

## Chapter 1

"Get a move on, Charlotte Bessette," I muttered. Time and I were not fast friends. On any given day, I felt like I was behind. Rags, my sweet Ragdoll cat, twitched his tail and meowed, the little taskmaster. When my cousin Matthew and his twins moved out a few weeks ago, I made a pact with myself to refurbish each of the rooms in my Victorian home, one at a time, after work at Fromagerie Bessette and on weekends. I had a to-do list so long that it would make an obsessive person nuts. Me? Okay, I was nuts.

Seeing as many tasks were going to be messy, I had decided to convert my rarely used garage into a workshop. But before tackling the job, I needed sustenance. I stood in my kitchen preparing an appetizer that was fast becoming one of my favorites: Charlotte's Nirvana. To make the appetizer, I chose a sliver of an heirloom tomato, a hearty slice of San Joaquin Gold, which was a buttery, Cheddar-like cheese, and a portion of prosciutto. I stacked the trio on top of sourdough slathered with homemade pesto and cut it into bite-sized pieces. I popped one into my mouth, set the rest on a platter, covered them with a checkered napkin, poured a glass of water, and with Rags trailing me, traipsed to the garage . . . workshop.

The space teemed with books and boxes filled with discarded clothing bound for the homeless shelter. My mountain bike and cross-country skis—neither used in well over a year—hung on the wall. A sizable wine cooler that contained nearly sixty bottles of wine, all recommended by my savvy cousin, stood in the far corner and hummed with energy. I set the snack on a red metal cart that held my tools, then pushed everything from the center of the garage to the sides and laid out a tarp. Cool air whistled through the opened

windows and the pedestrian door to the garage, but I was too revved up to care.

I moved the Tiffany desk lamp, Chippendale side tables, and antique desk from the office to the workshop with the help of a dolly. Matthew had promised to help me repaint the office; meanwhile, I intended to repair the furniture. Rags paraded beside me. He tilted his chin with curiosity. I said, "Relax, buddy, I'm not going anywhere."

The secretary desk was first on my makeover agenda. My great-grandfather on my mother's side had purchased the desk in the early 1900s. Sometime between then and now, someone had given the desk a coat or two of murky brown paint—why was beyond me.

Intent on restoring the desk to its original beauty, I set a can of stripper and stack of sanding paper on the tarp. Next, I donned a pair of gauntlet gloves to keep my hands from becoming shoe leather, and I strapped on a pair of goggles. Using a power screwdriver, I disassembled the desk. I placed the organizer cubby, carved legs, and dovetail drawers on the tarp, and then eyed the desktop.

"I'll sand the belly first," I said to Rags. He mewed his assent.

Carefully balancing the desktop against my legs, I flipped it on its edge and lowered it to the tarp. As it landed, dust poofed into the air. When the dust settled, I spied a hidden compartment on the underside of the desk. I pushed up my goggles and wiggled open the drawer, expecting to find nothing more than a nest of spiders. Excitement rushed through me when I caught sight of a stack of letters tied with gold ribbon. Whose were they?

The single overhead garage light was not enough illumination to do the letters justice. I plugged in the Tiffany desk lamp and switched it on.

Rags nuzzled his head beneath the hem of my tattered jeans and purred: Tell

me. *What did I help you discover?*

I removed my gloves and lifted the stack of letters. I plucked the topmost and unfolded it, mindful that the stationery was delicate. My heart snagged in my chest as I scanned the words: *missing you . . . adore you . . . be together soon.*

Rags yowled.

"It's a love letter from my father to my mother," I explained. "When Dad had to go to an education convention." As a school principal, my father had traveled often to keep up with the trends. He had given my mother the same assurances that Jordan, the love of my life, had given me weeks ago. Jordan was involved in a WITSEC trial in New York, giving his testimony to put criminals away, and he might be away for a long time, but he promised we would be together soon.

*Not soon enough.*

Rags flicked me with his bushy tail.

