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THE PUMPKIN SPICE CAFÉ

Dream Harbor Series

Book 1

LAURIE GILMORE



Chapter One

Jeanie Ellis had never killed a man before, but tonight might be the night. Desperate times and all. She clutched the baseball bat tighter in her fist and crept down the rickety, back staircase.

She hadn't slept in three nights. Not since moving into the apartment above her aunt's café. Well, *her* café, technically. Jeanie was officially the new owner of The Pumpkin Spice Café, her Aunt Dot's pride and joy until exactly two weeks ago, when the older woman announced she was retiring – and taking off for the Caribbean for a few weeks to work on her tan. Apparently, Dot could think of no one better to take over her beloved café than her favorite – and *only*, as Jeanie pointed out – niece. An idea that now seemed completely

absurd as Jeanie tiptoed off the last step prepared for battle.

Every night, she'd heard strange noises. Scritchyscratchy type noises with the occasional clangy-bangy type noise. At first, she'd tried to chalk it up to the wind, or maybe an animal scurrying through the back alley. She absolutely refused to let her mind take off down a path to the worst-case scenario, like she usually did. She would *not* allow herself to imagine an escaped serial killer creeping up her back steps. That banging was definitely *not* an armed robber, here to take the meager change her aunt kept in the cash register.

Jeanie was starting fresh.

Jeanie was a new woman.

The quaint seaside town of Dream Harbor and its inhabitants knew nothing about her, and she planned to take full advantage of that.

A shuffling noise at the back door caught her attention. She would take full advantage of her 'New Life, New Jeanie' plan as soon as she figured out what was keeping her up at night. No one could live a laid-back, quaint, small-town life with a murderer outside their back door. That was just logical.

She choked up on the bat and crossed the small hallway between the stairs and the door that led to the alley behind the café. Although 'alley' wasn't quite the

right word for it. Alley conjured images of overflowing trash cans and scurrying rats. But Jeanie wasn't in Boston anymore. She was in Dream Harbor, which she was convinced someone must have actually dreamed up. It was far too idyllic to have sprung up naturally. No, the space behind the café and the other businesses on Main Street was more like its own little side street, with room for delivery trucks and tidy trash bins. She'd even seen some of the other shop owners taking breaks and chitchatting back there during the day. Not that she'd talked to anyone yet. She wasn't quite ready for that, for being the new kid.

Jeanie shook her head. Her thoughts were way off track, and she was about to be potentially murdered. Alley or not, whatever was out there was keeping her awake, and after three nights without sleep, she was barely holding it together. She rested the bat on her shoulder and reached for the doorknob. It was nearly dawn and a weak gray light seeped through the window over the door.

Oh, good, Jeanie thought vaguely. At least I'll be able to see my attacker before I die. With that less-than-pleasant thought in her head – not at all the positive new persona she was shooting for – she yanked open the door—

And came face to face with a crate of small pumpkins.

Gourds? It didn't matter, because before Jeanie could get her produce names sorted, the giant man holding the crate of small pumpkins spoke.

Or at least he made a gruff startled noise that reminded Jeanie that she was currently holding a baseball bat in a very aggressive manner. She nearly dropped it to her side, but then she remembered; this was still a large, strange man. Gourds or no gourds, she probably shouldn't let her guard down just yet.

'Who are you?' she asked, keeping one hand on the door in case she had to slam it in this mysterious pumpkin-man's face.

His dark eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch as though he was surprised by her question. 'Logan Anders,' he said as though that would clear things up for her. It didn't.

'And what are you doing in my back alley, Logan Anders?' she asked.

He blew out a frustrated-sounding breath and shifted the crate in his arms. It was probably heavy, but Jeanie would not compromise her safety just because this man was the picture of autumnal bounty with his crate of vegetables and his worn, flannel shirt and thick beard. Her gaze lingered on his face for a beat longer. So she could pick him out of a line-up, she reasoned. She might

need to know that above his beard was a long, straight nose and ruddy cheeks. The police officer might ask her if he had lashes for days, and the answer would be yes. It might be of the utmost importance to the investigation to know that even in the dim light of the morning she could see that his eyes were a devastating blue.

'It's Thursday.'

Jeanie blinked. Did the day of the week have something to do with why this man was here keeping her awake?

'And you've been keeping me up since Monday,' she said.

Now it was Logan's turn to look confused. 'I just got here.' He shifted the crate again, his forearms flexing under the strain. It really must be heavy, but he hadn't made any move to come in or set it down.

'Well, I've been hearing strange noises all week and I tried to pretend it was just the wind or a raccoon or something. But then I started thinking that's probably what people tell themselves right before the killer bursts through the door.'

Logan choked a little, his eyes going wide. 'Killer?'

