



CHAPTER ONE

Monday, October 26

OTHER PEOPLE, WHEN forced to start over, do so in appropriate places. New York. Los Angeles. Bozeman. Only Flair would wind up in Kansas, dragging a hand-painted, life-sized figure of Jack Skellington into her bakery and wondering where to hide it until the horror show that was Halloween in Rattleboro finally lurched to an end this weekend.

Flair hated seeing even the outside of her tidy space besmirched with the trappings of a ridiculous holiday that invited exactly the kind of chaos that she normally kept firmly at bay. But she'd had to accept it. From the skeleton on the now spiderweb-covered bench to the black-and-orange garlands and the wheelbarrow of painted pumpkins, her precarious new venture had become part of a Main Street so drenched in town-funded Halloween preparations that it was impossible to rest your eyes on a surface not wrapped in twinkle lights or faux-aged into flawless Gothic dereliction.

But Jack eating a slice of bloodred cherry pie was taking it a step too far.

Like nearly everyone, he was taller than Flair, making him difficult to maneuver, but Flair would not let that stop her from ridding her entryway of the blight. She wrestled him through the door and looked around the shop, wondering where she could stash him until the town's Halloween powers that be came to retrieve him in November. Or maybe he could meet an untimely and tragic end before then.

Lucie looked up from one of the white tables where she sat with her ankles wrapped around the legs of a turquoise chair, which she had—under duress—helped Flair to paint before Buttersweet Bakery's opening in August. Ostensibly she was doing vocab, but more likely she was staring into the phone Flair had given her when they moved. Flair's plan had been for Lucie to connect with (and feel appropriately cool next to) her new eighth-grade classmates, but Lucie preferred to use it to complain to her father and her friends back "home" in St. Louis about the cruelty of her mother's decision to move them both to the boondocks.

"Grand is having a show in St. Louis tomorrow," she said. "If we were there, we could go."

"Well, we're not," Flair said automatically. "And Grand's shows aren't G-rated, so we wouldn't be going anyway." Would Jack fit behind the hutch that was very nearly the only thing left of what had until recently been Marie's Teas, or was she going to have to find a place for him in her kitchen? "We'll see her soon."

"That's what you always say," said Lucie, who was clearly gearing up for another monologue on her favorite topic, *how you*

have ruined my life. “But it’s been since her birthday two years ago. If we were home, we would at least have dinner or something.”

Maybe. Or maybe Cynthia would be so overrun by fans of the bewilderingly successful vampire-and-witch romances she wrote that—darn—she wouldn’t be able to fit them in. Flair was relieved when the bells on the door interrupted her daughter before the pointless debate could continue. She tried but failed to hide Jack behind her as she prepared a welcoming, but not overwhelming, smile for what would be her first customer of the day. At 3:30 in the afternoon, but Flair wasn’t counting.

Who was she kidding? Of course she was—and the count would still be zero, because unless Renee Oakes had abandoned her distaste for all things Flair and Flair-adjacent, the woman who walked through the door was not and would not ever be a customer. “He’s supposed to be outside, Hardwicke,” Renee said, pointing to the pumpkin-headed particleboard figure behind Flair. “We put him there this morning.”

Flair drew herself up to her full height—which had to be at least six inches shorter than the stern blonde in front of her—and prepared to deliver a considered and logical explanation for why this decoration did not represent Buttersweet, even in the context of the all-encompassing town Halloween festival Renee directed with what should have been admirable dedication.

“But he’s hideous,” Flair said. “His eyes are seriously terrifying, and he looks more like an axe murderer than a friendly Halloween mayor dude or whatever he is. I mean, where did anyone even find this? The drive-in movie theater’s dump?”

“I painted it,” Renee said.

Oh. Flair turned to look at the creation leering back at her

and could think of no way to backtrack over what she'd just said. Life, she thought, not for the first time, really needed some kind of rewind button.

“And you have an obligation to display the holiday decor provided to you by the decoration committee.”

Flair knew that. Renee had already given her a “reference” copy of the building’s covenant, which also required that she maintain the window boxes, whose riot of fall foliage and flowers threatened daily to overwhelm her entrance, as well as the paint and the trim (in approved colors only) and all the rest of the landscaping. She felt her resolve weakening. “But I don’t even serve pie.”

“I’ll put it back outside,” Renee said, taking the decoration from Flair and lifting it easily. She glanced around at the empty tables and the full pastry case before giving Flair a pitying look. “Maybe pie would help.”

Renee marched out the door, Jack under her arm. Flair could see her through the windows, standing him prominently on the sidewalk in a way that would effectively deter any potential customers.

She looked at Lucie, hoping for some sympathy—Jack Skelington was truly dreadful—but Lucie was stuffing the worksheets Flair didn’t think she’d so much as glanced at into her backpack. “I’m going home,” Lucie said. “Unless you want to give me a ride.”

“It’s four blocks.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like you’re doing anything.”

Flair pointed to the door. Lucie went out as Loretta Oakes, the only member of the Oakes family Flair regarded fondly at this point, came in. At least Lucie managed to return Renee’s

mother's greeting politely. Either she did have some manners, or she was, like everyone else in town, both terrified by and in awe of Loretta. Flair would take whatever she could get.