"You're right. If I take the time to read all the letters, I'll fall behind on my project, not to mention I'll wind up a mess of tears."

Reluctantly, I inserted the love letter back into the stack with the others, but I didn't return the packet to the drawer. I grabbed a pair of Tupperware boxes, emptied them of nails and screws, dusted them with a clean rag, and deposited the letters into them. I sealed the containers and set them high on the shelves that held the rest of my tools and rags. I would read the letters another day, when I was stronger and not aching with loneliness.

"It's back to work we go," I sang while lifting Rags with both hands, my thumbs tucked beneath his forearms. I kissed him on his nose and mismatched ears. Then I

hooked him over my shoulders. He loved being carried like a rag doll, as many of his breed did, hence the name. He chugged with contentment.

Better a cat's love than no love, I mused.

For a half hour, I applied stripping fluid with a paintbrush, scraping occasionally with a curved-edge scraper when necessary. The spindles would be the hardest to clean. I shaped a wooden dowel into a sharp tool to work the grooves. I had purchased a sanding cord for the tightest turnings. When my fingers ached from cleaning the main body of the desk, I took a break. I plucked an appetizer from the plate atop the tool cart and downed it in one bite. After savoring the salty goodness, I quickly ate a second. Heaven. Rags begged for a taste of cheese. I obliged, although I never let him have more than a fingernail-sized portion. Then I recovered the platter with the napkin, hoisted the sander, and returned to work.

I was lost in a world of my own when I felt Rags grumble. Glancing up, I noticed the silhouette of a man on the shelving; his arm was raised. I whirled around, brandishing the sander like a shield.

"Whoa, cuz." Matthew backed up, arms raised, a goofy grin on his handsome face. "It's just me bearing gifts." He offered the bottle of wine he carried. "Bozzuto chenin blanc." Bozzuto was a local winery north of the town of Providence. "It's a lively wine, offering fine concentration and balance."

"Sounds delish."

"And the sweetness of the wine won't be overcome by the pungent flavor of any cheese."

I took the wine, admired the artistic label, and set the bottle on a side table. "To what

do I owe—" I glanced at my watch. Nearly seven thirty. "Oh my. Time got away from me."

"You and your projects." Matthew grinned as he ran his fingers through his tawny hair, which was in dire need of a trim.

"Is she here?"

"Right outside." He leaned out of the garage and beckoned.

Seconds later, Noelle Adams entered. "Hello, Charlotte."

I had met Noelle last month at Matthew's wedding. Willowy, with classic features, she reminded me of a French movie star, the kind that could make the hardest-hearted man swoon. She was certainly working her charms on my Ragdoll cat. He rubbed Noelle's calfskin boots with fervor.

"Hi, Noelle." I fingered the scarf I had tied around my head to prevent sawdust from sticking to my hair. "Sorry about the mess."

"Forget it. Matthew warned me. And don't fuss. You look great."

"Yeah, right."

"You do. Fresh and natural, the all-American girl. Don't forget, I know what you look like in a fabulous gown." Noelle hoisted the strap of her purse higher on her shoulder and bent to scratch Rags's ears. "Hello, gorgeous. Marry me?" Rags rumbled with motorboat intensity, the traitor. After a second, Noelle stood and tugged at the ecru wool serape she had draped dramatically over her shoulders. "What a great place you have, Charlotte." Even her voice was deeply sensual, like fine wine rolling over the tongue. "It's so nice of you to let me stay with you."

A contemporary of Matthew's, Noelle used to be a sommelier that offered her

expertise to famous restaurants in Cleveland, Chicago, and New York. Recently, she had been hired by the local Shelton Nelson Winery to help them create buzz about their business. I had offered her the guest room because the inns were full up with pre-Thanksgiving events in town, and Matthew's place was jammed with the twins, the dog, and mounds of unpacked boxes. The cottage Noelle had rented wouldn't be ready for a couple of weeks.

"Matthew said you were tweaking a few things around the house." Noelle's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Perhaps I could help. I see you mean business." She lifted the pencil-sharp dowel and sanding cord. "I've done some refinishing before. My paps was a master builder."

