

# Chapter One

Aunt Maude is standing on the station platform. Even though it's been two years since I've seen her, she hasn't changed a bit—except for her glasses. The hot-pink frames are new. She pushes them up the bridge of her nose, but right away they slide down again.

I smile and wave from the bus. She grins and waves back.

Already I'm excited. I have no idea what Aunt Maude has planned for us, but I know it will be good. It always is. Aunt Maude lives by a different set of rules than other adults. When I was nine, she took me to a horror movie and told my mom it was a Disney film. When I was eleven, she taught me to play poker—for money. On my thirteenth birthday, she took me makeup shopping and didn't try to talk me out of purple lipstick and glittery black polish.

Though I call her Aunt Maude, she's actually my mom's aunt. That makes her my great-aunt. And she really is. Great, I mean. Normally, I wouldn't consider hanging out with a seventy-one-year-old lady for an afternoon, never mind a couple weeks of my summer vacation. But when Aunt Maude invited me to Witcombe for a visit, I jumped at the chance. Why wouldn't I? I have more fun with her than I do with most of my friends.

"Christine!" I'm barely off the bus when she swallows me in a fierce hug that takes my breath away.

"Aunt Maude," I gasp when she releases me. "It's good to see you."

"And you, my girl. It's been far too long." She throws an arm around my shoulder and squeezes again. My bones fuse. Old ladies aren't supposed to be that strong.

"There's my bag." I squirm free and make a dive for it.

"Just the one?" Aunt Maude says.

"And my backpack," I tell her, swinging it onto my shoulder.

"Well, then, let's be off." She laughs and leads the way to the exit.

Aunt Maude owns an antique shop in downtown Witcombe and lives in the apartment above it. Since it's a sunny day and the shop is

only a couple of blocks from the bus station, we walk.

Though I've visited Witcombe before, I still gawk at everything like I'm a tourist. The town is caught in a time bubble. It's barely changed at all in 150 years. Oh sure, there are roads and cars and electricity, but there are also wooden sidewalks, hitching posts and old storefronts. On Main Street there's an ancient red telephone booth. And it works! The mailbox in front of the post office is old-fashioned too. Of course, there are restaurants, drugstores, banks and clothing stores like in big cities, but Witcombe businesses have to be one-of-a-kind. It's a law. You won't find any fast-food chains or big-box stores here.

You'd think that might discourage visitors, but it doesn't. The town buzzes with tourists all year long. There are cottagers in the summer and skiers in the winter.

Aunt Maude has lived in Witcombe her whole life. As soon as we step out of the bus station, she waves to a man in a plaid shirt and a ballcap. "Afternoon, George. The pipes have quieted right down."

The man smiles. "Glad I could help."

"Plumber," Aunt Maude tells me. "The hot-water pipes were rattling something fierce last week. In twenty minutes George had them hushed right up. He's a genius with a wrench." And then she greets the next person. It goes on like that the whole way to the antique shop.

Aunt Maude fishes a key out of her pocket and sticks it into the lock. "Darn thing," she fumes after fighting with it for several seconds. "It's been giving me nothing but grief lately."

"Here. Let me try," I say, taking the skeleton key from her. "This is pretty old, Aunt Maude. Maybe it's time for a new lock."

She waves away my words. “Nonsense. The lock came with the door, and I don’t have any intention of replacing either of them.”

“But it must be easy to pick. Aren’t you afraid of getting robbed?”

“Why would I be? I’ve had this shop for over thirty-five years, and in all that time I’ve never had so much as a teaspoon go missing. Besides, if I can’t get the door open with the key, what makes you think a thief will have better luck without one?”

I ignore the sarcasm and say, “On the bus I was listening to the news, and they said there have been a bunch of burglaries in the area.”

Finally, the key twists in the lock. I hand it back to Aunt Maude.

“That’s in other towns,” she says, turning the brass knob. “Not here in Witcombe.”

I know better than to argue. Aunt Maude may be a free spirit, but she is also very stubborn. Pulling

my suitcase behind me, I follow her inside and shut the door.

“Do you want the sign flipped to *OPEN*?” I ask.

“Yes, please,” she says. “It’s only 4:30. We have lots of time before we have to get ready for the tour.”

“What tour?”

Aunt Maude’s eyes suddenly look like they’re being held open with toothpicks, and her voice gets all spooky. “The ghost walk.”

I feel my eyebrows shoot up. “What’s that?”

She grins. “Something new—I think you’ll like it. The idea came to me last week. All day long tourists come into the shop, and while they’re browsing, I tell them stories about Witcombe. I tell them about Old Joe Miner, the legend of Wheaton’s Bridge, the mystery of the abandoned mill and all the other town stories. So I got to thinking, why not show people the places that go with the tales? It will be interesting for them and fun for me. Tonight

She waves away my words. "Nonsense. The lock came with the door, and I don't have any intention of replacing either of them."

"But it must be easy to pick. Aren't you afraid of getting robbed?"

"Why would I be? I've had this shop for over thirty-five years, and in all that time I've never had so much as a teaspoon go missing. Besides, if I can't get the door open with the key, what makes you think a thief will have better luck without one?"

I ignore the sarcasm and say, "On the bus I was listening to the news, and they said there have been a bunch of burglaries in the area."

Finally, the key twists in the lock. I hand it back to Aunt Maude.

"That's in other towns," she says, turning the brass knob. "Not here in Witcombe."

I know better than to argue. Aunt Maude may be a free spirit, but she is also very stubborn. Pulling

my suitcase behind me, I follow her inside and shut the door.

"Do you want the sign flipped to *OPEN*?" I ask.

"Yes, please," she says. "It's only 4:30. We have lots of time before we have to get ready for the tour."

"What tour?"

Aunt Maude's eyes suddenly look like they're being held open with toothpicks, and her voice gets all spooky. "The ghost walk."

I feel my eyebrows shoot up. "What's that?"

She grins. "Something new—I think you'll like it. The idea came to me last week. All day long tourists come into the shop, and while they're browsing, I tell them stories about Witcombe. I tell them about Old Joe Miner, the legend of Wheaton's Bridge, the mystery of the abandoned mill and all the other town stories. So I got to thinking, why not show people the places that go with the tales? It will be interesting for them and fun for me. Tonight

is the first tour. You wouldn't believe how many people have signed up."

"Ghost walk, huh? Sounds interesting. But are there really ghosts in Witcombe?"

She shrugs and smiles mysteriously. "I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

## Chapter Two

At 8:45 Aunt Maude and I climb the stairs of the gazebo in the park. There are already two people waiting, and Aunt Maude checks them off her list. During the next fifteen minutes, the rest of the tour group trickles in. By 9:00, there's quite a gang—eleven, not counting Aunt Maude and me. Lucky thirteen, I think—perfect for a ghost walk.