

Chapter 1

"I thought I'd seen a ghost, Charlotte," Matthew said.

"It wasn't Chip." I popped off the lid of another Tupperware box of decorations we'd lugged from The Cheese Shop. "Chip lives in France, not Providence."

"He was blond, broad-shouldered, and fast."

"So are you."

"I'm telling you, the guy could run. What if it was him?"

I blew a stray hair off my face. "My ex-fiancé is not loping through the Winter Wonderland faire in the middle of February. Last I heard, he hated winter." And hated me, but that was water over the falls.

"I worry that he'll hurt—"

"It wasn't him. We have tourists. Lots and lots of tourists. One looked like him, that's all." A fog of breath wisped out of my mouth. I buttoned my pearl-colored sweater and tightened the gold filigree scarf around my neck to ward off the morning chill. Wearing corduroys, a turtleneck, and extra socks beneath my boots wasn't doing the trick.

Every year, in celebration of Providence's Founder's Day, the Village Green transformed itself into a Winter Wonderland faire. Farmers, vintners, and crafters from all over Holmes County and beyond joined in the weekend fun that would officially start on Friday evening. It was a tourist draw in a season when tourists should have been scarce. Overnight, small white tents with picture windows, peaked roofs, swinging doors, and fake green grass floors appeared. Twinkling white lights outlined each tent.

I stood in the middle of ours and removed glittery wedge-shaped ornaments from the

decoration box. "Let's change the subject."

"Okay, Miss Touchy." A grin inched up the right side of my cousin's handsome face. He could be such a joker. He plucked another taste of what I called ambrosia—he'd already eaten three—from a small platter of cheeses that I'd brought to sample while we worked. "Hungry?" He waved it under my nose. "Mm-mmm. This is a delicious cheese. What is it?"

"Zamorano. A sheep's cheese from Zamora, Spain. Sort of like Manchego. The milk comes from Churra sheep." I'd eaten my fair share as an early morning snack.

"It's nutty and sort of buttery."

"Your new favorite," I teased.

"How'd you guess?" He slipped the cheese into his mouth and hummed his appreciation.

While I decorated the tent with gold and burgundy ribbon looped through crystal wedge-shaped cheese ornaments, Matthew hoisted a box of wineglasses onto the antique buffet that I'd brought in to serve as our cheese counter and started to unpack them. We were setting up Fromagerie Bessette, or Le Petit Fromagerie as we were calling our little enterprise, primarily as a cheese- and wine-tasting venue. For the first day we would offer Vacherin Fribourg, a yummy cheese that's perfect for fondue, Haloumi from Greece, which sort of tastes like a Mozzarella, and the Zamorano. Our wines would include a creamy Mount Eden chardonnay from Santa Cruz, a peppery Bordeaux, and the boisterous but not over-the-top Sin Zin zinfandel. Each customer would receive a burgundy souvenir plate embossed in gold with the words: Say cheese. For larger cheese purchases, we would direct eager customers back to Fromagerie Bessette. Gift items,

crackers, and jams were available.

In between unpacking boxes, Matthew filched another sliver of cheese. "The Zamorano would pair well with the zinfandel, don't you think?"

I laughed. "It's good with all reds and even sherry."

"Hmph. Showing off?"

"You bet."

Matthew, a former sommelier and now my business partner, was doing his best to learn about cheese. In exchange, he instructed me about the complexities of wine. Our arrangement was what you would call a delicious swap.

"Well, it's killer," he said. "Truly killer."

A chill shimmied through the tent. I twisted the knob on the standing heater beneath the buffet table and cozied up to it. Once we opened the tent to customers, we'd have the heater on all the time.

The front door flew open and a dash of yesterday's featherlight snow fluttered inside.

Then Sylvie, Matthew's buxom ex-wife, entered. "Hello, love!" She bolted toward us, waving a handful of glossy flyers. A cool breeze swirled through the tent until the door swung shut.

"Speaking of exes," I said dryly as I felt my eyebrows rise.

"What are you . . . ?" Matthew sputtered. "Why . . . ?" He gaped at Sylvie with outright shock.

I didn't do much better. The lacy purple teddy Sylvie wore barely covered her ample chest and her you-know-what. I couldn't imagine that the purple muffler and ankle-high Uggs she was wearing provided enough warmth to bear the nip in the air. Her shoulders

were dimpled with goose bumps.

"Did you forget to put on clothes?" Matthew managed to blurt out.

"I'm advertising, love," Sylvie announced in her clipped British accent as she waved the flyers.

Advertising what? I pressed my lips together to keep the snarky comment from escaping my lips. Good business required tact, even with ex-in-laws.

