

*FRANKIE AND THE BINGO BABES**CHAPTER I*

The evening bells were ringing from the Methodist church on Main Street as Ginny Jacobson stepped through the heavy wooden doors of the Grafton Hollow library and walked briskly through the twilight toward home. She was late, and if she wanted be on time for the potluck and bingo game at the VFW, she needed to hurry. She drew her plaid woolen scarf more tightly around her neck and found herself humming along with the familiar tune of “Amazing Grace” that floated across the crisp New Hampshire air. The old brick sidewalks were littered with dried leaves from the tall maples, oaks and sycamores lining the streets, and Ginny enjoyed the crunch they made under her Bass weejuns as she waded through their faded splendor. The leaf-pecking season was over, the crowds of summer tourists had disappeared, and the residents of Grafton Hollow were settling in for another long New England winter.

Ginny turned the corner onto Shady Maple Lane and saw a squirrel scamper down the steps of a nearby porch. The little animal had a peanut shell clenched between its jaws, and moved swiftly toward the huge sugar maple that stood in Ginny’s front yard, several houses away. It was Mommy Squirrel, the neighborhood pet. She had caught one of her front legs in a trap a few years earlier and had gnawed off the paw to get free. The neighborhood families had adopted her, and everyone left nuts and seeds and bits of apple on their porches to feed her and her young. Ginny watched as the squirrel scrambled up the trunk and disappeared into the craggy knot hole that hid her nest. What independence, Ginny thought, not for the first time. What innocent courage.

She stopped to collect her mail from the mailbox at the end of the drive, and riffled through the envelopes as she moved toward the front steps of her house. The colorful cover of the latest *New Yorker* caught her eye, and Ginny flipped through the pages to earmark the short story to read later that evening in bed. She climbed the steps and automatically slid her key into the lock. The pounding roar of the Rolling Stones poured down the staircase to greet her as she pushed open the door. After the quiet of the library, the sound was deafening. “Sybil?” she called as she entered the foyer. “Can you turn down the volume? I can barely think!”

The music grew louder as a door opened above her on the second floor of the house. Her daughter appeared on the landing and leaned over the banister, her smiling face and tousled mane of silvery blonde hair bouncing in time to the music. “Hi, Mom. I found your note. The tetrazzini is in the oven.”

“Great, sweetheart. Thank you. Can you”

“Douse the noise? Got it, Mom!”

With a wave of her hand, Sybil disappeared. A few minutes later, the Stones were no more than a muffled presence seeping through the living room ceiling. Ginny tossed the magazine on the foyer table, stashed her coat and scarf in the hall closet, and headed to the kitchen, where the tantalizing aroma of the baking tetrazzini was already filling the air. She peeked into the oven and smiled at the sight of the lovely bubbling casserole. What a great choice for the potluck!

The Wednesday night bingo games at the local VFW had been the brainchild of the Congregational minister, Pastor Hawthorne, a wily community activist long since deceased. He and his wife, Midge, started the games during the Depression in the 1930s as an inexpensive source of entertainment for the small rural community they served. But the bingo games fulfilled

a dual purpose. By combining them with a potluck dinner before the games, the town was able to provide a bit of weekly nutrition for the poorer families in the area, as those who could afford to bring food did and shared it in a family-style meal with everyone attending. The local housewives vied to prepare the best dish each week and loved the attention it drew to their culinary skills. The potlucks provided the most substantial and dependable meal that many families had to eat during the rough financial time between the two World Wars. It helped families survive, and fifty years later, the games and potluck lived on.

Ginny had decided to make turkey tetrazzini after seeing it prepared on the public television network the weekend before. She'd put the casserole together in the morning and had stashed it in the refrigerator before heading off to her job as director of the Grafton Hollow library. Sybil, who was home from college for a few days break, had been charged with putting it in the oven at 5:00 pm sharp so it would be hot and bubbling when Ginny arrived home at 6:00. Ginny peeked again at the wonderful concoction, delighted with the golden crust and the smooth pools of turkey, vegetables and linguini underneath. She donned her oven mitts and lifted the cobalt blue pan from the oven, placing it on a metal rack to cool, then took a step back and admired her handiwork. Beautiful! And she would bet that it tasted as good as it looked.

