

Chapter One

Claudia climbed the uneven wooden steps to Gail's Victorian wondering if anyone else would show up, wondering if maybe, from now on, Book Club might be just herself and Gail. She pressed the doorbell and waited, staring at the sorry-looking ears of Indian corn hanging on the door.

A harsh wind blew in from the lake, which was visible during the day at the end of Gail's Edgewater street. It would be cool, Claudia thought, to live this close to the water. Although Claudia suspected the real reason Gail loved this neighborhood was because it reminded her of her edgier days. Tonight the lake at the end of the street was invisible, a black void, and Claudia hugged herself against the chill.

"Hey! We were beginning to wonder if you were going to show up." It wasn't Gail, but Lindsay who opened the door.

"Am I late?" Claudia looked at her watch as she stepped inside. It was only ten past seven. Her eyes met Lindsay's. "You mean everyone's here?"

Lindsay closed the door and stepped around Claudia. “Everyone,” she said, popping her eyebrows as if to say, *I told you so*. She reached out her hand for Claudia’s coat, which Claudia took off and handed over, staring past Lindsay into Gail’s living room.

All five Book Club members were there. Everyone.

With wineglasses in hand, they took their seats on the two couches in Gail’s front parlor, Lindsay managing to snag the high-backed, Queen Anne chair in between them. Claudia suppressed a smile; even subconsciously Lindsay thought she was the queen bee. And it was, of course, Lindsay’s voice that quickly broke through their chatter. “I’m so excited about what happened last time. I think this group has a lot of positive energy.”

Well, that took less than thirty seconds, Claudia thought.

Gail set a tray of vegetables, fruit and cheese down on the coffee table and stood her nearly six-foot frame up to full height. She ruffed her spiky white-blonde hair with one hand, her dark roots showing, almost as long as the blond ends. “Tonight,” Gail gave Lindsay a look before she turned toward the kitchen, “I think we should try to focus our energy on the book we’ve all come here to discuss.”

As she watched Gail, Claudia twirled the ends of her own dull brown hair, the same color as Gail’s roots. Although she had to admit the idea of being able to work magic had its appeal—like maybe it could give her the courage to do something new with her boring hair— Claudia wasn’t sure she wanted Book Club to change. She thought, like Gail obviously did, that Book Club should probably continue to be Book Club and that the previous month’s digression into the occult should remain an anomaly.

“Oh, I loved the book.” Mara hugged her copy of *Home* to her chest. “I just cried and cried at the end.” She shook her head and sniffed when she said this, as if she were going to reenact her tears. Mara had a large face, a fat-woman’s face. Claudia was always a little surprised whenever she noticed the tiny body beneath it. “It was so lovely,” Mara continued, sniffing, her cheeks flushed. “Sad, but lovely.”

“What about his wife and that other woman—they stay friends?” Jill asked from her seat on the couch next to Mara, the two of them contrasting against each other like fire and ice: Jill’s cool elegance, Mara’s warm frumpiness.

Jill was fabulously turned out tonight in her trademark black Prada. Combined with her long black hair and fair skin the outfit made her blue eyes leap out, the effect of which, Claudia was certain, Jill was not unaware.

“I find it hard to believe they stay friends,” Jill continued, “especially after all that.”

“They were friends for a long time,” Gail walked back into the room carrying another tray, this one full of pastries and chocolates. “They were friends since way before he came along.” She put the tray on the table and took a seat on the couch next to Claudia.

“Well, I hope I don’t have any friends like that,” Jill said, biting the head off of a broccoli floret.

Claudia pushed her glasses up higher on her nose before she spoke. “She doesn’t leave Joseph in the end, because Joseph is her home. She came home and he was there, where she was at home, and so, she decided to stay...where she felt at home and comfortable...you know, at home. With him.”

“That’s just the kind of insight we expect from our English teacher.” Lindsay’s sarcastic comment got a laugh from the group.

Claudia made a face at her. *Thanks a lot.*

“Well, there’s no place like home.” Mara giggled.

