

Chapter 1

"Where are you taking me?" I asked. "And don't 'Hush, Charlotte' me again." I hate being blindfolded, hate not being able to see. Even as a girl, I despised it. I remembered one time when my oh-so-sly cousin coerced me into following him into a cave. We encountered shrieking bats and spiders and—*ick*—something creepy-crawly with a long tail that skittered across my foot.

"Hush, Charlotte," Delilah said. The moment I'd arrived home from work, she and Meredith, my other best friend, had kidnapped me.

"It's Thursday night, for heaven's sake. I've got to open Fromagerie Bessette early tomorrow. We have so much to do to prepare for next week's Lovers Trail event before I—"

"We're going to a party."

"A bachelorette party," Meredith added.

"Yours." Delilah pushed me at the small of my back. "Now, move it."

"Look." I tried to dig in my heels, to no avail. "I'd be game for whatever you have up your sleeves if I didn't have things to do."

Tons of things: decorations to put up and gift baskets to create for the Lovers Trail event. Not to mention all the things I needed to do for my impending nuptials: a hem to stitch, boutonnieres to fashion. Did my sweet friends care? Not a whit. They were giggling too hard to care about anything.

A brisk gust of February wind attacked me. I shivered from the cold. "Where are we?" I demanded. Delilah had escorted me out of her car a minute ago; we were on foot.

On cement. A sidewalk, I was pretty sure. I heard light traffic. I detected the faint smell of cinnamon and coffee. Were we near Café au Lait, a delicious coffeehouse designed with a French flair? I could use a cup of coffee. "At least take the blindfold off. It's tugging the back of my hair."

"No, ma'am," Delilah said.

"*Ma'am*," Meredith sniggered. "That's right. You're going to be a ma'am soon. Maybe we should continue to call you *Miss Charlotte* for a while longer." More giggles erupted from Meredith. How had Delilah talked her into this escapade? Meredith was usually the reliable and sane one. Sure, back in high school, she had been sneaky, but now? "Sounds like something right out of *Gone with the Wind*," she continued. "*Miss Charlotte*. Hmm. Which do you prefer, *Miss Charlotte* or *Mrs. Jordan Pace*?"

I didn't know who, where, or what was on the agenda for tonight, but in three days, on Sunday, I was moving forward with my life and marrying the man of my dreams—Jordan. A sizzle of desire shot through me just thinking about him. Prior to moving to Providence, Jordan had been the chef and owner of an Italian restaurant in upstate New York. One night outside the restaurant, he saw two thugs attack a third man. Without hesitating, Jordan, a former military man, sprang to the third man's defense. Days later, Jordan entered the WITSEC program to testify against the survivor, whose buddies had been the lynchpins of a gambling ring. Entering WITSEC had landed him in Providence, Ohio. Lucky me.

"This way, *Miss Charlotte*." Delilah steered me to the right.

A door opened and I breathed easier. I recognized the jingle of the chime above the door. We were entering Fromagerie Bessette. The aroma of a potent Irish Cheddar

cheese—our last sale of the day—hung in the air. I detected a hint of the quiche I'd made in the morning, too—apple bacon Gouda. It had been rich with a smoky, savory flavor.

"Let me go and tell me which way to go."

"Uh-uh," Delilah said.

"C'mon." I could navigate blindfolded through the shop without their help. I often dreamed about Fromagerie Bessette—or as the locals called it, The Cheese Shop—and its displays of cheeses, honey, mustards, and specialty crackers. Yes, I was a major cheese geek. Being a cheese shop proprietor was a dream job. I had inherited the shop from my grandparents, who had migrated from France to the States after World War II and had raised me to love the shop as much as they did.

Delilah joggled me. "Oops."

Although I would have been safe if I'd been allowed to grope along on my own, with Delilah as my guide, I instinctively reached out in front of me. Good thing I had. My foot hit something hard. "Ow." I grasped what had attacked me—a display barrel, the old oak cask kind with metal struts. "You did that on purpose."

"Did what?" Delilah guffawed.