Jeanie felt her cheeks heat up. Maybe she'd let her imagination get the best of her. 'Or something...' Her voice trailed off. She wasn't really sure what to say to this

strange man and he seemed to be equally at a loss. 'So, what are you doing here?' she prompted.

'Right, uh, I deliver produce every Thursday.' He nodded toward the box of said produce.

Jeanie winced. The produce delivery. Of course. Aunt Dot had told her so many things in the day before she left and Jeanie had written none of it down. The café had been closed since she'd got here and she still hadn't wrapped her head around everything that needed to be done. Thankfully, Norman, the café's long-time manager, was here to help. He assured her they'd have the café up and running by the weekend.

Logan shifted the box again. The heavy box he was still holding.

'So sorry!' Jeanie stepped back and swept her arm toward the café. 'Come in. We'll find a place to put those ... uh ... pumpkins?'

Logan hesitated in the doorway, his gaze shifting between Jeanie and the bat still poised over her shoulder.

'Gah! Sorry. I won't hit you on the head. I promise.' She tried to give him a reassuring smile but it didn't seem to help. He still hovered in the doorway.

'I'm really sorry, I assumed you were a murderer. It's nothing personal. I just haven't slept in three nights, and something's been making noise down here, I swear. And

I'm still trying to wrap my head around this whole café-inheritance thing.'

Logan stared at her, a hesitance still in his eyes. Crap. She'd probably already scared him. Jeanie had been called 'intense' on more than one occasion throughout her life. She was pretty sure it was even on a report card or two. It was something she was trying to work on, part of her new, Jeanie persona. Less talking. Less overthinking. Less intensity.

She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Café Jeanie was calm, chill. Just your friendly neighborhood coffee-shop owner, ready with a smile and your favorite drink. Not her theories on who or what was trying to kill her on any given day, or the latest in ice-cap-melting news, or the eighteen things she had to get done later today.

She tried to channel Aunt Dot's free-spirit vibes even as she wished the woman had been slightly less laid-back and had actually left her more explicit directions. She attempted a gentler, sweeter smile. It felt strange on her face. 'Please, come in. That must be so heavy.'

Logan gave a slight nod in acknowledgment. 'I usually leave it out here.'

'Oh.' So it wasn't her monologue scaring him away, she'd just interrupted his usual operating procedure. She understood very well how that could throw a person off.

When her favorite coffee place on the corner was closed for a week, she could barely function. And it wasn't for lack of caffeine. There was no shortage of coffee shops in the city, but none of them were hers. She'd been in a bad mood all week.

Her smile this time was genuine. 'Well, you're here now and I'm awake. How about a cup of coffee?'

Chapter Two

Logan liked the new owner of the PS Café more when she wasn't about to knock his head off with a baseball bat. But that wasn't saying a whole lot. He had work to do, deliveries to make, and well-meaning townfolk to avoid. He really didn't have time to be sitting here having a predawn drink with her, but he didn't seem to be able to escape. Or get a word in. Dot's niece hadn't stopped talking since she insisted he come in.

Every Thursday for the past five years, ever since he started managing the farm, he'd left Dot's four crates of produce next to the back door. He liked being in town before the sun came up and the people came out. He liked getting his business done before any other businesses were open.

Logan wasn't one for small talk. He hated speculating about the weather. He did not need to know about the latest town scandal. He liked being a part of the latest town scandal even less. So the quicker he was done with his deliveries, the sooner he could get back to the quiet of the farm. Or as quiet as a farm can be with half a dozen chickens, two senior goats, one rescue alpaca, and a grandmother who loved chatter. Thankfully, his grandfather was just as quiet as he was. His grandmother talked enough for the both of them. Almost as much as this Jeanie did.

'So, what do you think my aunt intended to do with those ... uh, little pumpkins?' she asked, glancing down at the crate he'd left by his feet. She stood behind the counter, a hand on her hip, the other swiping at the little wisps of hair that had fallen out of her messy bun.

'Gourds,' Logan corrected her from his spot on the other side of the counter.

'Right. Gourds. I thought so.' Jeanie still looked confused. 'But ... you don't eat them, right?'

He nearly laughed. Nearly. He was still too annoyed to laugh. 'No, you don't eat gourds.'

Jeanie's gaze roamed over the other three crates that he'd carried in instead of leaving them in their rightful place near the door. The place he always left them. The place he wished he'd left them this morning. 'I'm

guessing the rest of it is for the smoothies she added to the menu.'

Logan nodded. This town loved their smoothies. Not that he was going to complain. Smoothies meant the café needed a lot of fresh fruit and veggies from his farm. Smoothies were good for business.

'The gourds are just decorative,' he said, saving both of them from more guesses.