Lindsay used a wicked-witch voice to add, “And your little dog, too,” and it made Claudia realize just how much Lindsay resembled not the Wicked Witch of the West, but the Good Witch, Glinda, with her heart-shaped face and her perfectly curled shoulder-length blond hair. It wasn’t hard to imagine Lindsay with the gold crown, either, enveloped in a cloud of taffeta. She even had a proclivity for pink.

“I was hoping it would take longer than this before we started quoting witches.” Gail rolled her eyes and tossed her copy of *Home* down onto the coffee table.

“I got some books about witchcraft.” Mara watched for their reactions as she spoke, her eyes rapidly moving from face to face. “I’ve been reading them since—well, since, you know. Maybe I shouldn’t admit this, but I really think there is something to it, something to what we did last time.”

Lindsay clapped her hands together. “See? See? I’m telling you, there is.”

“I need a drink.” Gail got up and walked to the dining room, where the bar was set up.

“Gail, now, come on.” Lindsay sat with perfect posture at the edge of her chair. She turned her entire body to face Gail. “You know we really should talk about this. It’s unhealthy to keep things inside and all repressed.”

Claudia watched Gail’s face contort as she repressed a comment, probably one concerning the healthiness of too much therapy.

“I just don’t think we should put any weight on what happened last time.” Gail paused. Wine bubbled into her glass in the silence. “I think we all had a little too much to drink and we got all caught up in ghost stories and witchcraft and what-not.”

“I’m with you,” Jill said. “I don’t think we can take credit for stopping the rain or putting out that candle. It was just a coincidence. All that chanting was just silliness. I mean, honestly.”

Gail nodded her head and flipped the palm of her free hand up to the ceiling. *Exactly*, her face said as she walked back from the dining room to join them.

“But what if we did do it?” Mara asked. “Wouldn’t it be a shame if we just stopped and never found out if that chant or spell or whatever it was actually *had* worked some magic?”

Mara could be like a terrier at times. It was a feature about her they all found simultaneously annoying and endearing. Mara could belabor a plot point or character trait to death, like that time at a previous meeting when she’d kept insisting Ignatius Reilly from *A Confederacy of Dunces* was *not* crazy. When Mara argued, Claudia could almost imagine her teeth grinding into the book jacket while she thrashed it around in her mouth, an image reinforced by the fact that Mara’s curly black hair was turning to salt and pepper: in other words, terrier gray.

“Don’t you want to explore this at all?” Mara continued. “I can’t believe you’d just let it drop, forget about it like it never happened. Think about what it could mean if it *did* happen. I think we need to look into this, just a little bit. To make sure. Wouldn’t it be magnificent if we really could use our energy to make changes? And I’m not just talking about clearing the skies for the squash festival like in *The Kitchen Witches*, either. I’m talking about helping each other.

“These witchcraft books I’ve been reading, they talk a lot about controlling your reality—and your destiny—and it doesn’t have as much to do with eye of newt and hemlock as it does with harnessing and controlling your own energy and using it for good.”

Hmmm. Working magic. Controlling your destiny. The idea was beginning to grow on Claudia. Perhaps bringing Mara into this group would turn out to be one of her better ideas.

“I’ve read about this before, too,” Claudia said, adjusting her glasses again. “It’s in a lot of New Age literature. They talk about how women used to always meet for healings and to pray for good fortune, and to celebrate, but how, as our society became male-dominated, this stopped, and the women who did this became labeled as witches—because the men were afraid of their power as a group.” Claudia, happy she’d found her voice again, pressed on. “It’s why thirteen is an unlucky number. It’s the number of moon cycles and women’s cycles in a year. It’s all related.”

“Well, the book I read,” Gail said, “was written by some crackpot from the sixties. He said you could use lemon and salt to break the effects of a negative psychic attack, you know, like the evil eye.”

The women looked at Gail.

“What?”

No one said anything.

“What?” Gail asked again. “I don’t get to go out and buy a book on witchcraft? I just wanted more information, that’s all.” She stopped. “It was a *used* book. It’s not like I’m buying into this or anything.”

