Gerwulf Grimoire. He thought I might have run across him.”

“And?” Glo asked.

“I have.”

“It sounds like a warlock name,” Glo said.

“You’ve got to stop watching *Bewitched* reruns,” Clara told her. “The only warlocks in Salem are paid actors in the Salem Witch Museum.”

CHAPTER TWO

As the chief cupcake and assorted pastries maker at the bakery, I'm early in and early out. I left Dazzle's at twelve-thirty and pointed my car south on Lafayette Street. I was driving a tan Chevy sedan. The age and model escape me, but needless to say it wasn't new, it wasn't expensive, and it was no longer pretty. There was a dent in the left rear quarter panel and a scrape running almost the length of the car on the right side. Aside from that, it was almost perfect. I crossed the bridge taking me into Marblehead, Lafayette turned into Pleasant Street, and from Pleasant I wound around until I came to Weatherby Street.

Great Aunt Ophelia's house is a little saltbox dating back to 1740. It sits on a high rise of ground chockablock with other historic houses, and the back windows look down the hill at the flotilla of pleasure boats moored in Marblehead Harbor.

JANET EVANOVICH

The clapboards are gray, the trim is white, and there are two onion lamps on either side of the red front door. Somewhere in the late 1800s, a couple rooms were added. There were several more renovations and patch-up jobs after that, more or less bringing the house into the twentieth century. The ceilings are low, and the floors are wide plank pine and a little lop-sided. Probably, I should have the foundation shored up, but it was going to have to wait for an infusion of money.

I parked at the curb and let myself into the house. I gave a squeak of surprise at seeing Diesel, boots off, sprawled on my living room couch.

“I’ve got a gun,” I said to him. “And I’m not afraid to use it.”

“Honey, you haven’t got a gun. And if you did have a gun, you probably wouldn’t know how to make it go *bang*.”

“Well, okay, but I have a chef’s knife, and I could carve you up like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

“*That* I believe.”

I was standing with one hand on the doorknob, ready to bolt and run for help. “How did you get in here?”

“There’s this thing I can do with locks,” Diesel said.

“Thing?”

“Yeah, I can open them.”

He stood and stretched and headed for the kitchen.

“Wait,” I said. “Where are you going?”

“I’m hungry.”

“No, no, no. You have to leave.”

WICKED APPETITE

“There’s good news, and there’s bad news, and it’s both the same news. I’m here to stay.”

Don’t panic, I told myself. He’s obviously a crazy person. Just quietly leave the house and call the police. They’ll come get him and take him somewhere to get his meds adjusted.

“I’m not crazy,” Diesel said from the kitchen.

“Of course not. Did I say you were crazy?”

“You were thinking it.”

Oh great. The crazy guy can read minds. I inched away from the front door and cautiously peeked into the kitchen, where Diesel was going through the cabinets.

“Are you looking for money?” I asked him. “Jewelry?”

“I’m looking for food.” Diesel opened the refrigerator, looked inside, and settled on leftover lasagna. “So what’s going on with you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll take that as a no. You have ‘no boyfriend’ written all over you. Sort of a surprise, since you make decent lasagna,” Diesel said.

“My lasagna is better than decent. I happen to make *great* lasagna.”

Diesel grinned at me. “You’re kind of cute when you’re all indignant like that.”

I spun on my heel, huffed out of the kitchen, and headed for the front door and a call to 911. I reached the middle of my small living room and realized the door was open and the flesh-burning guy was standing in the doorway, looking in at

JANET EVANOVICH

me. I instinctively took a step back and came up against Diesel. Okay, so I know he might be crazy, but Jeez Louise, Diesel smelled great when you got close to him. Warm and spicy, like Christmas. And he felt good plastered against me, a protective hand resting on my hip.

“Hello, cousin,” Diesel said to the man in black.

There was a flash of light, and a lot of smoke, and when the smoke cleared, the man was gone.

“That was Wulf,” Diesel said. “But then, you’ve already met.”

“How did he do that? He vanished into thin air.”

“Smoke and mirrors,” Diesel said. “He’s read *Magic Tricks for Dummies*.”

“Why did he leave?”

Diesel went to the door, closed it, and threw the dead bolt. “He left because I was here.”

“Are you really his cousin?”

“Yeah. We grew up together.”

“And now?”

“Now we’re playing for different teams.”

He handed me the lasagna dish and his fork and laced up his boots.

“I need to follow Wulf,” he said. “Stay here and keep your doors locked.”

“So Wulf can’t get in?”

“No, so the weird guy across the street can’t get in.”

I looked out the front window. “That’s Mr. Bennet. He’s

WICKED APPETITE

ninety-two and he thinks he's General Eisenhower. He lives in the house with the red geraniums in the window boxes.”

I turned back to Diesel, but Diesel was gone. No smoke. No flash of light. Nothing. Just gone. I went to my small second-floor office and did a computer search for Gerwulf Grimoire. Nothing. Clean slate. No Facebook page. No matches found.

I called the bakery and got Glo.

“When I came home just now, Diesel was inside my house, waiting for me,” I told her.

“Who's Diesel?”

“The big rude guy from the bakery.”

“His name is Diesel? Like a powerful engine pulling a freight train?” Glo said. “That is so sexy.”

I thought his *personality* was freight train engine, but his appearance was more unkempt ruler of the pride male lion.

“Is he still there?” Glo asked. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, and he's gone. I thought I should tell you in case I turn up missing or dead or something.”

“Did he threaten you?”

“No. He ate some lasagna. And then Wulf walked in. And then they both disappeared.”

“What did Wulf look like?”

“Scary in a sexy vampire sort of way.”

“Wow.”

“Am I being punked? Is this going to show up on *Funniest Home Videos*?”

“Not on my dime,” Glo said.

JANET EVANOVICH

I looked out my back office window. No sign of anyone lurking in my bushes or hiding behind the maple tree. Beyond the maple tree, the boats peacefully bobbed in the harbor. Marblehead was business as usual. And that meant not much business at all. It was originally a fishing village with narrow, crooked streets moving inland from the water. The nineteenth-century cod boats have been replaced with dories and fancy sailboats, and Marblehead is mostly a bedroom community for Boston and the North Shore now, but the low-key character of the colonial town hasn't been entirely lost.

"I'll be over as soon as I'm done here," Glo said. "I'll bring my book, and we can put a spell on your house to ward off vampires."

"I said he *looked* like a vampire. I didn't say he *was* one."

"I'll bring garlic, too."

"Put it on a pizza, and it's a deal."