

## Chapter 1

"Charlotte Bessette, you're a goner." A blissful moan escaped my lips. Had I died and gone to heaven? I took another bite of the ciabatta, spinach, and goat cheese crostini—one of many appetizers sitting on the granite counter in The Cheese Shop kitchen—and sighed again. Adding minced sun-dried tomatoes to the recipe had done the trick.

I downed the remainder of the scrumptious morsel and eyed the array that I had started at six a.m. The jalapenos packed with mascarpone and seasoned with Cajun spices had nearly seared the roof of my mouth, but the ricotta-stuffed mushrooms were a good balance. All in all, the experiment was a success. I had at least ten winning choices for the taste testing.

As I collected cartons of cream to use in the desserts I planned to make, I paused. Did I smell smoke?

I tore out of the walk-in refrigerator. Flames not only licked upward from the sauté pan on the stove, they spiraled from the twenty-five-pound bag of flour beside it.

"Fire!" I yelled to no one. I was alone in the shop. Lured by the ciabatta crostini, I had forgotten that I was frying shallots for one more dish. "Shoot, shoot, shoot." I hadn't patted the shallots dry enough. Water must have boiled a spit of oil out of the pan, which caught fire and nailed the flour bag.

"You dope, Charlotte." I knew what danger lurked in a kitchen. That would teach me to multitask. Why did I always think I could do everything...at once? Wonder Woman I was not though, at the age of seven, I had liked her costume so much that I begged and

pleaded to wear it for Halloween. What girl hadn't?

I dumped the cartons of cream on the counter, swooped to the stove, grabbed a lid, and threw it onto the saute pan to douse the flame. Then I switched off the gas beneath the burner, snatched one of the oven mitts, and batted the bag of flour. I quenched the fire, but smoke coiled toward the ceiling, and the fire alarm began to bleat.

"Dang." I chucked the oven mitt, hoisted one of the wicker stools that nestled under the counter, placed it beneath the alarm, and climbed on.

"*Sacre bleu*," a woman yelled from the front of the shop. Rebecca galloped into the kitchen. "Charlotte, I smell smoke." She skidded on her heels. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" I teetered on tiptoe, the hem of my pumpkin-colored sweater rising up my midriff, the heels of my loafers loose. "I'm trying to hit the red button." I jabbed at the darned thing with my index finger but missed my target. The smoke alarm began to howl like a banshee.

"You can't turn it off that way." My young assistant covered her ears. "You have to remove the battery."

*Swell*. Out of spite, I poked at the red button one more time before unclipping the alarm case, which came loose but remained fixed to the ceiling by its wires. I plucked at the battery, breaking a nail in the process—*double swell*—and removed the battery from its slot.

Just as the siren stopped blaring, I felt something give way beneath my feet. "Oh, no." The seat of the wicker chair burst. I let rip with a yelp, lost my grip on the alarm, and careened heels-first through the seat's hoop. The wicker and rubber matting on the floor cushioned my landing; the underside of my bare arms scraped the rim. I would have

black-and-blue bruises, but at least I hadn't broken skin, or worse, my neck.

Rebecca rushed to help, her ponytail flapping behind her, her pencil skirt preventing her lanky legs from making long strides. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Only my ego."

"What were you thinking? We have a ladder."

"Do you see it nearby?" I said. "No, you do not. I didn't have time. I had an emergency."

"Impulsive," she muttered.

"Proactive," I countered.

"Okay, okay." Rebecca offered a hand to help me out of my confinement.

Spurning her goodwill, I snuggled my feet into my loafers, and balancing both palms on the broken chair's hoop, slipped one leg out, followed by the other. I brushed bits of wicker from my clothes and tugged the hem of my sweater over my chinos. After a stunned second, I burst into giggles.

Rebecca covered her mouth with the back of her hand and sniggered. When she regained control of herself, she said, "What kind of quiche are you making—let me rephrase that—*were* you making?"

"I wasn't." Each day at Fromagerie Bessette—what the locals liked to call The Cheese Shop—we made a different quiche to sell to our customers, but I had finished the dozen long before I had started in on the wedding menu. Every October, when daylight savings ended, my inner clock went cuckoo. For weeks, I had been waking before dawn.

"I was testing out wedding appetizers."

"*Bien sûr*. But, of course."

I smiled. Ever since she had started working at the shop, Rebecca practiced her French. She loved the way my grandparents, who had owned the place before ceding it to my cousin and me, settled into their native tongue. To date, I think she had learned close to a hundred phrases.

"How is the menu coming?" she asked.

