

Chapter 1

I stopped dead in my tracks and listened, on full alert: a leaf fluttering in the early morning breeze, a creature skittering across the pavement; footsteps. I whirled to my right, but I couldn't see a thing. Dang. It was inky black out. The crescent moon had disappeared over an hour ago. *It's always darkest before the dawn*, my grandfather would say.

"Anybody there?" I whispered.

As if, I thought. As if someone wishing me harm would cry out, *Yes!*

Breathe, Charlotte. Doing my shallow best, I glanced at Rags, my adorable Ragdoll cat. I could make out the white of his dappled fur. He wasn't acting antsy, which meant I shouldn't, either, but sometimes the dark scared the bejeebers out of me. Why was I so jumpy? I couldn't put my finger on it. The month of May was a lovely time of year. The temperatures were growing warmer. Birds were building nests and feeding newborns. Tourists were flocking to our fair town, which meant sales at Fromagerie Bessette—what many in town call The Cheese Shop—were good. No, not just good . . . booming.

"Let's go," I said to Rags and tugged on his leash. He was one of the few cats I knew that had taken to one. I think a leash made him feel safer.

If only some big, strong person had hold of my leash.

A breeze kicked up behind me. A chill shimmied down my spine. I spun again but didn't see any sign of danger.

"Think lovely thoughts," I muttered. "Raindrops on roses." We were on our way to the shop, walking instead of driving, as we often did. What could go wrong? Maybe I

should have put on something warmer than a lacy sweater and trousers. Ah, who was I kidding? A jacket, mittens, and an ear-flapped snowcap wouldn't have been enough to warm me right now. Something was getting to me. What?

Then it dawned on me. It was the date my parents died. My shoulders tensed, my body flushed. Every year it happened. The memory of their deaths slammed into me like a thunderbolt. More than thirty years had passed, and yet that fleeting moment when the car went out of control and we crashed had changed my entire world.

A sudden death or two will do that, I thought wryly and mentally kicked myself. *Buck up!*

I forced the sound of screeching brakes and my parents' shouts from my mind and hurried ahead. I unlocked the front door of the shop and allowed Rags to cross the threshold first. "Let's switch on all these lights," I said to him. "We'll drum up good vibes. No wallowing."

I roamed the shop, drinking in the luscious aroma of cheese, drawing strength from what I, thanks to my grandparents, was able to call my own. Though the two darling people who raised me were both alive and in fine health, when my grandfather decided to retire, he turned over Fromagerie Bessette—Bessette being the family name—to my cousin and me. Ever since I moved in with my grandparents, under my grandfather's tutelage, I had learned to relish all things cheese. Prior to joining me in this venture, my cousin was a well-respected sommelier. He manages the wine annex portion of our shop.

"Not much to do, is there?" I said to Rags. Before leaving last night, I had straightened the boxes of crackers and jars of jam on the shelves, and I'd rearranged the displays on each of the slatted wine barrels. Decorative cheese knives and colorful plates

nestled among the crystal wineglasses. Funky and traditional cheese graters stood beside chalkboard-style cheese markers, all set atop a huge wheel of Grafton Clothbound Cheddar, one of my favorite cheeses when paired with a dark chocolate, like Olive and Sinclair Southern Artisan Chocolate.

Rags meowed. I was pretty sure he thought his plea was packed with meaning that I, his human, could interpret. I couldn't, of course. I wasn't even good at sign language.

"Hungry?" I asked. I took him to the office—his home away from home—and freshened his water and treats.

Rags circled on his plush pillow in the corner and settled into a ball. Not hungry.

"What should I make for today's special quiche?" I asked as I nestled into the desk chair and wakened the computer. Rags offered no inspiration. "Maybe I'll add some secret item or spice that no one can figure out. Ooh, I know! I'll make it with peanut butter and apples and a dash of nutmeg. I'll use a simple Havarti." Havarti is a semi-soft Danish cow's-milk cheese, good for melting. "That combo will throw Pèpère for a loop." My grandfather loves trying to guess ingredients. "Don't you think?"

Rags couldn't be bothered. He was already snoring.

Every day at The Cheese Shop, in addition to the vast array of cheeses we peddled, we offered slices of quiche or specialty sandwiches. When the items sold out, we didn't make more. We weren't trying to compete with The Country Kitchen diner across the street. We just wanted our customers to feel they had plenty of time to browse the shop. If they cared to, they could slip into the wine annex and eat their items at one of the mosaic-inlaid café tables.

I clicked on the email icon and reviewed all the entries. A couple of orders topped

the list. There was also an email from Jordan, my husband of three months. Subject: *I adore you*. He sent the note a half hour after I left home. *Our* home. Or rather, we were in the process of making it *ours*. We were revamping some of the bedrooms by repainting and switching out the window coverings. We were also upgrading the kitchen. We had ordered new appliances. Jordan loves to cook. So do I.

I typed a quick response. *Love you, too*, and I headed to the kitchen at the back of the shop.