Sylvie owned a women's boutique called Under Wraps. Many of the items in the store's window would make the sultriest vixen blush. A few years back, Sylvie abandoned Matthew and their girls to live with Mumsie and Dad in merry old England. A couple of months ago, she returned to Providence. Much to Matthew's vexation, she had wheedled her way back into their nine-soon-to-be-ten-year-old twins' lives.

"I've rented the tent next to yours." Sylvie fluffed her acid-white hair. Static electricity in the air made it stick straight up on top, but I didn't tell her. "What better lure than the aromas of cinnamon and hot spun sugar from the neighboring tents, right, love?"

To increase business during winter months, the Igloo Ice Cream Parlor made all sorts of delectable treats. The Igloo had rented a tent near ours, and though the faire wasn't officially open, the shop was already selling its spicy winter version of cotton candy. Other scents like pine trees, cocoa, and brandy-laced crepes filled the air as well.

"C'mon, Mattie-Matt, sales are down," Sylvie said. "I've got to do something to make customers flock to my tent."

"The faire isn't open yet," Matthew said.

"I like to be prepared." She sidled up to Matthew and ran a chocolate-colored fingernail down his sleeve. "Admit it. You always liked how I could coax a cow to

croon."

Matthew's eyes turned as dark as lava. "Stop it." He nudged her away.

Coming to his rescue, I gripped Sylvie by the elbow and steered her toward the exit.

"Sylvie, give me some of those flyers. I'll be glad to post these."

Some place. Maybe in Timbuktu.

"Thanks, Charlotte. Oh, did you hear—?"

"No time to gossip." I prodded her forward. "We're busy-busy."

Sylvie frowned. She prided herself on being Providence's gossipmonger extraordinaire. Gossip, according to her, flew rampant around a women's boutique.

"But—"

"We've got to get back to decorating. Bye-bye!"

Before she could protest, I propelled her into the cold, not thinking twice about how she would keep warm. She was an adult—or at least she liked to think so.

The door lingered before closing, and I caught the strains of Kenny G's melodic saxophone playing a jazzy rendition of "My Funny Valentine." Our mayor—my darling, eclectic grandmother—insisted that easy listening music play nonstop during the Winter Wonderland celebration. Speakers had been set up at the corner of every aisle.

Matthew returned to the task of unpacking glasses and muttered, "Can you believe it? Sylvie rented the tent next to ours." On a normal day, my cousin was the most laid-back, generous man on the planet. But when it came to Sylvie, he turned sour. "Next to ours!" he repeated.

"Intimate, but not horrible."

"She's nuts. Certifiable. It's supposed to snow again."

"Not heavily." Another gentle storm was due tomorrow, the kind that would entice children to walk around with chins upturned, mouths open, and would make our white tents glisten with frost.

Matthew mumbled, "Looney Tunes," and I couldn't disagree. When Sylvie ran out on Matthew, he and the twins moved in to my Victorian home with me. Matthew and I had spent many nights discussing the repercussions of Sylvie's return. He worried that his children, by association, would start acting as crazy as she did. I assured him they wouldn't.

"C'mon, cuz." I nudged him on the shoulder. "No negativity, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah." Matthew brushed a thatch of tawny hair off his forehead and grumbled his dismay. Our new Briard pup—a surprise gift to the twins from their capricious mother—couldn't have looked more chastised. "Found anybody to hire at The Cheese Shop?" Matthew asked as he inspected stemware for smudges.

"Not yet."

Business at Fromagerie Bessette—or The Cheese Shop, as the locals call it—was increasing at a steady clip, thanks to our burgeoning Internet business, multiple orders for gift baskets, and thriving wine sales. Taking off days to run Le Petit Fromagerie at the faire was making it nearly impossible for us to swing vacation time, even with the temporary help of my industrious grandfather. A few people had applied for the sales job, but none seemed like a good fit. I don't consider myself particular, but I do want whoever works for me to feel like family. Call me crazy.

"Say, did you see that ice sculpture shaped like a hound's tooth?" Matthew asked.

To lure more tourists to town, my grandmother had cooked up an ice-sculpting

contest. Ten artists had signed up for the event. Two days ago, a truck delivered huge blocks of ice, and the artists set to work. The weather, as crisp as always in February, was cooperating and keeping the ice from melting.

"It's whimsical," he added.

"That's an understatement." The tooth statue was ten feet tall. I had a sneaking suspicion that the bubbly hygienist, a vocal advocate for flossing, was the artist. "Did you see the knight on horseback sculpture?"

"My personal favorite is the Great Dane cuddling a litter of kittens."

"It definitely wins the 'aw' factor."

The sculpture entries didn't have to be completed until Sunday, when the winner of the contest would be announced. I looked forward to seeing the other designs.

"Shoot." Matthew swatted the counter. "I left the wine openers in my car. I'll be right back."

