

## Chapter 1

"I'm not dead, Charlotte," Grandpère Etienne said.

"But you are retired, Pèpère." I tweaked his rosy cheek and skirted around him to throw a drop cloth over the rustic wooden table that usually held wheels of cheese, like Abbaye de Belloc, Manchego, and Humboldt Fog, the latter cheese a great pairing with chardonnay. Dust billowed up as the edges of the drop cloth hit the shop floor.

"A retired person may have an opinion."

"Yes, he can." I smiled. "But you put me in charge."

"You and Matthew."

My adorable cousin. If I had a brother, he would be just like Matthew. Bright, funny, and invaluable as an ally against my grandfather when he was being stubborn.

"What does Matthew say about all this?" Pèpère folded his arms around his bulging girth. The buttons on his blue-striped shirt looked ready to pop. The doctor said Pèpère needed to watch his weight and cholesterol, and I had been trying to get him to eat more of the hard cheeses that contained a lower fat content than the creamy cheeses he loved so much, but he had perfected the art of sneaking little bites. What was I to do?

I gave my grandfather's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Pèpère, I love this place. So does Matthew. We only want the best for it. Trust us. That's why you made us partners."

"Bah! So many changes. Why fix something that isn't broken? The shop made a good profit last year."

"Because life is all about change. Man does not live by cheese alone," I joked.

Pèpère didn't smile.

Fromagerie Bessette, or as the locals in the little town of Providence, Ohio, liked to call it, The Cheese Shop, needed to expand and get with the times. Our proximity to Amish country was driving more and more tourism in our direction. The town was exploding with bed-and-breakfasts, art galleries, candle and quilt shops, and fine restaurants. To take advantage of the boom, Matthew and I decided the shop needed a facelift. We had stowed all the cheeses in the walk-in refrigerator until the renovation was complete. The sign on the door of the shop read *Closed*.

"Pépère, why don't you take a walk in the vegetable garden?" The town had a co-op vegetable garden and hothouse in the alley behind the shops on Hope Street. "Pluck me some basil. Maybe some heirloom tomatoes." I intended to sell homemade basil pesto in jars. For a simple treat, basil pesto ladled over a scoop of locally made chevre and served with flatbread and a slice of a juicy heirloom tomato is an economical gourmet delight.

Pépère muttered something in French. I understood. "Give the horse the reins and the rider is quickly thrown off."

For a little more than thirty years, I had heard Pépère's witticisms and grown in the tutelage of his wisdom about all things cheese. Today, I turned a deaf ear. I needed to concentrate. Everything for the reopening of the shop was going smoothly. So far. But if we were to finish by next week, we had to maintain a strict schedule. The decorator was due any minute with the updated kitchen fixtures and lighting fixtures, none of which had been switched out since 1957. Antiques were to be prized in a home, but not in a thriving business concern. The painter was scheduled to arrive at noon to paint the walls and refinish the twelve-foot wood counter at the rear of the store, hence the need to stow the cheese and cover the display tables with drop cloths. The painter would stain the wood a

warm honey brown to match the ladder-back stools by the Madura gold granite tasting counter, and then paint the walls Tuscany gold. Yesterday we had installed extra shelving that would soon be loaded with new additions like patés, chutneys, homemade jams made without pectin or preservatives, gourmet olives, crackers, and artisanal breads. I would cluster cheese baskets, gifts, and accessories on the five oak barrels stationed around the shop. My favorite gifts—the olive-wood-handled knives from France, the copper fondue pots from Italy, and the crystal cheese trays from Ireland—would sit on the largest barrel prominently stationed in the middle of the room. Over the last year, thanks to the Internet, I had "visited" many wonderful places and found one-of-a-kind items.

"Where is Matthew?" Pèpère said, ending my moment of patting myself on the back for a job well done.

"Seeing to the wine annex."

Matthew used to be a sommelier in one of Cleveland's finest restaurants, but a month ago, life struck him a hard blow, and suddenly living in a big city didn't appeal to him. His wife ditched him and his twin daughters and went back to dear old Mumsie and dear old Dad to live in their thatch-roofed vicarage in dear old England. My grandparents, who never liked the woman in the first place, had urged me to take in Matthew and the girls. How could I say no? When Pèpère offered us the partnership in The Cheese Shop, Matthew jumped at the chance. He arrived bursting with new ideas. A must-see place like Fromagerie Bessette should also sell wine, he argued, and Providence didn't have a wine shop yet. I had agreed wholeheartedly, and we set to work.

For the annex, we leased the empty space next to The Cheese Shop. We cut an archway between, laid travertine tiles on the floor, paneled the wine annex with dark

mahogany, installed a bar and stools, and added rows and rows of wine bottle nooks. *Voilà*. In a short time, we had created an authentic-looking winery tasting room. When word got out, local vintners had clamored to provide samples.

