

Chapter 1

"*Bonjour, Mimi!*" Heather Holmes, a lanky blonde in her forties with huge, wide eyes and long, curly tresses, breezed into Bistro Rousseau. She screeched to a halt.

"Whoa!"

I stared at the chaos in the center of my restaurant—well, it was almost mine; it bore my maiden name. I would own it when I paid off my benefactor, knock on wood.

"What happened?" Heather asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't know we had tornados in Napa Valley."

"Very funny." For the past hour, I had been rearranging the tables. In my haste, I had toppled a few of the cane-backed chairs.

Heather's giggles sounded so much like wind chimes, I was pretty sure an angel had just gotten its wings. "Actually, I like the way you've set things up." She shimmied down the hem of her slinky black dress; it must have twisted up on her ten-minute drive to work. "*Très* intimate." Heather didn't have a wide French vocabulary. I didn't care. She was a wonderful hostess and assistant. "Perfect for a wedding."

The wedding was exactly why I was rearranging. We were hosting our very first out-of-towners' dinner for our very first wedding party. Bistro Rousseau, which was located in Nouvelle Vie—an unincorporated enclave in Napa Valley, north of Yountville and south of St. Helena, which boasted upscale eateries, inns, jazz clubs, and high-end shops—had only been open three months. We were growing in popularity, but my benefactor and mentor, Mr. Baker—*Bryan*—said that in order to make a splash, we

needed to open the restaurant and Maison Rousseau—yes, I *almost* owned an inn, too—to destination weddings. And he knew just the celebrity who would want to book one. Angelica Barrington, the thirtysomething talk show hostess of *Everybody Loves Angelica* fame, was his niece. Bryan and Angelica's father, a winemaker in the county, were half brothers. Same mother, different fathers.

After Bryan had spent twenty minutes boasting about how wonderful Angelica was, I agreed. Honestly, could I refuse? I had seen her on a celebrity cooking show wielding kitchen utensils like a pro and instantly felt she and I could be kindred spirits.

The wedding ceremony would be held tomorrow, Saturday, in the inn's beautiful courtyard. Oh, how I wanted everything to be perfect. Needless to say, my stomach was in knots and my *almost* restaurant was a mess.

"Do you want me to set up the wineglasses?" Heather asked as she stowed her purse in the safe that was tucked into the teensy coatroom.

"That would be great!"

The restaurant was small, but the many mirrors on the walls gave it a larger feeling and reflected the warm twinkle from the lights in the bronze-finished, candelabra-style chandeliers. The focal point, where Heather would set up the tasting, was a hand-carved pub-style mahogany bar I had imported from France. Bryan said, *Go big or don't go at all*. I wasn't accustomed to going *big*, but this time, I had, and I was thrilled.

"Then help me fold the linens and put out the silverware," I said. "Later, I'll gather flowers for the crystal table vases and floral arrangements from the garden."

"You know," Heather said, "seeing the chaos, I thought for a second that they had come looking for me."

They being aliens. She claimed they had abducted her on numerous occasions. It seemed to happen around this time of year, during June, when the weather in Napa Valley was pitch perfect, not too hot and not too cold, and the thriving vineyards and fertile orchards were at their greenest, preharvest. *Glonkirks*, Heather called her abductors. I wasn't sure if she was pulling my leg. I mean, c'mon, I'd watched *Star Trek* reruns. None of it was true—was it? Heather related her experiences in exotic—and I mean *ultraexotic*—detail. True confession? I enjoyed the stories. They were fanciful, and I could use a dose of fanciful every once in a while.

"When do they arrive?" she asked.

They, this time, meaning the wedding party.

"Around four PM," I said. "Jo will greet them, get them set up in their rooms, and direct them here around six."

Jorianne James, a.k.a. Jo, my best friend from childhood, was the reason I knew Bryan Baker. Long story short, a year ago I left San Francisco where I had worked as a sous chef and then chef for nearly fourteen years and returned home with my tail between my legs to live with my mother. Quickly I landed a job as a Monday-Tuesday chef at a decent restaurant, but I blew that off when Jo introduced me to Bryan Baker, a longtime friend of her father's. Bryan was a local entrepreneur in his midsixties who loved to help *young people with promise*. His many success stories included an art gallery owner, a vintner, a cheesemaker, and a dress designer. Somehow I qualified!