"Pretty well, except for one." The shallots—now ruined—were intended to go into a radicchio marmalade that would garnish a filo dough turnover, filled with breast of turkey and smoked Gouda.

I headed to the kitchen sink to freshen up.

"Why are there ice cream fixings on the counter?" Rebecca trailed me.

"I'm planning on trying out a few new desserts." I wasn't a caterer—I was a cheese shop owner—but when my best friend had asked me to come up with an eclectic menu for her wedding, I promised I would do my best.

"Maybe you should have waited until you had more hands to help."

I frowned. The last thing I wanted after a kitchen fiasco was sage advice from a twenty-something who was ten years younger than me. Wonder Woman wouldn't take it, would she?

"I wasn't expecting you," I said as I rinsed my hands and patted them dry on a fluffy white-and-gold-striped towel. "It's your day off, isn't it? I thought you were spending it with your fiance and his parents. You were going on a tour of Amish country."

"Speaking of desserts," she said, ineptly changing subjects, "remind me to show you an all-cheese wedding cake that I saw on the Internet."

I glanced over my shoulder. Was there trouble brewing in Romance Land? Was that

why she had come to work? "Are you okay?"

"The cake was so cool," she went on, fluttering her fingers to describe the shape. "Wheels upon wheels of assorted cheeses. Cheddar, Smoked Gouda, Cashel Blue, and Ashgrove Double Gloucester, all topped with a wedding couple carved out of cheese."

I raised an eyebrow and pursed my lips, my standard look when demanding an answer to a question.

"I'm fine," she assured me. "Really."

She didn't seem to have been crying. Maybe I was making more of her sudden arrival at the shop than I ought. I turned back to the sun-shaped mirror over the sink and assessed the damage the shock and awe of a kitchen fire had done to my appearance. Thanks to nerves, my short feathery hair had gone as flat as a pancake. I tweaked it but to no avail. Giving up, I dabbed perspiration off my face with the tip of the towel and walked back to the main shop.

I fetched a container of Brie from the glass cheese case, set it on the wooden counter, and cut it in half with a carving knife.

Rebecca scooted to my side and tapped the cheese counter with the tips of her hot pink fingernails. "Okay, truth? I don't want to go on the tour. Ever."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid I'll run into Papa. He was so shut down the last time we saw each other."

Her Amish father had been as cordial as a bale of straw. He had come to town to bring Rebecca her grandmother's shawl. They had exchanged few words. Anger and disappointment could run deep for the elders of a clan when someone like Rebecca left

the fold.

"Was I nuts not to go?" she asked.

"Sometimes you have to protect your heart."

"That's what I told my future in-laws. They seemed to understand. Do you think they understood?"

"I'm sure they did."

"Let's not talk about me anymore." Rebecca clapped her hands. "I'm here. What can I do to help?"

I loved her no-pity-parties attitude. The day I took ownership of Fromagerie Bessette from my grandparents, I had hired Rebecca. She had helped me through all the renovations. Together we had decided where the wooden display barrels would stand and what jams and other accoutrements would sit on the many shelves around the spacious room, and she had been instrumental in helping me decide on our color scheme of Tuscany gold and burgundy. I don't know what I would have done without her.

I pointed. "Open some windows and let in the fresh air."

"I'm on it." She scurried to the rear of the shop and cranked open the window beside the exit door, then flew to the front door and propped it open with the cheese-shaped doorstep. "Next?"

"Fetch some blueberries from the refrigerator."

Her gaze went from the cartons of cream in the kitchen to the Brie sitting on the cheese counter. "Are you planning to make Brie blueberry ice cream?"

I nodded. "I've been collaborating with the owner of the Igloo Ice Cream Parlor. He's a wizard with flavors."

"And he's willing to share a recipe?" Rebecca whistled.

"Actually, it's my recipe," I said as I rewrapped the remaining Brie. "He—"

"Mystery and magic abound ever since he took ownership, don't you think?"

Rebecca's eyes widened; her face flushed.

"Magic?"

"And he's very secretive. He's in and out of town all the time. What's up with that?"

"I don't have a clue." And, to be honest, I hadn't paid attention.

"He's so dishy handsome. He reminds me of Houdini, with that thick black hair and those ebony eyes."

I pushed the Brie to one side. "Rebecca Zook, if I didn't know you better, I'd say you had a crush."

"Oh, no." She crossed her heart. "I'm committed to my man. He is the best, sweetest—"

"Who's the sweetest?" Umberto Urso, our chief of police, appeared in the opened doorway.

"Not you," I teased.

"I am, too. My mother tells me so."

"She's sparing your feelings."