"You don't have to—"

"But I'd love to. I'm willing to work for my bed and board, and it'll help me stay grounded. You know what they say about busy hands." Noelle smiled with warmth that would melt icebergs. "I feel like my feet haven't touched earth for days. I've been flying around the Northeast meeting all my former contacts in person to tell them about the career change."

To snag her, the Shelton Nelson Winery must have offered her the stars.

"However, I should unpack and change before tackling this project." Noelle fingered her sheath. "These aren't exactly my furniture-stripping togs."

"I'd help, too," Matthew said, "but I've got to split. PTA meeting. I put her suitcases in the kitchen." He kissed Noelle and me good-bye.

I led Noelle back to the house, hoisted her two small suitcases, and guided her up the winding mahogany staircase. The wood creaked beneath our weight. I sighed. The steps,

too, were on my to-do list.

"Love the chandelier," she said about the grape motif fixture hanging in the foyer.

I adored everything about my home, from the Necco candy-style tiles surrounding the dormer windows on the exterior to the bay windows, quaint kitchen, and built-in shelves inside. I swung back the door to the guest room. "This will be your room."

"Mm-m-m." Noelle inhaled. "It smells good in here."

My throat clogged with emotion. Even though I had turned the twins' bedroom into an adult space, and I had decorated for Thanksgiving with gourds, colorful fall foliage, and homemade pumpkin-scented candles, I could detect the girls' youthful fragrance.

"The room is so pretty and quaint," Noelle continued. I had added a patchwork quilt, lace runners, brocade drapes, and a gold-based lamp with gold shade, which sat on a turn-of-the-century writing desk. "It's just like"—she hesitated—"when I was a girl growing up in Cleveland. I . . ." She let the sentence hang. I didn't press.

I set Noelle's overnight-style suitcase on the bed and the other on a luggage rack, and then opened the doors to the closets. "Make yourself at home. There are lots of hangers. And the drawers in the bureau are empty."

"I only brought the basics—movers are hauling the rest." She placed her cell phone and a bright pink iMac computer on the desk, and emptied her overnighter onto the bed. As the contents spilled out, she giggled. "Who am I kidding? Maybe I did bring all of my worldly goods." The items were varied—a chic leather briefcase, a silver corkscrew with a sweetheart handle that had been given as a table favor at Matthew's wedding, a book of wine references, two personal leather-bound booklets, a Montblanc pen, a Nikon camera with multiple lenses, and toiletries.

"Are you nervous about starting the job?" I asked as Noelle unzipped her other suitcase and removed clothes draped in plastic dry cleaner bags.

"Absolutely. I want to make a good impression."

I didn't think she would have to work too hard. Miss America would have a tough time competing with her.

"So much is at stake." Noelle pressed her lips together; her face clouded over.

"What exactly will you be doing for Shelton Nelson?"

"Hmmm?" She looked in my direction. "My job. Right. He wants me to get the word out about his white Burgundies. An interview piece in Wine Spectator wouldn't hurt."

"Can you do that?"

"I'm sure going to try. White Burgundies are unusual to find in this climate, but Shelton's done a lot of prep work to the soil, and he keeps the vineyards heated to prevent frost. He also ships in grapes from a few California vineyards. No shortcuts for him, he says." Her mouth quirked up. "If I can get some of my former clients to start touting the Burgundies, word of mouth plus a dose of passion will sell them to the general public." She removed elegant suits from her suitcase and hung each carefully in the closet. "I'll be hosting an auction to start the buzz. Among my other duties, I'll be guiding personal tours for collectors and throwing some fabulous multicourse dinners."

According to Matthew, Noelle was at the top of her game as a sommelier, yet she had wanted a change of pace. She had met Shelton Nelson a few months back at a tasting of his wines, and suitably impressed, had fashioned the job for herself. She had asked Matthew to tell Shelton that he would be an idiot not to hire her.