An hour later, as I was removing the quiches from the oven, the aroma of baked apples, peanut butter, and cheese filling my senses, Rebecca, my twenty-something assistant, entered the shop.

"Charlotte," she called. "You'll never guess what I did!" Rebecca, who was relentlessly perky, bopped into the kitchen while tying the strings of her gold apron around her bright pink dress. "Mmm. Smells fantastic. Nutty." She had a great sense of smell. "See?" She did a twirl.

"You cut your hair."

Usually Rebecca wore her long blonde hair in a ponytail. Not anymore. A swath of bangs swooped across her forehead. She swiveled a second time to reveal the back of her head, fringed in an A-line at the nape of the neck, not all that different from the style I wore.

"It's darling," I said. "Who made you so bold?" I remember her saying that she would never cut her hair. Ever. "The deputy?"

"No." Rebecca and Deputy O'Shea had been dating for a few months. They had performed in a play a few months ago and had been inseparable ever since, other than for

work. I don't think they had gone past first base, to coin a phrase, which was so sweet and refreshing. "I won't let a man dictate how I wear my hair."

"My, my. Aren't you sassy today?"

Rebecca grinned. "I cut it because I saw this blog online—"

"You said you weren't going online anymore."

"To *shop*. I'm not going online *to shop*. And I haven't. But I like to read. Blogs especially." She flapped a hand. "Anyway, this blogger wrote that a woman should make a change to her look every few years, to keep life fresh and fun. I even added highlights. Can you tell? My hair is now officially multicolored."

I couldn't tell—the hairstylist had done a nice, subtle job—but I wouldn't burst Rebecca's bubble. When I hired her, she was an innocent right off an Amish farm, ready to spread her wings and taste all life had to offer. Within a month, she fell in love with the vastness of the Internet. She discovered clothing websites, home decorating sites, and more. Then she found TV reruns and became a mystery junkie. After that, she discovered books—everything from thrillers to classics—and movies. She was like an empty vessel ready to be filled. She had seen all the films starring Barbara Stanwyck, Meryl Streep, and Reese Witherspoon. Now she was lapping up movies featuring foreign-born actresses. I think Kate Winslet was her latest favorite, which might explain the inspiration for her haircut. Kate had cut off her curly tresses a month ago. Pictures of her with her new highlighted hairdo were popping up on covers of all the current magazines.

While I wrapped slices of quiche, Rebecca selected a wedge of Bleu Mont Dairy Bandaged Cheddar, an absolutely divine aged cheddar with caramel sweetness and a hint of mossy-grass flavor near the rind. She set it on the cutting board and carved off small

morsels, which she placed on a pretty china platter. She set the platter on the Madura gold granite counter next to the display case. We offered a tasting of cheese to our customers daily. It was one of the best ways to sell our wares. Most people couldn't resist buying a wedge of cheese if they sampled it and liked it.

"Are you excited about the big event?" Rebecca asked.

"The brain trust? Absolutely."

"All packed?"

"Yep."

"Rags, too?"

I nodded. He was going to stay with my cousin Matthew and his family. Rags's canine buddy Rocket, a French Briard that Matthew's ex-wife had given their twin daughters, would welcome Rags with open paws.

"Is Erin ready?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm sure she is."

Erin Emerald owned a spread at the north end of town called Emerald Pastures Farm, a local farmstead that had won awards for its goat cheese and now its Cheddar cheese. Erin and I had attended school together. I remembered the two of us, in fourth grade, spending a lot of time creating a historical diorama of Ohio; it involved glue and sugar cubes and giggles. Starting tomorrow, Friday, with the help of an event coordinator, Erin was putting on what was called a *brain trust* for cheese makers. About twenty people, including a few cheese makers, distributors, journalists, Jordan, and I, had been invited to participate. Jordan was invited because he knows the art of *affinage*, which is the careful practice of ripening cheese, and I was tagging along because I understood the marketing

side of cheese. The inn on the property could house half of us. In a few hours, we were going to check in. The other attendees would stay at Lavender and Lace, the bed-and-breakfast next door to my . . . *our* . . . Victorian. During the two-day affair, Erin wanted us to immerse ourselves in the world of cheese. We would talk shop and compare techniques while we stirred, cut, drained, and milled curd.

"The better question is," I said, "are you ready?" I was turning the shop over to Rebecca to manage through Sunday. "It will get busy in here."

Rebecca toyed with her hair. "Of course."

The brain trust idea had come to fruition because my grandmother, the town's mayor, had declared that, starting this year, our *annual* Cheese Festival Week would occur during the first days in May. The festival would start tonight and run until next Friday. Never one to shy away from setting up too many activities, Grandmère had enticed a number of local restaurants to offer cooking classes or specialty dinners. She had encouraged the farmers to hold creamery tours and wine tastings. Erin came to her with the brain trust idea, and Grandmère pounced on it. She had also dreamed up what she was calling the Street Scene.