Urso removed his broad-brimmed hat before sauntering into the shop; otherwise, he was so tall he would have scraped the top on the upper edge of the door. As he moved toward the counter, he smoothed the front of his snug-fitting brown uniform. Had he lost a pound or two? He seemed robust and happy. He perched on one of the ladder-back chairs by the tasting counter and sniffed. "What did you burn?"

"Nothing."

"Don't kid a kidder. I'm guessing onions."

"Shallots."

"Ah, one of my favorite smells." He swatted the Genoa and Cervelat salami hanging on the silver S-hook. The group swayed to and fro. "Hey, I heard you set a wedding date."

"You heard wrong." The love of my life and I had been discussing dates. We hadn't settled on one yet. He had suggested November; I had proposed June, mainly because I didn't want to steal my best friend's thunder and get married too soon after she tied the knot. "Are you here for your usual?" In addition to cheeses and the occasional quiche, we offered sandwiches, made fresh every morning. Urso preferred a Jarlsburg with maple-infused ham on a torpedo-shaped roll. Over the last six months, I couldn't remember a day when he had missed ordering one.

He stopped the salami from swinging. "Actually, I'm going to take two of your heroes made with prosciutto, Morbier, and pesto."

*Knock me over with a feather.*

"Two." Rebecca winked. "Planning a picnic, Chief?"

"The weather is perfect for it," I said. Autumn in Ohio was one of most beautiful seasons. I loved the vistas of amber hills and the trees turning burnt orange and gold.

"So who's the girl?" Rebecca asked.

"Girl?" I echoed.

"Picnic means date," Rebecca explained.

I ogled Urso. He avoided making eye contact, but his mouth quirked up ever so

slightly.

"C'mon, who is she?" Rebecca pressed. She had no compunction when it came to Urso. She ribbed him mercilessly, as if he were her older brother. And he took it. I could banter with him only so far before he turned disagreeable.

He ran the rim of his hat brim through his fingers. "Mine to know," he said, his voice cagey.

"Will she be your plus-one at the wedding?" I said. A select group of the town's residents were invited.

"We'll have to see." He chuckled.

Not eager to pry further for fear he would think I was interested—which I most definitely was not—I grabbed a pair of the requested sandwiches from the glass case, stowed them and a pair of napkins in one of our glossy gold bags, and beckoned Urso to the cash register.

As he paid for his purchase, a group of tourists wearing purple T-shirts, with *Stomping the Grapes* inscribed in cursive writing on the front, crowded into the shop.

Behind them marched Prudence Hart, Providence's self-appointed diva. "Charlotte!" She booted the cheese-shaped wedge from beneath the door and slammed the door shut. The picture display windows rattled with a vengeance. Wagging a bony finger, Prudence made a beeline for me. The mustard-colored sheath she wore matched her dour expression. I swear, I couldn't remember Prudence ever smiling. "You won't believe what I...I..." she sputtered.

Oh, dear. I hoped she wasn't going to do what she had done during a previous visit to

the shop— pass out. I didn't have any brown paper lunch bags on hand.

"...what I"—Prudence drew in a deep breath, tapped on her toothpick-thin leg as if to regulate the intake, and exhaled—"what I heard."

"What?" Rebecca said.

I prodded her not to encourage Prudence. The woman was an uptight authoritarian who rarely came into Fromagerie Bessette unless to spread rumors or make a fuss.

"The Harvest Moon Ranch has been sold," Prudence blurted.

"Oh, no," I said. That was the site for my pal's wedding. It was a charming red ranch north of the city, with a gazebo and barn and acres of lush grounds. Would the sale cause a postponement?

"Oh, yes," Prudence went on. "I was going to buy it."

I didn't believe her for a second. She was forever blustering about purchasing this and that. She considered herself a real estate mogul in the making. So far she hadn't purchased a thing other than her dress shop, which was situated cattycorner from Fromagerie Bessette.

"Who bought it?" Rebecca said.

"That divorcée," Prudence hissed, the word as distasteful as wolfsbane.

I didn't have a clue who she meant.

"She snatched it out from under me. Why I should—" Prudence gestured as if wringing someone's neck but stopped when she spotted Urso, his head tilted, his steely gaze blazing at her. She blanched. "Oh, Chief, I didn't see you there."

How had she missed him? He was almost as large as a grizzly bear.

"I didn't mean..." Prudence hesitated. "What I should have said...I'll have my attorney

Speak to her attorney and—"

The door to The Cheese Shop swept open. The grape-leaf-shaped chimes jingled.

With murder in her eyes, Prudence bolted toward the woman who entered. "You-u-u-u!"