"I have to admit, I'm a little wary about being accepted by Shelton's daughter and the



manager of the winery," Noelle said. "Both have been, how can I put it nicely, a little standoffish."

"Change isn't easy."

"You can say that again, sister."

After she stowed her toiletries in the adjoining bathroom, I said, "Let's get something to eat before we do anything in the workshop. I'll throw together a fall salad with toasted pumpkin seeds and some local chèvre. Do you like cheese?"

"Adore it. All kinds. I'm most fond of triple creams. They're sinful." Noelle dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved tee shirt that said: *Life is too short to drink bad wine!* and we retreated to the kitchen. "By the way, I've heard great things about Fromagerie Bessette. The locals call it The Cheese Shop, right? I can't wait to visit and inhale the aromas."

"We'll go first thing in the morning."

Over our light dinner, I listed all the fun things to do in and around Providence in November. Hiking along Kindred Creek, taking an Amish tour, or visiting the nearby city of Columbus to see the Ohio Historical Center and the Center of Science and Industry.

"Locally, there's also the Providence Playhouse," I said. "Usually the theater puts on an eclectic array of productions, but right now, my grandmother is directing a Thanksgiving Extravaganza. Matthew's twins and their schoolmates will be reenacting the first Thanksgiving. And then there's the Thanksgiving Parade. You'll see people decorating the streets around the Village Green for the next few weeks."

"Sounds fun." Noelle promised to attend both.

An hour later, I made a dessert platter of crisp apples and slices of Roquefort, grabbed two Riedel wine tumblers and the bottle of chenin blanc that Matthew had

brought, and we returned to my makeshift workshop.

"This cheese is deliciously smoky." Noelle licked remnants off her fingertips. "Cow's milk?"

"Sheep, aged in the Combalou Caves of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon."

"There's some European law, isn't there, about Roquefort cheese only coming from Roquefort?"

"Yep. It's called protected designation of origin," I said. "The laws about importing the cheese are strict, as well. The U.S. doesn't get nearly as much Roquefort as I would like. And the tariffs? Don't get me started."

Noelle laughed.

"It's best if eaten between April and October," I added. "After a five-month ripening period."

"So we're eating it a month late? It's still excellent, in my humble opinion." She downed another piece then wiped her hands on a cocktail napkin and eyed the secretary desk. "Tell me what to do, boss."

I pointed out the various boxes on the shelves and what they held: sandpaper, tools, paintbrushes, and rags. I mentioned that she should bypass the two Tupperware containers because they held my parents' love letters. I told her about finding them in the secret drawer.

"How romantic." Noelle's eyes grew misty. "I can't imagine finding a treasure like that after all these years."

Together we stripped the desk's legs. We held them over a drip pan while daubing them with paint remover, making sure junk didn't collect beneath the T-joint in the

hollow of the leg. The buildup of paint wasn't as bad as I had expected. In less than an hour, the grain of the wood peeked through.

When we took our first break, Noelle picked up the wooden dowel I had carved into a digging tool. "I remember how my paps and I would sit on the stoop and whittle."

"Paps. Is that what you called your father?"

"No, my grandfather. My parents were . . ." She pursed her lips. "Hmm, how to describe my parents?" Her last word popped with sarcasm. "They weren't really there for me and then—" She swallowed hard. "I'm not sure if Matthew told you, but I was orphaned at the age of seven."

He hadn't, but I wouldn't have expected him to. "I'm an orphan, as well. My parents died in a car crash." My throat grew thick. "I was raised by my grandparents. They are salt of the earth."

"You were lucky. I ended up in a Catholic dump after Paps died of cancer." She swizzled the wooden dowel between her fingers. "The place wasn't all bad. I learned an incredible work ethic from the nuns."

"How's that?"

"I hate pain. It only took a couple of penitence sessions on my knees and extra duty scrubbing the bathrooms to get me in line." She twitched her nose. "I don't think I'll ever erase the scent of Lysol from my memory bank."

"How did you become involved in the world of wine?"