Unlike Renee, Loretta embraced Flair, bringing with her a spicy, faintly floral scent that tugged at a memory Flair preferred to leave unpursued. Loretta also brought with her a comforting sense that here, at least, was someone who was happy that Flair was back in Rattleboro.

"My usual, please," Loretta said, taking a seat at the table closest to the counter. "And join me, if you can."

Flair appreciated the suggestion that she might suddenly be overwhelmed with customers, although Loretta must know as well as she did that it was unlikely. Obediently, Flair took up her place behind the case full of scones and cookies and flaky croissants, all lined up on their trays, swiveling the portafilter into place and waiting for the grinder's familiar growl.

Her occasional assistant, Callie, whose wages she really could not afford, had suggested renaming things "in the holiday spirit" and had gone as far as "Spooky Scones" and "Devilish Danishes" before Flair shut her down. Flair's baked goods weren't the kind of thing you bought in a plastic clamshell at Dillons. They were award-winning pastries that deserved better. On the cover of *Bon Appétit* once, she reminded herself. Featured in Martha Stewart's *Holiday Cookies* issue three times: see also the triptych on the wall. *Midwest Living* said, last year, that even if David's Table ran out of steak and couldn't fry another frite, it would still be worth the wait for Flair's Pavlova bars alone.

But after two solid months of effort, she couldn't seem to entice anyone in Rattleboro to try one. If today was anything like

yesterday, Loretta would be her only patron. And she'd clearly noticed that not one thing on the carefully arranged trays had been disturbed.

"Slow day again?"

"Things will pick up," Flair said, repeating what she'd been telling herself for weeks. "Getting started is always tough."

"I think it's been more than tough," Loretta said. Flair hid her face behind the espresso machine while she prepared Loretta's favored macchiato so that the other woman wouldn't see how closely her words hit home, or how much her sympathy affected Flair. She'd grown up spending summers in Rattleboro. Her grandmother had run Marie's Teas in this spot for fifty years. It wasn't that she'd expected a parade, but she had thought she could make a go of it here. That she'd be at least sort of welcomed. Instead, other than her best friend and once-again next-door neighbor, Josie, Rattleboro seemed to have shut her out, and it was almost as if the shop were invisible.

"I'll be fine," she called. But when she looked up, Loretta met her eyes with an expression that made it clear she didn't buy Flair's cheery words.

"This is not fine," she said with a quick lick of her lips that Flair had learned was characteristic when Loretta spoke. "We need to do something to get you involved. And I have the perfect thing. You know about the Rattlebones Trail, of course."

It wasn't a question. No one could spend any time at all in Rattleboro without hearing about the Rattlebones Trail, and Flair was scarcely a stranger. Every summer she'd spent here had been punctuated by stumbling into macabre scenes in Nana's neighbors' garages and sheds in preparation for the

event, an elaborate outdoor haunted attraction that had been a tradition for over a hundred years and had become famous not just in the Midwest but across the country. The trail, run by the League of Kansas Craftswomen, was legendary for its artistry and its scariness and for being something just a little bit more than what even the average horror fan was going for.

A few actors and performers had appeared as guests years ago, and a famous director had once taken it over, but for as long as Flair had known it, the trail had been masterminded entirely by Loretta, long the head of the league, micromanaged by Renee, and “haunted,” in the town’s parlance, by the same families again and again. Tickets, which sold out fully a year in advance, were distributed through a wildly complicated, un-transferable system, and newcomers to town waited years to be initiated into the preparation.

“Of course,” Flair said.

“Then you’ll know what it means to become a part of it.”

Flair stopped short, then quickly resumed adding foam to Loretta’s drink, trying to hide her surprised dismay. She’d known she couldn’t avoid the town’s festival, with its crowds of costumed families. That was going to be bad enough. But the trail took place in an unusually thick wood just on the outskirts of Rattleboro, and given the competition to participate, Flair had expected the trail itself to be easy to avoid.

This was a hard no, and Flair was about to say so, delicately, when she heard a sharp rap on the door—the back door, which opened onto the alley that ran behind every building on this side of the street.

Nobody Flair wanted to see came to the back door without

letting Flair know they were here first. Loretta lifted her chin in the direction of the noise as the rap came again. "I can wait if you need to get it."

"No, that's okay." Flair didn't pause as she added a drizzle of chocolate over the drink. "Probably just a delivery." It wasn't, and she knew it. She wasn't expecting anything, and she could feel the urgency of the knock from here.

The knocking continued. Flair forced herself to move calmly as she placed Loretta's drink in front of her, the coffee beautifully serene in its white mug on an accompanying plate, tiny complimentary madeleine beside it. As much as she wanted to ignore the interruption, whoever it was, wasn't going away. "I'll just go take care of it."

She made her way through the swinging door into the kitchen quickly, intent upon putting a stop to this now. Teabag, the toy poodle who'd been the first thing Flair inherited from her grandmother, was up and staring at the door.

Flair yanked it open to a woman in a long coat, hood pulled up, hand poised to knock again. She peered around Flair.

"Where's Marie?"

If Halloween had arrived at the front door, its pagan sibling Samhain would come in through the back.

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