As he exited through the tent door, Rebecca, my coltish young assistant, hustled in. Her long ponytail flew behind her like a jet stream. "Alert! Alert!" Her pretty face was flushed the color of Edam wax, her sweet forehead crimped with worry. She skidded to a stop on the fake grass.

"What's wrong?" I braced her slim shoulder.

"She's . . . she's . . ." Rebecca swallowed hard and caught her breath. "A woman bought the property next to Quail Ridge Honeybee Farm, and she's . . . she's—" Rebecca hiccupped.

I cuffed her on the back. "Calm down."

"She's starting a honeybee farm, too."

I understood her concern. Rebecca had a crush on our local beekeeper. To hear her talk, Ipo Ho had created the moon and the stars.

"She's going to ruin him."

"Relax. There's enough room in Providence for two honeybee farms. Ipo's honeybees dine on clover. Maybe the new owner will feed her bees wildflowers." Honey, with all its healing properties, had turned into a big business. Jars of Quail Ridge honey flew off The Cheese Shop's shelves.

"She's trouble, you watch."

Two years ago, Rebecca left her Amish community and moved to Providence with a rosy picture of what the "real world" would be. After a steady dose of Internet news and TV murder mysteries, she admitted that living in the modern world could be a challenge. But she wasn't leaving. Not any time soon. Because of Ipo Ho.

"Howdy-doo." A handsome and very tall woman in her fifties, wearing a jeans outfit and turquoise-studded cowboy hat and boots, ducked beneath the scalloped doorframe. Where was her horse? I mused. "Nice place," the woman said with a drawl as she dusted lacy snow that had fallen from the door's edge off her shoulders. "I'm Kaitlyn Clydesdale."

Aha! I stifled a giggle. She was the horse, complete with a cascading mane of straw blonde hair and a square jaw.

Rebecca gasped. "That's . . . that's her." She slunk back a few paces, as if standing near to the woman would mark her as a traitor.

"You're Charlotte, aren't you?" Kaitlyn jutted out a tanned hand.

Instinctively, I shook with her. Strong grip, perceptive eyes. I liked her. At least I

thought I did. She radiated energy and enthusiasm.

Kaitlyn Clydesdale released my hand and roamed the tent, fingering the cheese ornaments and wine bottle labels. "Ah, the aromas. Love 'em. Exactly like I remember as a girl."

"Are you from around here?" I asked. I couldn't recall having seen her before, and she would be hard to forget.

"Lived here years ago. Moved to Texas in my twenties when I got married."

She wasn't wearing a wedding ring now.

Kaitlyn plucked a cheese card from a wheel of Vacherin Fribourg and read: "*Nutty. Melts great for soups, raclettes, and gratins.* Sounds fab." Over her shoulder, she said, "Maybe I could entice you to put together a cheese tasting party for my crew when we pass through town in a few months."

"Your crew?"

"The Do-Gooders."

I'd heard about the Do-Gooders, a volunteer organization that restored historic buildings in the Midwest. All the women wore turquoise-studded hats and turquoise-studded clothing. Their show of unity reminded me of the fabulous Red Hat Society ladies.

Rebecca whispered, "She's lying."

"Shhh."

Undaunted, she pinched my arm. "Ask her what's she doing buying the farm next to Ipo's."

I shot Rebecca a look. It wasn't like her to detest someone so out of hand, and

truthfully I wasn't picking up any bad vibes from our visitor.

"Charlotte," Kaitlyn swiveled and met my gaze. "I knew your—"

"Achoo!" A fine-boned young woman with matted black curls scuttled into the tent. Her classic black wool coat swallowed her up; her five-inch platform-heel boots looked as clumsy as army boots.

"Bless you," I said.

"Sorry." Appearing as miserable as a wet poodle, the young woman dabbed her chapped nose with a wadded-up tissue and gripped her coat at her throat.

"I told you not to come inside, Georgia," Kaitlyn said. "Go back to the car."

The young woman flinched at the imperious tone but obediently shuffled out. How she balanced on those heels was beyond me.

"Forgive me," Kaitlyn said. "That was my CFO. She's under the weather. No need to be spreading germs."

"You hired a CFO for the Do-Gooders?" I said. Having one sounded pretty formal for a regional organization.

"Oh, no. She works for Clydesdale Enterprises." Kaitlyn replaced the Vacherin Fribourg cheese information card. "That's my main business."

Rebecca elbowed me. "Told you so."

Kaitlyn eyed Rebecca. "Am I missing something? Why are you upset with me? Who are you?"

"Rebecca Zook." Rebecca threw back her shoulders with youthful exuberance. "And you—"

I rested my hand on her forearm. "My assistant believes you've purchased the cow

spread next to the Quail Ridge Honeybee Farm."

Kaitlyn smiled shrewdly. "We're in negotiations."