"Shh," Meredith cooed. "Charlotte, just a few more feet."

Gingerly, I shuffled across the hardwood floor praying I wouldn't wind up with ten stubbed toes. At least I was wearing a pair of Ugg boots; they were padded and perfect for the winter. I still couldn't understand a girl wearing them in the summer, but I wasn't a fashion guru.

"Where are we headed?" I asked. "The annex?" The wine annex, which my cousin managed and stocked with some of the finest wines this side of the Rockies, was situated

to the right through a stone archway. "Ooh, are we having a wine tasting?" I was always up for one of those.

"Sort of," Meredith said.

I had known Meredith and Delilah since I was in grade school. The two of them were like night and day. Meredith was blonde and sun-kissed with freckles; she had a rosy disposition. In contrast, Delilah had dark curly hair, striking features, and a wicked sense of humor. Meredith was an elementary teacher and soon would run the Providence Liberal Arts College. She was married to my cousin, and stepmother to my pre-teen twin nieces—I referred to them as my nieces; they were really my first cousins once removed. Delilah ran The Country Kitchen diner across the street. She had returned to Providence after her career on Broadway stalled. Weekly, the three of us and a few other women went out for girls' night. I imagined tonight's bachelorette soiree was going to be an entirely different kind of event.

"What are we going to do at the party?" I said.

"It's a secret," Delilah answered.

"How many people?"

"Just a few of us."

"All girls?" I asked.

"No boys allowed," Delilah said.

"Well, almost no boys." Meredith snorted.

What had gotten into her?

A chilly wisp of air tickled my nose. Abruptly Delilah pivoted me and ushered me in the direction of the cold. Good thing I'd worn a cashmere sweater and corduroy trousers. I

knew where we were headed. Downstairs, into the cellar. My cousin and I, with Jordan's help, had installed a wine and cheese cellar. It was one of the best investments we had made. Even after cheese makers shipped wheels of cheese to us, we preferred to age some of them a tad longer.

I stepped down the stairs, drinking in the luscious perfume of cheese. The temperature in the cellar ranged from a cool fifty-five degrees to a toasty fifty-eight. Heat affects the speed with which wine and cheese age. We had painted the cellar white and had fitted it with wood racks. In addition, we had commissioned a local artist to paint a faux window with a view of the rolling hills of Providence in the eight-foot, semi-round alcove. Below the painting stood an oak buffet as well as a mosaic-inlaid table with chairs. Perfect for a small gathering.

My left foot touched the cellar floor. "C'mon, ladies, out with it. I smell something nutty with a hint of charcoal and fresh herbs. Are we having a cheese tasting party?"

I heard more tittering. Not from my guides. From other party members already in the cellar.

"Please say something," I pleaded. "Wait, do I also smell . . . suntan oil?"

Meredith brushed my arm with something furry.

I recoiled. "Ew, what is that?"

"It's a paintbrush, silly."

I moaned. "We're having an art party?" I'd heard about them. They were very au courant. "I'm not an artist," I protested. "Isn't this supposed to be all about me?"

"No, you goon," Delilah said. "This party is about all of us giving you a fabulous sendoff into married life. Get with the program."

"Don't worry," Meredith reassured me. "None of us are artists."

"You are, Meredith," Delilah chimed.

"I'm not sure about *this* kind of art." Meredith pinched me.

"What do you mean '*this kind of art*'?" I cried, truly hating being in the dark . . . about anything. "Take off my blindfold. Now!"

"Don't get snippy." Delilah released my hand and moved behind me. She started to untie the scarf she had slung around my head. "One, two, *voilà*."

"Surprise!" the other party guests yelled.

When my eyes adjusted to the light, I realized each was wearing a cream-colored artist's smock over warm winter clothing, and each held a glass of sparkling wine. A gorgeous spread of appetizers was laid out on a long table behind them: biscuits stuffed with ham, mini quiches, and one of my all-time favorites, a cranberry crusted cheese torte.

"Turn around," the women said in unison.

When I did, I couldn't believe what I saw.