

Chapter 1

"Mimi, whoa!" Stefan, my sous-chef, reeled back as I pushed through the swinging doors leading to the kitchen. "Hot stuff!" he yelled. He wasn't referring to me, sorry to say. He was commenting on the preparations for crème brûlée with caramel flambé that he was carting into the main dining room. The delicious aroma of burnt sugar permeated the air. As if reading my thoughts, he said, "Though you do look good."

"Kiss up," I said.

Stefan let out one of his rollicking laughs. "I'm not stupid."

I looked the same as I always did, clad in my work uniform of khaki pants, white shirt, and clogs, my toffee-colored hair slung into a bun. It wasn't a *hot* look but not unattractive, I'd been told. And I was always ready for whatever the day might bring. The only fashion statement I wore was the pink tourmaline necklace my father had given me when I turned sixteen and the matching tourmaline studs I had recently purchased to go with it. A little sparkle did a girl good.

I said, "Thank heaven you have young legs or I'd have been toast."

"Your legs are almost as young," he said. "*Almost.*"

At thirty-five, I was ten years his senior. "Go!" I chuckled. "Someone is expecting a delectable dessert after their lunch."

"*After* lunch? This *is* lunch." Stefan winked. "You know the Friday crowd. People splurge!"

Humming, he pushed the cart into the main dining room. As he deftly wove between tables, I glimpsed multiple images of him in the mirrors that adorned the bistro's walls,

and I couldn't help thinking how much he resembled Johnny Mathis in his heyday. His father did, too, right down to his espresso-colored skin and chocolate brown eyes. Did Stefan's twin sister look like Johnny, as well? I'd never met her. Last week was the first time I'd heard of her. Stefan could be secretive, and for good reason. He had wanted to follow his own path without his influential father's help. Fortunately, my gifted sous-chef oozed talent in the kitchen; he had never wanted for a job. When I was his age, I'd been equally precocious.

"Chef C!" I called as I reentered the kitchen and moved past the white farmhouse-style table where I ate most of my meals. "Chef!" I zigzagged through the busy kitchen crew.

Camille Chabot, or Chef C as she liked to be called by the staff, was standing by the eight-burner stove. She twirled a wooden spoon, acknowledging that she'd heard me, but she didn't take her focus off her task. How I adored her. She was a talented French-born woman with a lust for food as well as a hunger for excellence. Lucky me; I had discovered her a year ago after a statewide search in California for someone to head up the kitchen in my new bistro.

I said, "A birdie told me—"

She shook her head, indicating she couldn't catch all of what I was saying.

I knew how she felt. I'd once been a full-time executive chef. The cacophony in the kitchen could be daunting. I drew nearer.

"What is up, Mimi?" she asked with a hint of a French accent. She had worked hard to get rid of it after moving to America as a child. She tilted her head to make eye contact. I wasn't that tall, but she was a cube of a woman. Her toque teetered on her head.

I steadied it for her. "*Merci*," she said. Although she was in her forties, her hair was snow white. She claimed it was because her daughter—now a sous-chef in New York—had been a hellion in her teens.

"A birdie told me your sister Renee is doing a bang-up job setting up the Sweet Treats Festival at Maison Rousseau."

"*Oui*. I have been told the same."

After I'd given up my career as a chef—long story, not so short—I'd moved home and caught a break. A generous benefactor was willing to sponsor my dream of owning a restaurant. With wings on my feet, I tossed aside my toque and chef's coat and set to work. Soon after, I owned Bistro Rousseau. Rousseau was my maiden name and I was proud of it. My family had produced quality wine in Napa Valley—specifically in Nouvelle Vie, an unincorporated enclave in Napa between Yountville and St. Helena—for six decades. In addition to the bistro, I owned the neighboring and growing-in-popularity inn, Maison Rousseau.

"Renee is having the best time. She is on cloud nine." Camille cranked off the burners for the three huge pots of boiling water—a large pan filled with pasta that had been cooked al dente sat on the nearby counter—and redirected her attention to the four skillets in which she was sauteing fresh herbs, oil, and garlic. The aroma made my mouth water. "Renee has not told me much about it, and I will not ask. She does not need my two cents."

I usually served as chef on Fridays so Camille could relax before the weekend rush, but a few days ago she'd advised me that she was too excited to sit still. Now I understood why. If she had taken the day off, she might have been tempted to butt into

her sister's business.

"Help, please," Camille said to me rather than to a sous-chef. She directed me to finish making the pasta appetizers. "And make it snappy, missy." At times she could be gruff. None of the staff seemed to mind. They had soon come to realize, as I had, that she was all bark and no bite and had a wicked sense of humor.