"Progress, bah." My sweet old grandfather uttered another grumble of disapproval and fled through the rear door of the shop.

I smiled. I had prepared myself for his resistance. After World War II, he and Grandmère had migrated from France and given their life's blood to The Cheese Shop. Pèpère did not like me bucking tradition, but I had such dreams: cheese and wine tastings, a mail-order business come the fall, cooking classes. I even planned to write a cheese cookbook. It would be so popular that the Barefoot Contessa would beg to write the foreword.

One thing at a time, I reminded myself and chuckled. Like cheese, if I set too many slices of life on a plate, the flavors would be indistinct.

The grape-leaf-shaped chimes hanging over the front door tinkled.

"Charlotte, take a look at these beauties." Matthew bounded across the natural pine floor like a long-limbed Great Dane. He carried two mosaic bistro tables with S-scrolled legs that I had ordered from Europa Antiques and Collectibles, a quaint shop located in the building next to ours. "*Très* hip," he said. "You did good."

The antique shop's proprietor, Vivian Williams, glided in behind Matthew, carrying a pair of matching mosaic chairs in black matte finish. She reminded me of a clipper ship, aloof and elegant, sails unfurled, her chin-length hair in a flip, the flaps of her Ann Taylor suit jacket flying wide. She said, "Take these. I'll go get to the other set of chairs."

I slipped the stools from her grasp, admiring for a second time the way the round

mosaic seats matched the table. Definite conversation pieces. I traipsed after Matthew into the annex.

Vivian returned in seconds with two more chairs. "By the by, I saw the girls on their way to school. They're so adorable."

Matthew's eight-year-old twins.

"Did they make their beds?" I asked Matthew.

His mouth quirked on the right side. "They pulled up the covers."

I sighed. It was a start.

"The littlest one, Amy, is a handful." Vivian fussed with the chairs, arranging them with an eye for balance. "They're not identical, are they? Amy's like her mother, I assume?"

"Nothing like her." Thank God. We didn't speak her name in Matthew's presence.

"My great-granddaughter is just like me." Grandmere Bernadette trundled into the annex like a locomotive with no off switch, arms pumping, chest huffing, patchwork skirt swirling around her calves. She was always in a hurry and filled with boundless energy. I only hoped I could have that much energy at seventy-two. *I think I can. I think I can.* She finger-combed her short gray hair and tossed her red macramé purse on the drop-cloth-covered bar.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you had rehearsal." I strode to her and bent slightly to give her a hug. She was shrinking but would never admit it. She took pains to stand erect. Once a dancer, always a dancer, she told me.

"Later, *chérie*. Later." She smacked her gnarled hands together. "Now, what can I do?"

I ushered her into The Cheese Shop. "The window displays."

"*Moi?*" She tilted her head in that coquettish way she had.

"Yes, *toi*," I teased.

"Oh, but I couldn't."

"Don't be modest. You know you love it." Not only was Grandmere the mayor of our little village, but she managed the Providence Playhouse, a local theater that had won dozens of regional theater awards. She had an eye for staging that was beyond compare. Sure, she could wax dramatic and she often dressed like a gypsy, but it was her ability to see the big picture in regard to set design, costumes, and crowd appeal that made her famous throughout the region.

"I'd help you, Bernadette," Vivian said, "but I've got to run. Another appointment. Oh, that reminds me, Charlotte. The decorator is on her way. She called me to say she was sorry she was late. I guess she lost your cell phone number. Ta!" She sailed out of the shop as if launched on the crest of a wave.

As she exited, she dodged my clerk, Rebecca, who hurried in, gangly arms and legs jutting from her frilly blouse and capri pants. Luckily it was a cool day in May, so the air conditioning didn't have to work overtime with all the comings and goings.

"She's here!" Rebecca waved her hands like a singer at a Baptist revival, which was unusual since she was Amish and prone to quiet displays of excitement. Like the Fromagerie, Rebecca was a work in progress. Last year, at the age of twenty-one, she chose to leave the church and step into the modern world. She hadn't lost her faith, just her desire to be cloistered. At twenty-two, her latest discoveries were the Internet and the wonders of Facebook and Victoria's Secret.

"Who's here?" I said.

"Her!" She pointed toward the front of the shop.

I noticed she was wearing red nail polish. I suppressed a smile.

"Her. Zoe, Zelda, Zebra. You know, that lady with the Z name."

"The reporter from *Délicieux*?"

Perspiration broke out under my arms. The *Gourmet*-style magazine with an ever-expanding readership offered to do a feature on our family—how my grandparents, Matthew, and I were keeping the old French tradition alive, with modest changes like adding the annex and offering cheese and wine tastings. Pèpère was against the idea of speaking to a reporter. He said for fifty years word-of-mouth had been good enough for his sturdy business. But with all the dreams that Matthew and I had for the future of the shop, we craved a little media coverage.