“Who else bought a book about witchcraft this month?” Lindsay had her hands on her hips, her ringleader pose. She looked first at Claudia, who shook her head “no,” and then Jill, who did the same. She reached down into the large Vuitton bag next to her chair and pulled out two books of her own. Mara took three books out of her tote bag. Lindsay looked up at Gail. “Well?”

Gail sighed, then got up and went to get her used 1960’s crackpot book.

Lindsay set a huge *Benton's Grimoire* on the coffee table. "I am absolutely intrigued by witchcraft." She started flipping through the grimoire's glossy pages.

Gail's eyes met Claudia's. *Here we go again.*

"Lindsay," Gail said, "I don't think I have the patience or energy to endure another one of your trendy obsessions. Remember that Japanese Tea Ceremony? And I know I don't have the time to endure whatever the witches equivalent might be."

"But this is different," Lindsay said, pulling the grimoire off the table and onto her lap, sinking back into the wings of her chair. She looked over the book, her chin lifted slightly off to one side.

Claudia could tell Lindsay wasn't really reading. In fact, she was pretty sure Lindsay's eyes couldn't even see the pages, the way her eyebrows had pulled together in a look of bemusement. Everything about her seemed to ask, *That Tea Ceremony wasn't so long, was it?*

"What I think Gail means is," Claudia raised her eyebrows at Gail, "she's not ready to buy into witchcraft or any whole new belief system, based on one controversial night and some anecdotal stories in some books." For all of Lindsay's bravado, Claudia knew inside lay an extremely sensitive soul. "Gail? Am I right?"

Lindsay flipped a page of the grimoire.

Claudia clenched her jaw and thrust her chin toward Gail, widening her eyes.

"Right," Gail said.

"It's not like I'm trying to convert anybody." Lindsay looked up from the pages. "I just find the whole subject fascinating, that's all. I think this is something I want to explore for myself. If some people want to do it with me," she looked at Mara, "well maybe that would be

fun, too. I'm not trying to change anyone's belief systems or anything. I'd never force someone into doing something they didn't want to do."

Claudia and Gail exchanged a glance again and this time Lindsay caught them. "Would you two quit doing that?"

"What?" Gail feigned innocence, and Lindsay glared at her, angry, but then she rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know why I put up with the two of you."

"Because we put up with you, dear," Gail said. "You know we love you Linds, it's just—"

"—we're not always as open to trying new things as you are," Claudia finished. "That's all."

"How about this," Mara said. "Why don't we try it one more time and see what happens. If it doesn't work, then the subject is closed and we never bring it up again."

"Oh, I don't think that's such a good idea." Jill's blue eyes were wide. "I think I'd really rather we didn't."

"I think we need to settle this." Lindsay leaned back into her chair, crossing her arms and legs.

"But it's not even raining." Jill looked pained.

"Not a rain spell." Mara shook her head. "Just any other spell. To see if it works."

"And what if it does work?" Jill asked. "What then?"

Mara looked surprised at the idea, then giggled. "I guess I never thought of that."

"What exactly is it you want to try in my house?" Gail asked.

"Well, I was thinking we could try one more spell, just like the last time—only this time we do it for something else." Mara looked hopefully at Gail.

“My kids are upstairs. I don’t think I really want this to—”

“It’s not like we’re going to sacrifice a goat in your living room,” Lindsay said.

Mara flashed a horrified, *you’re-not-helping*, look at Lindsay before turning back to Gail.

“I just thought we could try a chanting spell again. You know, light a candle, hold hands, say a few words.”

Gail looked around the room. “In that nineteen-sixties nutcase book I read, the guy *really believed* he was under psychic attack from evil forces all the time.”

She looked at Claudia as if she were expecting some support, but Claudia shrugged. She’d liked what Mara had said about harnessing their energy, about using it to help each other. What if this group did have some magic in it? Like Mara said, it would be a shame to waste it. And what if they could use it to help each other? What could be the harm in that?

Gail persevered. “The guy said he knew it was an evil spirit that put a thought into his head telling him to drive his car off the road. He said he had to race home for his lemon and salt.”