"When I left the orphanage at the ripe old age of eighteen, I took up bartending. A patron at the restaurant offered me the job of a lifetime to become a wine sales rep." She raised an eyebrow. "There were strings, of course, and not being the kind of gal who

wanted to go down the dating-a-married-man path, I quit, but not before I became an apprentice sommelier. Turns out I have a great nose. Matthew was my mentor." She pressed her palm to her heart. "I'm so happy for him and Meredith. Wow. I can only hope to find their kind of love."

"Tell me about the dinners you'll be throwing at the winery," I said.

"We'll set them in Shelton's private tasting room. Have you seen it?"

I hadn't, but I had heard about it. Like the cellar at Fromagerie Bessette, it was belowground, with nooks and crannies, and a fabulous dining table made of preserved redwood that Shelton had picked up in California.

"We'll feature the wines from his famous private collection."

"Why did you decide to make a career change?"

Noelle contemplated the question then said, "I wanted a fresh new start. Away from Cleveland."

"Why not in New York or another big city?"

"Bigger isn't always better." Noelle's mouth screwed up like she wanted to say more, but she didn't.

The next morning I woke to the aroma of fresh coffee. Though I was an early riser, Noelle had beaten me to the kitchen. Rags lay nestled in her lap at the kitchen table when I entered.

"He's going to leave hair on your beautiful suit," I said. The woman had exquisite clothes.

"I don't mind. I can use the love."

Rags nuzzled her, his eyes so dreamy he appeared to have been drugged with a love

potion.

"I've eaten," Noelle added. "So has Rags, which means we're ready when you are."

I had offered her a walking tour of Providence, followed by a visit to Fromagerie Bessette. She had a couple of days to sightsee before taking on her new job. I put together a quick piece of toast topped with fig jam and Rush Creek Reserve, a pasty raw cow's milk cheese, and I downed it in four bites. Divine.

A short while later, we left Noelle's BMW parked in the driveway and set off with Rags on a leash. He was one of the few cats I knew that had taken to one. Because he was a rescue cat, I think he felt safer and somehow protected.

No season thrilled me more than autumn in Providence. Spring was beautiful, with all the hope of new growth, but autumn stirred something deep inside me. The sky was a brilliant blue. Most of the leaves had turned gold or crimson. Plumes of warm breath clouded the crisp air as I pointed out the Village Square, the Congregational Church, Timothy O'Shea's Irish Pub, and some of my favorite shops. When Noelle had visited for the wedding, she had come in for the day and left before midnight.

"It's so charming," Noelle said. "I love all the people walking around, and it's not even eight A.M."

"We have lots of strollers. Many of them congregate at our local coffee bistro, Cafe au Lait, or the Country Kitchen, a diner known for its homey comfort food."

"I'm game for either . . . both." She laughed. "And the decorations are so festive."

"Our town council, mainly my grandmother, loves the Thanksgiving holiday."

For the past week, local volunteers had been decorating for the Thanksgiving holiday, hanging *We Love Providence* banners at intersections and attaching gold and

burnt orange flags to the lampposts. Soon parade stands would appear. There wouldn't be any floats in the parade, but nearly every farmer would arrive in a festooned carriage. The high school band, heavy on the brass, would march. Shops would line the sidewalks with their goods for inspection by the multitude of tourists. And my grandmother, our eloquent mayor, would give a rousing speech that would remind each of us how thankful we should be.

We purchased a couple cups of coffee from the diner and proceeded to the shop. When we entered, I spied Matthew polishing the wine bar in the annex. My assistant Rebecca, a young Amish woman who had left the fold years ago, moved about the kitchen at the rear of the shop fixing the morning's allotment of Roquefort Bosc pear quiches. In addition to cheeses, we offered a few seasonal savory delights. The Roquefort's pungency was a perfect compliment for the firm, sugary fruit.

Noelle's eyes widened with delight. "Look at your beautiful display window."

"We get into the spirit for a number of holidays."