I saluted. "Yes, Chef." I plated four servings of pasta and topped them with the fresh herbs, oil, and garlic sauce. I added a basil leaf and a slice of *chabichou*, a traditional non-rind French goat cheese. "Ready," I said.

One of the waitstaff loaded the dishes onto a serving tray and hurried out of the kitchen. A sous-chef removed the skillets and replaced them with fresh ones plus the fixings for another batch of pasta toppings.

Camille went right to work. "Setting the festival at Maison Rousseau was a coup for Renee. Thank you for allowing her to do so. This is the first of many such events for her."

"I heard she acquired the rights to the festival from another woman."

"That is correct. The woman could not make a go of it. She could not get advertisers on board. She did not have the—what is the word—*knack*." Camille punctuated the word with a wave of her spoon. "Renee is a dynamo. To spread the word about the festival, she came up with the brilliant idea to donate ten percent of the proceeds to a local charity that helps promote education. Plus, she is going to include a bake-off competition."

"She sounds industrious."

"She is." Camille beamed. "Both the fundraiser and the bake-off helped her secure five prominent sponsors. The rest is history."

"The festival is going to be a huge draw for us," I said. Most festivals in the valley

ran Thursday to Sunday, but Renee had decided a weeklong Saturday-to-Saturday event might really get people talking. The event, which would open tomorrow, would feature bakers, ice cream makers, and dessert beverage mixologists. Businesses from all over the valley had signed on to sell their wares. And hopeful amateurs had entered the bake-off. "Festival employees and volunteers are busy setting up tents, tables, and demonstration areas in the inn's gardens right now," I said. "I'm going over after lunch to take a peek."

Camille clacked her spoon on the rim. "Renee has told me each festival area will match the gardens' color schemes."

"How lovely."

With my benefactor's help, we had built the inn in the style of Monet's Giverny, each wing of the two-story building boasting a pink crushed-rock facade with green windowsills and shutters. There were three primary gardens, which we had named after Monet's family and artistic friends. Behind the inn, there was an idyllic lily pond and a walkway covered by arches of climbing plants.

I said, "Before the festival gets under way, you should stop by and take a peek, too."

"I will if I can. We have been packed with customers."

Every year in October, Napa Valley was busy. But this year, in particular, it was going to be busier than all get-out. In addition to the festival, people were flocking to the area to attend Crush Week—the time when grapes were pressed at the vineyards. There were going to be hoedowns, hayrides, and farm tours. At some vineyards, they celebrated the fall release with wine and food tastings. I loved how the heady scent of ripening fruit mixed with the excitement of those who grew the grapes as well as those who came to participate made the valley brim with energy. A walk through a vineyard preparing for a

crush could be intoxicating.

"Renee has spoken highly of the inn's staff," Chef C went on. "She says they are very cooperative."

"That's great to hear."

"Plate," she ordered.

I set to work, preparing the pasta again as I had moments before. "You know, I have yet to meet her."

"You cannot miss her when you do. She is nothing like me. She is taller, for one thing, and she is colorful and tells the best jokes."

"You tell pretty good jokes."

"She is also a slob." Chef C slid the skillets aside and fetched six petit filets from a nearby platter. "Perhaps she is not . . ." She laughed as she prepared the filets for *steak au poivre* by rolling them in cracked pepper. "Perhaps I am a solitary person who prefers everything in its place."

"Like your kitchen."

"*Exactement*," she said in a full French accent.

Renee hadn't always been a festival operator. Up until two weeks ago, she had managed a chicken-and-egg farm with her husband. Mid-September, she had announced to her husband that she had tired of the life and had secured the rights to the festival with savings she had amassed over the years. She'd also informed him that she had grown weary of their marriage and needed a breather. That afternoon, she'd moved into her sister's house. Talk about major life changes!

"I also heard she's touring a few more places this morning, looking for her next

festival site." According to my source, Renee hoped to grow the festival business. She wanted to put on one a month.

"Yes. She went with Donovan." Camille's eyes glistened with excitement. Donovan Coleman, the son of a local vintner, was her new boyfriend. Well, sort of. I knew she had fallen for him; I wasn't sure how he felt about her. He was quite a bit younger and a tad impetuous. At the ripe age of thirty—he was all of thirty-five now—Donovan had shunned the family wine business to become a baker. Camille raved about his cookies, especially his bite-sized French *macarons*, a meringue and almond flour sandwich cookie filled with icing. "Renee and Donovan have gone to Calistoga."

"What's there?" I asked.

"The Bookery. Do you know it?"