But no one said anything. Gail was outnumbered. She looked at Jill, who shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Oh jeez-o-peet,” Gail said. “Fine. If this is what it’s going to take to get this nonsense out of your systems, then fine. We’ll try it. I’m going to make sure the little ones are asleep.” She started walking toward the stairway, then turned back around with an afterthought. “By the way, what exactly is it you want to chant about tonight?”

Mara looked sheepish. “Well...I was thinking maybe we could chant for Tippy.”

“Tippy?”

“My cat.”

Gail sniffed in a big breath as if she were about to say something, but instead, she turned around and headed up the stairs.

A Christmas tree candle, the only green candle Gail could find, burned in the center of the coffee table. The top couple of tiers had melted down and now it leaned a little to one side, making it look more like a Christmas bush than a Christmas tree. In the dark of Gail's living room, the women stood in a circle around it, holding hands and an image of Tippy in their minds' eyes, bathing him in a healing circle of white light.

Tippy was a longhaired black cat recently diagnosed with diabetes. He couldn't jump anymore, and sometimes he walked as if he were in acute pain, although the veterinarian had assured Mara he wasn't, that he walked on the backs of his footpads because of some neurological condition brought about by the diabetes. This weird walk always seemed to miraculously disappear when it came time for his daily shot of insulin. After six weeks of chasing him around the kitchen with a syringe in her hand, Mara was willing to try anything else.

In the same way they had the last time, Mara and Lindsay worked up a short chant. They used the novel they'd read for their October meeting, *The Kitchen Witches*, as a sort of template for their spell, copying the structure and phrases, changing a few words here and there to fit their specific, diabetic-cat needs.

The plan was to psychically bathe Tippy in white protective light, then douse him with green, the color of healing, then follow up with some red, the color of blood, since they couldn't find, in any of their books, a color that corresponded to the pancreas.

“Now change the light to a green healing light.” Lindsay directed the group visualization as they held hands around the grotesquely morphing Christmas tree candle. “Okay, now change it to red, the color of energy and strength.”

After a minute or so, they began the chant, hesitantly at first, then as they repeated it, gradually stronger:

We call upon the ancient power, in this time and in this hour.

We ask please heal the cat, Tippy.

It is our will, so mote it be.

Gail started popping her eyebrows up and down every time they said “Tippy” and “it be,” accentuating the ridiculousness of the rhyme. After a couple of times through, a laugh she’d apparently been trying to suppress escaped out of her nose as a snort, which caused the giggles to infect Jill, too. Both of them tried to conceal their mirth, which was only made harder by an angry terrier glare from Mara.

They finished chanting just like they had at the last meeting, with their arms up over their heads and heat pulsing through their connected palms.

After they dropped their arms down, Claudia bent over the table to blow out the candle.

“Wait!” Lindsay waved her hands. “Don’t blow it out. Remember we need to let the candle burn all the way down. To help ensure the spell will work.”

“Oops.” Claudia stood back up. “I forgot. Sorry.”

“Thank you everyone.” The light freckles on Mara’s translucent skin ran together, covering her nose and cheeks, and she had bright red blotches on her face and neck as well. “I

really appreciate you indulging me today. I hope I didn't embarrass you too much." She gave a nervous giggle. "Thanks."

"You'll have to let us know how Tippy does," Lindsay said.

"Oh I will. At the next Book Club."

"Speaking of which," Gail picked her copy of *Home* up off the table. "Is there anyone here that still wants to talk about the book?"

The group let out a groan.

"Then maybe we should pick out a book for next time," she said. "That is, if you still want to pretend this is a book club."

Gail finished cleaning up in the living room after everyone left. There were a few crumbs on the carpet and on the dark green damask of one of the couches, but that would have to wait until morning. She was tired and Emily, her early riser, would be up at six.

The blob that had been the Christmas tree candle burned alone in the center of the coffee table. She leaned over it to blow it out, then stopped herself and stood back up.

She went to get a plate from the kitchen and came back to the living room, cautiously picking up the candle to slip it underneath. There was so much melted wax it almost slobbered out the weak flame, but the flame survived, a tiny circle of light burning courageously in the center of the darkened room.