Ginny's interest in cooking had sprung from a genuine need to improve her cooking skills. She had, as she ruefully confessed, grown up in a family of terrible cooks. Her mother had hated to cook and the meals at home had been basic, indeed: cold cereal and milk in the morning; a ham and cheese or peanut butter sandwich for lunch; some meat, potatoes and canned vegetables for dinner. Ginny's husband, Hal, had been raised in New Orleans, and his mother had been a notable southern cook. He had been used to good food. After Ginny and Hal married during his internship year at Mass General in Boston, he said little about the meals Ginny

prepared, but started bringing home food from the hospital cafeteria and reheating it the next day. Hospital meatloaf, spaghetti with meatballs, and spinach casserole replaced the sandwiches of Ginny's youth. Brown Apple Betty, potato salad and hospital macaroni and cheese began filling her refrigerator shelves. Jars of pickled beets and Amish chow-chow joined paper tubs of leftover southern hash. But it was the clear jar of gefilte fish in jellied broth that did her in – that and receiving a hand-written recipe for yellow cake with chocolate icing from her new mother-in-law with a note saying it was Hal's favorite and Ginny should bake it for his birthday. The guilt and her own feelings of inadequacy finally prevailed; she headed for the nearest library and took out as many cookbooks as she could carry. A few weeks of trial-and-error meals, which were received by Hal with increasing happiness, convinced her to buy a second-hand Betty Crocker cookbook from a nearby thrift shop. As her skill grew, the hospital food disappeared from the refrigerator, and the marriage flourished. The story had become legend within the family, and as she became more confident in her ability to cook well, Ginny's interest in all things culinary grew to the point of obsession. She knew that her children secretly laughed at her penchant for cooking shows, and she noted their raised eyebrows when dishes that they had never seen before appeared on the kitchen table, but they always gobbled down the food without many complaints and Hal bragged to his friends about her culinary prowess.

Hal. He was gone now, taken before his time, and she missed him every day. She looked at the tetrazzini resting on the counter and knew he would have loved it! Tears swelled in the corner of her eyes and she wiped them quickly with the back of her hand. Enough of that, she thought, and forced herself to focus on the potluck and bingo game.

She turned off the oven and wiped down the counters and stovetop before wrapping the casserole in aluminum foil and enveloping it in a thick bath towel to keep it warm during the ride

to the VFW. Her lacy white kitchen curtains seemed askew, and she tweaked them to make sure they were hanging evenly. The sink was filled with cooking utensils. She washed them quickly in hot, soapy water and stacked them in the dish rack. Another obsession, she thought – being a compulsive cleaner and liking a clean house – but noted that her attempts at neatness were usually thwarted by the piles of books she brought home from the library or the town bookstore. She glanced down at her left hand where she still wore her plain gold wedding band, and thought that she had easily lived without diamonds and expensive jewelry, but could never have imagined life without books – and Hal had certainly agreed.

Ginny turned as Sybil entered the kitchen dressed in a bright pink bathrobe, fuzzy socks, and a head covered with large turquoise plastic hair rollers.

“I take it you’re not going to the bingo game,” Ginny said with amusement.

“Nope, Mom,” Sybil answered, rummaging through the refrigerator and discovering a small baking dish of the tetrazzini behind a gallon of milk. “Is this for me?”

“Yes. I thought you’d like to try it. The oven is still hot. It shouldn’t take more than 20 minutes to bake.”

“That’ll work. Ruth’s coming over to study. We have a big biochemistry hourly to take when we get back to campus on Monday. It’ll be a nightmare. It always is.”

“I remember your dad studying biochemistry at Penn,” Ginny said, her mind flying back over the years. “He was always so diligent. Never let himself get behind. That’s key – but you know that. You’re just him in that regard.”

“I know,” Sybil answered, pulling out fresh rolls and putting on some water for tea.

“That and the Swedish hair and blue eyes. They had to come from somewhere, and it sure wasn’t from the mailman.”