"Indeed, I do." The Bookery was a charming bed-and-breakfast that held literary events. In my spare time, I loved to read, and I enjoyed attending book fairs and meeting authors. I'd visited The Bookery at least a dozen times. One of my favorite mystery authors, Kate Carlisle, who'd written a series set in San Francisco as well as the wine country, had appeared at a book event there a few months ago.

"Donovan is checking out the bakery," Camille said.

The Bookery boasted a thriving bakery and café. The owner's motto was "Nestle in and get comfortable." She believed one couldn't read a book without a cup of tea and something sweet in hand.

Chef C said, "*Shh*—it is a secret—but I believe Donovan is hoping to steal some ideas. He wants to open his own bakery. He does not wish to teach cooking classes forever, although the position has provided him a steady income." She sighed. "Men.

They dream big, do they not?"

Yep, I thought. *The man had won her heart*. "I hope he gets what he wants."

"Me, too."

"Mimi!" Heather, my hostess and right-hand woman, breezed in via the kitchen's rear door. Her curly blonde tresses bounced on her shoulders. Her cornflower-blue dress clung to her lithesome frame. "You'll never guess what I did all day yesterday."

Dare I ask? I thought, suppressing a giggle. Heather had taken the day off. Who knew where she might have gone? When she'd first started working for me, she'd claimed that she had been abducted on numerous occasions by aliens—*Glonkirks*, she'd called them. Soon after, however, she disabused me of that notion, saying that talking about aliens was her way of pulling people's legs. The truth saddened me. I had enjoyed the stories, as fanciful as they were. I'd often fantasized about her visiting Mars and soaring outside the Milky Way. *Yoo-hoo, Scotty, beam me up*.

"Let me guess," I said. "Did you trip the light fandango? Or take tango classes? Maybe you've been typing your husband's latest manuscript." Henry wrote science fiction novels. For a long time, I hadn't believed he was real, either, until one day when she had finally brought him to the bistro. He was a dumpling of a guy.

Her bright eyes crinkled with amusement. "No, silly. I was playing with my babies."

"Your furry babies?"

"Yes!"

A few months ago we'd found out that Scoundrel—a gray-and-white mouser that dwelled in the neighboring vineyards and visited the bistro for real cat food and affection—was female, not male, and pregnant to boot. It wasn't my fault for the error.

Heather had been the primary caretaker. I hadn't thought to, um, look. Six weeks ago, Scoundrel had had a litter of kittens.

"You'll be pleased to know I've found them all homes." Heather rattled off the names of the new owners. A former math teacher, she was terrific with facts and figures. "Do you have a minute? Come see them. I'm not needed in the dining room at the moment."

"They're here?"

"Henry had a meeting with an attorney in the city. When he's done, he'll drop by and pick them up. It's okay, isn't it? I hate leaving them home alone. They're in the shed."

After completing the construction of the bistro, we'd realized we needed more storage. We'd added a small air-conditioned space where we kept staples like flour, sugar, and spices.

"It's fine."

"The kittens are so much cuter now."

"I hope so." When I'd first seen them, they'd looked like pinch-faced, furless rats. Growing up, I hadn't owned cats—my mother was a dog person. As a chef, I hadn't acquired any animals for fear of transporting their hair to my cooking area. Since then, fellow chefs had advised me that I needn't worry. Bobby Flay was a huge cat lover; if he could own a cat, so could I. Nowadays, Scoundrel often made her way to my cottage at the rear of Maison Rousseau—it had once been the caretaker's unit. She would meow a hello, as if she was there to visit me, but I believed she was more interested in getting to know my resident goldfish—intimately. *Yum.*

"Come on." Heather beckoned me.

She exited the kitchen, and I followed her to the shed. In the corner, inside a wire

crate, huddled six mewling kittens.

"Ooh," I murmured. "They're adorable." One with gray-and-white markings reminded me of Scoundrel. Another was black with white paws. Three were charcoal gray. The sixth was black with a white stripe down its nose. "And each of them has a new home?"

"Yep." She buffed her nails on her dress. "I'll turn them over to their new owners in a couple of weeks. One couple is taking three of them, one for each of their little girls. How sweet is that?"

As I bent to unlatch the door, a flash of black whizzed between me and the crate. I started. "What the heck?"

Heather steadied me. "Bad Scooter!" She wagged a finger at a retreating feline.

"Who's Scooter?"

"Sorry, Mimi. I forgot to close the door to the shed."

"Who is Scooter?" I repeated.

"Scoundrel's significant other."

"He's a black cat," I murmured, my heart chugging from the fright.

"As black as lava and faster than a bullet train."

A shiver ran down my spine. I was not superstitious by nature. Fantasies and folk tales didn't suck me in, but I had to admit, a black cat crossing my path unnerved me.

Black cats signified imminent danger, didn't they?

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