A few days after our first meeting, Bryan informed me that he had purchased a bistro and the bed-and-breakfast next to the bistro. For me! Both places were in desperate need of repair—the front and rear patios begged for inspiration—but he would help me get the

properties on their feet. Afterward, it was up to me to make them soar. I was terrified, but Bryan set me straight: *Big risks reap big rewards.*

With his backing, I hired a staff, including a full-time chef, and we got to work. Nine months later, voilà! We had a restaurant and inn built in the style of Giverny. Monet was not only my favorite artist but Bryan's, as well. Each building boasted a pink crushed-rock facade with green windowsills and shutters. Maison Rousseau featured a number of relaxing garden areas, all of which we named after Claude Monet's family or his artistic friends: Renoir, Sisley, Bazille. In addition, behind the inn was an idyllic walkway covered by archways of climbing plants and flanked by colorful shrubs. Beyond that, a lily pond. Bryan grandly donated two of Monet's lesser works, ones he had purchased from private collections, to hang in the inn's foyer.

Three months after we opened, thanks to savvy marketing—I was learning the value of social media—we now had a steady clientele, mostly locals. In fact, we had become quite the go-to place to chat about food, the community and, yes, each other—otherwise known as gossip. At the inn, we dished up breakfast and brunch; at the bistro, we served hearty lunches and elegant yet affordable dinners. We weren't quite ready for the Michelin review crew to come calling, but I was optimistic.

"I hope everything goes according to plan," Heather said. "What if—"

"Stop!" I shouted. A flutter flitted through my stomach. I had a horrifying fear of the words *what if*. What if the bride hated the whole affair and panned us on television? What if, *gulp*, she bad-mouthed me to Bryan and he withdrew all of his funds? What if they found out I was a fraud through and through? No culinary school degree. No college degree. No—

"Mimi, you look pale." Heather ran to me and clutched my shoulders. "Are you okay?"

I bobbed my head. *Liar.*

"Listen to me," Heather continued. "You are a talented chef, and you are an intelligent, creative being. Breathe! Remember when your dream started."

My love affair with food began when I was a preteen, twenty-three years ago. Prior to that, I was your typical picky eater. Carrots, *ew*. Pickles, *ugh*. Squiggly things like calamari, *ick*. My mother would coax me: Mimi, try this; *Mimi, taste that*. I refused. I squirmed. I made a stink. I went from thin, to thinner, to looking up the term *anorexia* on the Internet and wondering whether I was a borderline case.

"Mimi, are you breathing?" Heather whispered.

I bobbed my head again. *Liar. Fraud.*

"Repeat after me—I am an excellent chef." On occasion, Heather worked with a hypnotherapist, which might explain why she believed aliens had abducted her. My guess was that her doctor had implanted a false memory. I could be wrong. "C'mon," she urged. "I am an excellent chef and a terrific, caring manager.' Say it."

"I am" was all that popped out of my mouth because the rest of the memory was hurtling at me full force. At the beginning of seventh grade, something happened, and I began to see food in a whole new light. Maybe it was because my mother insisted that I learn how to make the five mother sauces that every girl of French origin needed to know—I was third-generation French. Whatever it was, the magic that happened when you put effort into something *happened*, and all of a sudden, food and cooking became fun. Flavors and textures came alive for me. *Pow!* I adored the aromas of fresh-baked

bread and sweets and grilled *anything*. I couldn't wait to handle a fresh fish or pie dough or cookie batter. And chopping vegetables rapidly? Let me tell you, it was a real turn-on. By the tender age of thirteen, I knew my destiny was to become a chef. As for property owner, restaurant manager, and wedding planner? My heart did a jittery jig.

"Mimi!"

"I'm breathing. I'm fine. Let me go."

Heather released me and twirled a finger in my direction. "Other than that wild gleam in your eyes, you look good. I like the ponytail."

I fingered my toffee-colored hair, remembering when I used to cut it myself to help make ends meet. See, at eighteen I desperately wanted to go to culinary school, but my family couldn't afford it, so I watched cooking shows, pored over every French cookbook that existed, and went to work at a local diner. At twenty, on a wing and a prayer and with stars in my eyes, I moved to San Francisco. The first job I landed was as a sous chef at a second-rate restaurant. Next, I worked as sous chef to a celebrated chef—*celebrated* was code for *crazy*—at a snazzy restaurant. By twenty-four, I had graduated to full-fledged chef at a French restaurant. Every night I went home eager to start my own restaurant. Knowing I needed seed money, I started saving twenty percent of every paycheck. It was hard; I denied myself new clothes, rode a bicycle to work—which was good for the waistline—and cut my own hair—shaggy chic was a fairly good look on me. *Fairly*. Over the past year, I had let my hair grow to my shoulders, a much better style with my oval-shaped face. I usually wore my hair in a bun so a stray hair wouldn't, you know, wind up in a salad or something, but I wasn't going near food for a while.

"I like the outfit, too," Heather added.

I didn't need to glance down. I put on the same thing every day: white shirt, tan trousers, and suede clogs. I was not a fashion horse. I dressed for practicality. I had duplicate outfits in the bistro's office in case I needed to make a quick change. My one fashion statement was the hot pink tourmaline necklace my father gave me when I'd turned sixteen, the necklace I always wore because it reminded me of his stalwart belief in me.