Jeanie's eyes lit up like he'd solved the world's problems. He ignored how pride flared in his chest at the sight of her pleased face. It had been a while since he'd been able to solve anyone's problems.

'Of course! I really should have thought of that. It's the lack of sleep!'

She rested her elbows on the counter and her chin in her hands. She was wearing an old, oversized cardigan, the sleeves so long they covered her hands, over a threadbare T-shirt and pajama pants. He was pretty sure the pants had little hedgehogs all over them, but he'd tried very hard not to notice.

He was trying very hard not to notice a lot of things about Jeanie. Like how expressive her dark eyebrows were, and how she hadn't stopped moving – making his coffee with quick efficient movements. She was a study in contradiction. Competent, but lost at the same time. Quick to smile, but also quick to frown, every emotion

clear in her eyes. Dark brown eyes, nearly black, the same as his coffee order.

Jeanie rubbed a hand down her face, breaking the spell. How long had he been staring at her? She yawned and stretched her hands above her head. Her T-shirt lifted with her arms and Logan averted his gaze from the exposed slice of skin above her waistband. He was definitely not going to notice that.

When he dared to look at her again, she was back to leaning on her elbows on the counter. Dark circles hung beneath her eyes, her black hair a messy nest on the top of her head. Her slumped, defeated posture tugged at something inside him. Something inconvenient. Something he did not have time for right now.

He opened his mouth to tell her he had to get going on his deliveries, but she was already talking again.

'It's just so weird. I keep hearing these sounds. Every night. Do you think maybe this place is haunted?'

Logan nearly choked on his coffee. 'Haunted?'

'Yeah.' She straightened, her eyes brightening with her new theory. 'Haunted. Like maybe the spirits who live here aren't happy with the new owner.'

'The spirits?' It was too early in the morning for this level of insanity.

'Ghost, spirits, whatever.' Jeanie waved her hand like

the semantics of the haunting didn't matter. 'Something is upset that I'm here.'

'I really don't think—'

'There's no other logical explanation.' She crossed her arms over her chest. Case closed. 'This place is definitely haunted.'

'No other explanation?' Logan thumped his mug on the counter. This was too much. 'Raccoons, old pipes, drafty windows, your own imagination.' He counted the other explanations off on his fingers. Jeanie narrowed her eyes at him on that last one, but he went on. 'Could be the kids in town messing around. There are an infinite number of explanations that make more sense than ghosts. Now I really need to go—'

'What do you mean kids messing around?'

Logan sighed and resisted tearing the hair from his head. 'I don't know. Maybe some kids were messing around in the back alley.'

Jeanie nodded slowly, taking in this new theory.

Logan slid his mug across the counter, a thank you and goodbye on the tip of his tongue.

But Jeanie was faster. 'So what are we going to do about it? I really need sleep.'

'We?' He backed away from the counter. Maybe he could just turn and run. The last thing he needed was to get further entangled with the new café owner. He could

practically hear the book club ladies cackling about it. They ate gossip for breakfast.

Jeanie nodded. 'You're my only friend in town. I can't confront a gang of teenagers by myself.'

'Gang is being a bit generous,' he mumbled, still backing toward the door, but now Jeanie was following him. Definitely hedgehogs on the jammies. He refused to find that endearing.

'Please? I'm new here and I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing...' She shook her head, her words trailing off. 'Sorry. This isn't your problem.' She smiled. 'I'll figure it out.'

The smile she forced onto her face tugged at something inside him again. She looked so ... so lost. Even as she smiled and pushed the hair from her face, attempting to assure him she was fine. She clearly wasn't. And that scrambled him up even more than her constant talking.

Damn it. 'Come to the town meeting tonight,' he said.

'Town meeting?'

'Yeah.' He ran a hand down his beard already regretting his next words. 'They're every other Thursday. You can bring up your ... uh ... problem. Get some help.'

Her smile grew into something bright and real. *Oh, no.* Jeanie's real smile was even more endearing than the

damn hedgehogs. How had his usual morning deliveries taken such a drastic turn?

'Thank you! That's a great idea.' Jeanie clasped her hands in front of her, like she was stopping herself from reaching out for a hug. Logan didn't know if he was relieved or disappointed by that.

He needed to go. He had one hand on the doorknob, nearly there. Nearly back to his normal morning, his blessed quiet.

'Will you be there?' Jeanie's question stopped him before he could escape. Logan usually only went to town meetings if forced to by some farm issue and only then if his grandmother was too busy with her knitting circle to come into town. His grandfather would rather have teeth pulled, without anesthesia, than attend a town meeting (his words).

Logan had no need to show up this week and yet for some reason found himself saying, 'Yeah, I'll be there.'

Jeanie's delighted squeak followed him out into the predawn light.

The book club was going to have a field day.