Our grandfather, who had given the shop to Matthew and me, said appealing displays drew customers. In the front window, I had set out huge waxed wheels of Edam, each topped with a fluted vase and filled with orange-tinted silk orchids and berry branches. At the base of the vases, I had scattered pinecones and small apples. A variety of baskets held crackers and accoutrements like jams and dried fruits. The idea was that we would build similar baskets for customers, adding three cheeses to each. My suggestions for this week included three distinctly different cheeses: the ever-popular Pistol Point Cheddar from Oregon, a Salemville Amish Gorgonzola in the pretty blue box, and Snofrisk goat cheese, a tart, cream cheese-like delicacy. Of course, customers could ask for their

favorites instead.

The telephone rang. I headed to answer. Before I reached the phone, the ringing stopped.

Seconds later, Rebecca raced toward me while flagging me down with pot holders. "Charlotte, phone! Hurry." She swatted me with the pot holders. Flour dusted the air. "It's *him*. He's on hold."

*Him, as in Jordan?*

Eager to talk to him, I shoved my cup of coffee into Rebecca's hand and sprinted to the office. Rags galloped to keep pace. I swooped up the telephone. "Hello?"

Jordan said, "Good morning, sweetheart." We had spoken a mere three times since he had left town. I couldn't contact him. He needed to call me on a secure telephone, probably one of those disposable kinds that had to be tossed after one conversation. "I miss you."

My soul wrenched with longing, but I forced myself to sound happy-go-lucky. "Ditto." Rags leaped onto the desk chair and craned his neck to listen in on the conversation. He adored Jordan. I bent and placed the receiver between our ears. Rags cooed his appreciation. "How's it going?"

"Slow," Jordan said. The attorneys forbade him from revealing any particulars of the case. For his safety. And probably for mine. Jordan said if word got out that I was his fiancée, I could be in danger. The men he was trying to put away with his testimony were dangerous. They wouldn't hesitate to take me hostage. They could use my capture to coerce Jordan. The thought sent shivers down my spine. "I can't talk any longer today. Will you make sure my sister is okay?" His sister owned a pottery store in town and was

also overseeing his farm.

"You know I will. Jordan—"

"Where are you?" a man yelled from the shop.

"Charlotte!" Rebecca screamed.

The front door slammed with a crack. Had Jordan's foes found me?

I bid Jordan a hasty good-bye, grabbed a pair of scissors off the desk, and bolted from the office.

A man appeared at the junction to the shop and the hallway leading to the office. He was a fury of red—red face, red hair, and red parka—and looked like he would burst into flames if I struck a match. "I know she's here."

"She, who?" I sputtered.

"Noelle!" he brayed. "I know you're here."

"Charlotte, do something." Rebecca hovered behind the man, oven mitts crisscrossing her chest.

What could I do? A pair of scissors was no match for this enraged bull. I snagged a slender tube of Genoa salami from the S-curve holder on the tasting counter and instantly felt like an imbecile. Perhaps the Three Stooges could pull off a salami fight. Not I.

"Noelle," the man yelled again.

The door in the kitchen that led to the wine and cheese cellar burst open, and Noelle emerged carrying a wheel of cheese and a bottle of white wine. "Boyd." Her face registered shock.

"How could you leave me?" Boyd walloped his chest with his knuckles.

"I didn't leave you." Noelle's nostrils flared. Her shock morphed into fury. "We split



up months ago. I left Cleveland."

"I asked you to marry me."

"I never said yes."

"I want you to come back. I've changed."

"I haven't."

The barb struck home; the man flinched, but he quickly regrouped and moved toward her. "This is a small town."

"So?"

"You're not a small-town girl."

"Boyd . . ." Noelle set the cheese on the counter and gripped the wine bottle by the throat. I was impressed with her response. A whack with a wine bottle would have a ton more impact than a cylinder of salami. "You should go."

"What've you got up your sleeve?" he snarled.

"I'm warning you." She shot a finger at him with her left hand while raising the bottle over her shoulder with her right. "Stop harassing me. Get out of town, or else."