"Did you put on blush?" Heather asked.

"No." I rarely donned makeup.

"Then use more sun block," she warned.

Okay, I had to admit I liked a few minutes of unprotected sun exposure every day. I didn't want to wind up with leathery skin; I simply needed a joy boost on occasion.

"Is Chef C here?" Heather asked.

"Yes." Though I was the owner and no longer the chef, I set the *carte du jour*, and I would taste test to ensure quality, but Camille Chabot, a.k.a. Chef C, a talented French-born chef with twenty years' experience and no accent—she had worked determinedly as a child to lose it—would do the heavy lifting. She could be a demanding woman, but she had a lust for food that was awe-inspiring. I was lucky to have found her.

"What's on the menu for tonight?"

"For the appetizers? *Gougères*," I said, pronouncing the word correctly: *goo-zhehr*. The singular and plural were pronounced the same. They were tiny cheese puffs that could be filled with anything. "And fig-and-olive tapenade on toast triangles. For the entrees, tamarind-braised black cod set atop a vegetable ragout, filet mignon with potatoes *dauphinoise*, or my specialty, rotisserie chicken." *Poulet roti* was a *must* for any

French bistro. I used my own personal blend of twelve spices for the rub. I paired the chicken with *pommes frites*—French fries that I served extra crispy.

"*Soupe gratinée à l'oignon?*" Heather asked.

"But of course. The guests will have a choice between the onion soup or a house salad." My mother had handed down the yummiest recipe for balsamic vinaigrette. A dash of white pepper gave it its zing.

Heather stretched her long arms and yawned.

"Uh-uh, none of that," I chided. "It's not yet half past ten." We had to last until at least midnight. Luckily, I wasn't much of a sleeper, not since I had fallen in love with food. I was always up before dawn, ready to cook with a flashlight if necessary.

Heather yawned again. "Sorry. My husband insisted on reading his latest sci-fi thriller to me." She claimed she was married, but I had yet to meet the guy...author...*aspiring* author. He had never been published. Was he real or a figment of Heather's colorful imagination? Had her hypnotherapist implanted that memory, too?

"Mimi! Yoo-hoo, Miss Rousseau!" My sous-chef, Stefan, a young African American in his twenties, called from the entrance to the kitchen.

I had reverted to my maiden name after the calamitous end to my marriage.

Calamitous because—

Stefan flapped his arms wildly. "Red alert!"

"What's wrong?" I yelled. My heart started chugging again. "Is there an emergency?"

"Ha! Nope. I just thought it would be fun to send you into a tailspin." Stefan could be a clown at times. His laugh was a rollicking guffaw worthy of a man twice his size. He

was slim, thinner than Heather, but he had spine and could stand up to our demanding chef. Stefan hadn't revealed his last name to anyone except me—he'd had to, for tax purposes—and merely went by Stefan. I understood why, and I would keep his secret. For now. For the record, he was one of the best sous chefs I had ever met. He could slice and dice like a Ginsu pro, and he had a flair for beauty when it came to plating. On his off hours, he painted watercolor landscapes. "Chef C wants someone to fetch rosemary from the garden. Stat! I would go, but I've got bacon sizzling for the salad." The chef had the commanding air of a general.

"I'll get it in a few minutes."

"Swell!" He disappeared.

The garden was located between the bistro and the inn. It was a sizeable patch, flush with summer vegetables and dozens of herbs. After fetching rosemary and flowers, I would head to the inn to check how things were going for the wedding. There was no rain in the forecast, so we hadn't needed to rent a tent, but I wanted to oversee the setting up of the chairs and the gazebo where the happy couple would say their vows.

Heather gathered a stack of linens and started folding crane-shaped napkins. I admired her skill. I could fold pastry dough with flair, but napkins truly stymied me. I couldn't do origami, either. I flapped open a tablecloth. After it billowed and came to rest on a table, I smoothed out the wrinkles.

"Is Mr. Baker attending the wedding?" Heather asked.

"He wouldn't miss it."

"He's handsome, for an old guy."

I laughed. Bryan wasn't old-old—he was in his sixties—but he reminded me of a

craggy Paul Newman with brilliant blue eyes, a noble chin, and a devil-may-care smile. We met weekly for coffee at Chocolate, an adorable café a half mile down the road.

"How's your mom?" Heather often made huge jumps in conversation and rarely stayed on topic, unless she was discussing aliens.

"She's good." My father died a few years back from a heart attack. How I missed him and his wit. My mother missed him, too, but she pushed through, one day at a time, and never let me see her cry. She was sturdy that way.