For the event, a lane on each of the four main streets of Providence that girded the Village Green would be closed to traffic, allowing pedestrians to roam freely. A volunteer construction crew was putting the finishing touches on portable stages, upon which would appear singers, fiddlers, actors, and more. To cap it off, my grandmother had chosen Fromagerie Bessette to be the sponsor for the artisan cheese competition. There would be two rounds of tastings, ten artisanal cheese farmers in each round. At the end of each round, we would pick a winner. The two winners would compete a week

from tomorrow for the grand prize. Grandmère hadn't told me what the grand prize was yet. I was eager to find out.

"Let's get hustling," I said to Rebecca. "Lots to do."

We worked side by side throughout the morning. Customers came and went.

Close to eleven A.M., the front door flew open. Grandmère, looking colorful in a yellow sweater and red slacks, hurried to the tasting counter and perched on a ladder-back stool. Her face, though weathered, glowed with energy. "Charlotte, *chérie*! You will be so excited to hear."

"Hear what?"

My grandfather followed her inside. "Our Charlotte has heard it all."

"Heard what?" I glanced from one to the other.

Though Pèpère was flushed and harrumphing like a disgruntled elephant, there was a twinkle in his eye. And why shouldn't there be? He loved coming to the shop and sneaking pieces of cheese—*sneaking*, because Grandmère continually put him on a diet. Perhaps the latest regimen was working. His stomach did appear less paunchy beneath his plaid shirt, and his typically chubby cheeks looked almost lean.

"Heard what?" I repeated.

Pèpère rounded the cheese counter, clutched me by the shoulders, and kissed me, *la bise*, on each cheek. Then he plucked a piece of cheese from the tasting platter.

My grandmother *tsked*. "Etienne."

"What is wrong?" He took another and plopped it into his mouth while daring her to chastise him.

Grandmère frowned. What could she do? Pèpère was going to help out Rebecca for

the next two days. She couldn't eagle-eye him every minute. He would either have self-control or not. Most likely *not*. Grandmère turned her attention to me. "She has come."

"She, who?" I asked, intrigued.

"That woman." Grandmère waved a hand. "The cheese author. The one who writes about all the farms and cheese shops in America."

"Lara Berry?"

"*Oui*."

A thrill of excitement rushed through me. In my world, Lara Berry was a star. Years ago, she had started out as a simple cheese monger, like me, but now, in addition to being an author, she was a consultant who advised cheese makers how to market their product, and she reviewed up-and-coming farmsteads. "Where is she?"

Grandmère said, "I saw her in La Chic Boutique buying a dress." The boutique was one of two women's dress shops in town. It offered classic styles at sky-high prices. "She is lean and tall, just like on the book cover."

"Why has she come?" I asked.

Grandmère squinted. "Is she not here to attend the brain trust?"

"She's not on the list of attendees. I've got to meet her."

"You have read all her works, *non*?" Grandmère mimed opening a book. "*Sont-ils de bons livres?*"

"Yes, they are very good books. *C'est fantastique*." Occasionally my grandparents resorted to their native tongue. They migrated from France after World War II. "She is very knowledgeable." Lara Berry was the go-to cheese maven for American cheeses.

"I've seen her on talk shows, too. She has quite a sharp sense of humor."

"Do you like her?"

"Yes. Of course."

"*Bon*. Then it will not matter that she is bossy."

"Bossy?"

"*Oui*. Bossy. This is the correct word. She barks orders." This coming from my grandmother, who could bark with the best of them. Some called her the little general.

"Was Prudence being rude to her?" I asked. Prudence Hart was the owner of La Chic Boutique. A woman with very strong opinions, she could rub people the wrong way.

"Perhaps." Grandmère chuckled. "Lara would not back down."

"Good for her." I appreciated a woman who could stand her ground.

The door to the shop flew open again. The chimes jangled. Matthew, my cousin, who reminded me of a Great Dane puppy mixed with a Sheepdog, all arms and legs with a hank of hair invariably dangling down his forehead into his eyes, raced in. "Have you heard?"

I nodded. "That Lara Berry is in town? Yes." Lara not only knew her cheeses; she also knew wine. Her latest book, *Educate Your Palette: a Connoisseur's Guide to American Cheese and Wine*, was a must-read for people like Matthew and me. Thanks to Lara's research, I had discovered a wealth of new farms and creameries that put out excellent artisanal cheeses. Matthew had learned about a number of independent wineries, citing from Lara's book that at the turn of the century there had been about two thousand wineries in America; now there were over eight thousand. "Grandmère saw her—"

"No," Matthew cut me off. "That's not what I'm talking about. Have you heard about

Meredith?" His wife and my best friend. "She's pregnant!"

"What? You're kidding." I did a happy jig. "How far along is she?"

"Three months."

I stopped dancing. "Three months and neither of you said a word to me?"

"She thought if she said something, she might jinx it. We've been trying. She lost one last year."

"She what?" I yelped. She lost a baby and hadn't confided in me? What kind of friend was she? What kind of friend was I not to have sensed her pain?

Matthew shrugged. "What can I say? Everyone's got a secret."