I tugged the hem of my linen shirt over the waistband of my Not-Your-Daughter's jeans. Casual chic, in my humble opinion, was always best. "Do I look okay?" I whispered.

Grandmère toyed with the feathered-cut tresses around my face, then cupped my chin. "You look radiant, as always. Just be your delicious self." She winked. "Get it? Delicious, *Délicieux*? I made a joke, no?"

I chuckled.

"She's not actually *here* here," Rebecca said, amending her story as she gathered her long blonde hair into a clip. "She's in the Country Kitchen having coffee. But she'll be here when she's done. Some of the local farmers are there, too. Don't you have a meeting with them at ten?"

"They rescheduled. It's now set for tomorrow at eight." I glanced at my watch out of habit while ticking off impending appointments and feeling my blood pressure soar. Why did good things often happen all at once? For that matter, why did bad things happen in threes? I looked forward to the end of the day when I would curl up in my Queen Anne chair with a glass of wine and a good Agatha Christie mystery.

"That *racaille* . . ." Pépère stomped into the shop through the rear entrance, his arms filled with tomatoes and basil, and kicked the door shut.

I hurried to him. "What's wrong? Who's a rascal?"

"Ed Woodhouse." The town's biggest real estate holder. Powerful beyond measure. Ruled by his snappish wife who wanted to oust my grandmother from her position as mayor so she could take over herself. Elections were next week, set in June because our town founder, Ed's great-great-grandfather, had wanted it to coincide with the birth of his son. Ironically, the son chose that very same date, sixteen years later, to dump a cartload of cow manure in the Village Green to protest his father's stance on a youth curfew.

"What's he done now?" I said.

"He's selling the building."

My heart leapt at the news. Pépère had been trying to buy our building for years, but Ed was never willing to sell. "That's wonderful," I said. "We'll purchase it and be rid of him for good." The man was not a nice landlord. He indiscriminately raised rents. We had to beg him to allow us to make the archway to the annex. Once, he said he wanted to put my grandparents out of business simply because they were French.

"He refuses to entertain an offer from us," Pépère said.

"What?" I nearly screeched. "Can he do that?"

"*Je ne sais pas*," he said, then mumbled a few choice snippets in French that would make a longshoreman blush.

Grandmère grasped him by the elbow and drew him into the kitchen by the walk-in refrigerator. I couldn't hear what she was saying to him, but she had a way of calming him down with nothing more than a tender kiss. Their love was magical, like something out of storybooks, love I longed for but didn't think I could ever hope to find. A moment later, they broke apart and Grandmère rejoined us.

"I must be gone," she announced. "The theater awaits."

"What are you putting on this summer, Mrs. Bessette?" Rebecca asked as she laid out more drop cloths. Before moving to Providence, she had never seen a play.

"A ballet of *Hairspray*."

Grandmère's events were quite unique and not to everyone's liking. Last year, she had staged *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a ballet.

Rebecca gasped. "Can you do that?"

"Dear girl, I can do anything I please as long as the town votes yes."

"I mean, isn't that rock and roll?"

"If Billy Joel can do it, so can I. *Adieu*." Grandmère did a curtsy, then jeted toward the shop entrance, arms spread wide. She ran headlong into my best friend, Meredith Vance, who was entering. In a flash, Grandmère recovered. "So sorry, *chérie*."

"My fault." Meredith, voted Providence Elementary's most adored teacher, was lovely in a freckle-faced, natural way. Sun didn't burn her; it kissed her. Sun didn't bake her tawny hair; it glossed it with a shimmering sheen. She also smiled more than anybody I knew. But she wasn't smiling now, and she was visiting during school hours. She stood

half in, half out of the doorway, her lips a hard knot.

A peppery taste of anxiety flooded my mouth. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

Meredith yanked her arm. In trotted my niece, Amy, her cocoa bean eyes wide, her pixie face lowered. What had the little imp done this time?

I hurried to them with Matthew and P  p  re at my heels. I steered Meredith and Amy away from the front door, to the empty area by the display window. We huddled around the duo as if circling the wagons.

"Tell them," Meredith ordered.

Amy's chin quavered. "I . . . I . . ." Gumdrop-sized tears fell from her eyes. "I . . ."

"Ah, heck," Meredith cut in. "She hit the Woodhouses' daughter in the nose."

A light sparked. I spun to my right. A boxy woman in a T-shirt with a huge zinnia on it stood just inside the front door. She held up her camera and took another picture.

I cringed. Z for Zinnia. The *D  licieux* reporter.