"Has she met Mr. Baker?"

"Whoa, Heather! You're giving me whiplash with the U-turns in conversation. Why do you ask?" My mother owned the Nouvelle Vie Winery, a small concern, not open to the public, which produced a lovely Chardonnay. Her father had brought vines from the old country and established the vineyard on top of its own aquifer. To this day, I could remember my grandmother making bread that was light, fluffy, and rich with yeast. She would serve it whenever a new year's wine was launched. Eaten plain, it was delicious. Slathered with butter, even better. Grandmère said the quality of the water mattered, and the water in Nouvelle Vie—which meant *new life*—was the best in the valley. "Mom doesn't date anymore, if that's what you're hinting at."

"Date? Your mom and Mr. Baker? Heavens no. I was just curious about him. He seems so...mysterious."

"There's nothing mysterious about him. Bryan is an entrepreneur. He doesn't bite, and he's not an alien."

"He's not an—"

"Gotcha!" I laughed heartily.

Heather snorted. "Oh, you." She flapped open a fresh napkin.

The *snap* caught me off guard, and a shiver coiled up my neck. What did I know about Bryan, really? He had never married, or so I'd heard. He didn't have children, I assumed; he never talked about any. He traveled extensively. I had often seen him in the company of beautiful, mature women. And he was worth a billion dollars—that might be a slight exaggeration—all of which he made by the time he turned forty because he started a tech company in Silicon Valley long before Google was born, after which he invested well. But what else did I know about him? I hadn't pressed him for information because, well, he was my mentor; I was the student. He often bestowed what I like to call Bryanisms—his world view, captured in sayings I could repeat—so I felt like I knew him.

My lack of curiosity given my history with my secretive husband appalled me. He was the reason the words *what if* could send me into a tailspin. See, at the ripe age of twenty-six, I met the man of my dreams: Derrick Burnham, an adventurer who wrote about his escapades in many magazines. We ran into each other—literally *bam!*—at a volunteer feed-the-poor event in Golden Gate Park. Trays toppled and food flew, followed by apologies and laughter and chemistry. That night we bonded over gourmet pizza. We married a year later. Sadly, eight years after that, the love of my life died in a tragic accident in Nepal. His body broke in multiple places. He died on impact. Quickly on the heels of his funeral, creditors came knocking, and I learned that Derrick had kept a huge secret from me—he was in debt up to his eyeballs. He bought all his pitons, ice axes, and backpacks on credit, to the tune of one hundred thousand dollars. There went my seed money, my dreams, and my sweet memories. I sold everything we owned to pay

off the debt, and then, unable to enjoy, let alone *cope with*, the buzz and struggle of city life any longer, I quit my job and moved home.

Was it fate? What if—

I abandoned the task of dressing tables and, obeying Heather's command to breathe, headed to the garden.

Morning was my favorite time of day. I could hear the birds' songs; I could smell the vines. The temperature was mild today even though the sun was shining. A few flecks of clouds dotted the sky.

Drawing in deep, restorative breaths, I entered the garden. Raymond Cruz, our gifted Hispanic gardener and a former classmate of mine from high school, was steady at work.

"Morning, Raymond!"

"Hiya, boss!" With his shaggy brown hair and easygoing smile, he reminded me of a Newfoundland puppy. Raymond wasn't just any gardener; he was a master gardener who gave back to the community by speaking at public events, writing articles for publications, and volunteering on Earth Day. "It's beautiful today, don't you think?" he said, his coffee-colored eyes crinkling with impish fun. "Don't you love the weather?"

"I do."

"Is Angelica on her way?"

"Soon. Are you looking forward to meeting her?"

"It would be nice."

Yesterday I learned that he was a huge fan of Angelica's. He hadn't reached out or anything, no fan mail. He simply admired her sense of humor and the way she joked around with the guests on her show.

"I put together a bouquet for the foyer." Raymond signaled with his shears. "Wait 'til you see."

"I bet it's beautiful." The miraculous displays he could achieve with begonias and azaleas when in bloom astonished me. The brilliant red and silvery-white tea roses he had planted along the walkway leading to the inn's entrance were remarkable. "I need to fetch some rosemary and flowers. Do you have a spare set of clippers?"

"Yep." Raymond pulled a pair from the tool belt looped around his hips and offered them to me. "You can use one of those baskets for your haul." He hitched a thumb over his shoulder at an array of wicker baskets and set back to work.

As I bent to retrieve one, a woman screamed, "Mimi!"

My pulse skyrocketed. I spun around.

My best friend, Jo, the woman who had bravely tasted all my childhood cooking fiascoes, the woman who had introduced me to Bryan and who had given up her high-paying CPA job to manage Maison Rousseau, ran at me full tilt, arms waving. "Help! It's horrible!"