Her revelation surprised me. Information about a place for sale should have surfaced in The Cheese Shop, if not from Sylvie, then from any of the dozen other people who liked to congregate at the shop to swap stories.

"We'?" I said. "There's more than one of you at Clydesdale Enterprises?"

"My business partner and I. The seller is rather eager to close, so it should be final soon."

"You can't," Rebecca blurted.

"Young lady, I can do as I please."

Kaitlyn looked down her nose at Rebecca with a maliciousness that bordered on evil, and in a snap, my opinion of her changed. How rude. Nobody talked to my young friend that way. I got a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. Maybe Rebecca's concerns were well-founded. Maybe the woman intended to bury Quail Ridge Honeybee Farm. But why, for heaven's sake?

"Now, where was I?" Kaitlyn shook her head like a horse disgruntled with its rider and drew in a deep breath. "Oh, yes. Charlotte, as I was saying before, when we were interrupted." She glowered at Rebecca as though she were a gnat. "I knew your parents."

I fell back a step, shocked. Was that why she had come into our tent? Not to set up a cheese tasting for her crew but to talk about my folks? Most of what I remembered about them, I'd learned from my grandparents. I was three when they died. I had a hope chest filled with memories—my mother's linens, a copy of *Wuthering Heights*, my father's box of fishing lures, LPs of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Elvis. A therapist had told me

that with time the loss would soften, but I could feel my eyes welling with moisture.

"Such a tragedy." Kaitlyn strolled to me and patted my upper arm. "That darned cat."

I stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

Kaitlyn placed her hand on her chest; her mouth drew into a thin line. "Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"People said your cat was roaming around the car and distracted your father."

My stomach clenched as a streak of orange and white zipped across my mind. Sherbet. My cat. We'd owned a cat. Until now, I'd blocked the memory from my mind. Images flickered before my eyes. I was sitting in the backseat of our Chevrolet. Sherbet was nestled in my lap. My father was driving fast and laughing. My mother laughed, too. Wind blasted through the car. We took one of the hills like a roller coaster, and my mother said, "Whee!" I whispered to Sherbet not to be scared. My father looked over the seat and winked at me. His face was full of lightness and joy. When he turned back to face the road, there was a blur. "Horses," my mother screamed. My father swerved.

I glowered at Kaitlyn Clydesdale. "No, that's not what happened. Sherbet was in the car, yes, but she was clutched in my arms."

"Are you sure?"

I willed away tears threatening to fall. Could I be sure? Had I forged my own memory? Had I blanked out the possibility that Sherbet had bolted from my arms and made my father swerve? Any reminder of Sherbet had been removed from my grandparents' photograph albums. Had my grandmother believed Sherbet was to blame? It was my fault that we'd had a cat at all. For months, I'd begged for a kitty. I'd whined

until my parents had caved. *Oh, Sherbet. What happened to you?*

"Your mother was a darling friend," Kaitlyn went on glibly, as if she hadn't thrown an emotional boomerang into my life, and once again I grew uneasy. Who was she, anyway? Was Rebecca right to mistrust her? "We had such romps, she and I. She was a gifted singer, did you know? She would have been very proud of you and your accomplishments. Fromagerie Bessette is renowned." An alarm sounded from inside Kaitlyn's purse. She pulled out her cell phone. "Sorry, I must go. I have an appointment."

"Wait," I called, eager, even if I was perturbed with the woman, to know more about my mother, but Kaitlyn strode through the tent door without a look back.

No sooner had the door clicked shut than it reopened, and Sylvie sashayed in. At least this time she had the sense to wear a robe.

"I know something you don't know," Sylvie sang.

Refusing to rise to the bait and eager not to dwell on the event that led to my parents' deaths until I could talk to my grandmother and glean the truth, I said, "Rebecca, go back to the shop and get those platters I need for the photography shoot. We'll figure out what's up with Kaitlyn Clydesdale's plans later."

"You bet you will," Sylvie said, triumph in her tone.

At times I wished I could pull out her wispy hair, strand by strand.

"You're not going to like who her business partner is," she went on.

I strode to the buffet table cheese counter, removed everything from it, and polished it to a gleam.

Sylvie trailed me like a hard-to-lose shadow. "I heard they want to take over Providence."

"They' who?" Rebecca said.

Sylvie kept mute. Obviously she wanted me to be the one to beg for the answer.

Well, she could choke on her gossip, for all I cared. She didn't give a whit about Providence. Her main thrill in life was to upset Matthew and her twins' lives. Selfish, that's what she was. Maybe she was the partner. I could see her begging her doting mother and father for cash to buy the property so she could make a name for herself in a town that had snubbed her. Except, thanks to reckless business judgment, her parents were broke. La-di-dah.

"Who?" Rebecca demanded. "Tell us who."