

Chapter 1

“Who are you, and what have you done with my pal Jenna?” Bailey Bird, my best friend since high school, fisted her hands on her hips and scowled at me.

“I’m still me.” I pulled white toile from a box and arranged it at the base of the Cookbook Nook’s display window.

“No. You’re not. You’re immersed in weddings and dresses and flower arrangements, and, like, honestly you’re scaring me.”

“Boo!” I teased as I added a white floral recipe box and set it just so.

“You’re in full-on Bridezilla mode,” Bailey said. Her cheeks were nearly the same color as her cropped hot-pink sweater. “Bridezilla,” she repeated in a vampiric tone.

Bailey and I were tweaking the window display to lure more customers to the shop. We had gone with an all-white theme. White linens, white aprons, white plates, and elegant crystal with white rims. For the featured cookbooks on the main table, we’d already set out a handful that featured recipes that would make a professional or amateur wedding planner salivate. *Wedding Cakes with Lorelie: Step by Step* was visually stunning and included charts for how to increase the size of the cakes. Of course, a go-to cookbook was always *Martha Stewart’s Wedding Cakes: More Than 100 Inspiring Cakes—An Indispensable Guide for the Bride and Baker*.

“I’m no more a Bridezilla than you were.” I hadn’t spent my youth thinking about weddings. When I married my first husband, David, years ago—may he rest in peace—he’d suggested *less is more*. With a little cajoling, I’d agreed. We only invited family and a few guests. I wore a simple ecru cocktail dress and carried a bouquet of daisies, my mother’s favorite flower. Now? When I married Rhett Baxter, I wanted to do it properly. The gown. A weekend of festivities. The whole

shebang. “We only have three weeks left.” Three weeks and four days, to be exact, but who was counting?

Our wedding would take place on the last Saturday in June. Our honeymoon would occur later, in the fall, when we could go leaf-peeping and wine tasting in the upper northwest. I tucked a stray hair behind my ear, irritated that I’d forgotten to don a hair band. I was growing my hair a little longer so I could wear an updo for the event, but it was invariably falling into my face.

“I’ve got to keep my eye on the prize,” I said. Specifically, spending the rest of my life with Rhett. “To do that, I have to organize all the events.”

“You have a wedding planner.”

“Yes, but you know me. I’m very hands-on.”

Family was coming in. My sister, her husband, and children would stay with our father. My brother, who I hadn’t seen in over two years, would lodge with a buddy. Rhett’s parents and sisters had rented rooms at the Crystal Cove Inn.

“Plus, I have to keep this shop running smoothly throughout,” I added.

A few years ago, my aunt, who had made a fortune in the stock market, asked me to help her open the Cookbook Nook, a culinary bookshop located in the quaint Fisherman’s Village shopping complex, which she owned. The bookshop was her passion project. Eager to change my course, I left my advertising job in San Francisco and moved home. I adored the store. I appreciated the layout with the moveable bookshelves filled with cookbooks as well as fiction featuring food. And I loved all the other things we sold in the shop—colorful aprons, spatulas, cookie jars, salt and pepper shakers, and cooking gear for kids. My mind was always whirring with new items to stock to please our steady stream of customers, in particular, our regulars.

“Hand me that wedding plate.” I extended my right arm.

“You see? You’re giving orders like a general.” Bailey giggled. “Next thing you know, you’ll be sending all units into battle.”

“With Bride’s Dream Expo in town for the rest of this week and into next week, it might feel like we’re at war,” I joked. “Talk about a pack of Bridezillas!”

At the beginning of June every year, the expo came to Crystal Cove. Designers, photographers, florists, hoteliers, caterers, and more would be on hand to show googly-eyed brides-to-be exactly what they wanted—or rather *needed*—in their weddings.

“The plate?” I asked.

“Say please.”

“Pretty please?” I sang sweetly.

Bailey gave me the requested wedding plate as well as the matching cup and saucer. Not long after we opened the Cookbook Nook, we’d hired her. She’d turned out to be a top-notch salesperson, adept at engaging customers, and equally adept at making me laugh.

“Speaking of the expo,” Bailey said, “I can’t wait to go.”

“Are you getting married again?” I winked.

Bailey was blissfully in love with her husband, Tito Martinez, a terrific reporter for the *Crystal Cove Courier*. “You’re going this afternoon, right?”

“I am.”

“When is your final dress fitting?”

“A week from tomorrow.”

Luckily, Harmony Bold, wedding planner extraordinaire, was helping me navigate my nuptials. This afternoon, she was escorting Rhett and me to the expo so we could take a last-minute peek at everything, in case we wanted to add to our event, although practically every item we had

on our to-do lists other than finalizing entertainment had been completed.

“Enough about me.” I twirled a hand. “Let’s focus on finishing this.”

“*Psst*,” Bailey rasped. “Heads up. Incoming customers. Nine o’clock.”

A group of women in their early twenties sauntered into the shop. Each was carrying a Bride’s Dream Expo cream-colored canvas tote bag.

“Welcome,” I chimed. “Have fun browsing.”

“Whew, is it hot outside!” said the one wearing a Minnie Mouse wedding hair band with adorable white ears and veil. I bet I knew where she was planning on honeymooning. “It’s so nice to get out of the sun.”

“Is it always this hot in Crystal Cove?” one of her companions asked, cooling herself with a Bride’s Dream Expo fan. She was wearing skinny jeans and a long-sleeved, scoop-necked T-shirt with the words *Marry Me* scrawled across the front.

“No,” I said. “This is an anomaly.”

Crystal Cove was a lovely tourist destination on the coast of California south of Santa Cruz. The town was settled in the 1850s, although it wasn’t officially founded until 1883. It consisted of three crescent-shaped bays, a range of modest mountains, which defined the eastern border of the town, and usually boasted moderate Mediterranean temperatures.

“The weatherman says it will cool down tomorrow,” I added. “And a rare summer rainstorm might be in the forecast.”

The women proceeded into the shop, chatting about how pleased they were that the expo entrance fee was a measly fifteen bucks.

“By the way”—Bailey sidled over to me—“Tito thought your wedding invitation was quite nice.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Tito had no compunctions about offering his opinion. On anything. When I’d first met him, I’d thought he was a pompous, in-your-face bulldog. Good for a reporter, not for a friend. Now, however, I liked him a lot. He was quite a charming and humorous guy and treasured Bailey and their daughter with all his heart. That made him a star in my eyes.

“He liked the gilded gold border.”

Tigger, my rescue ginger cat, mewed from the top of his cat condo, agreeing on the assessment of the invitations. And why shouldn’t he? He’d had the final say, after all. Rhett and I had laughed about his participation in the selection. When we were deciding on designs, Tigger galloped across the dining room table, scattering all the invitations to the floor. The one that remained on top was the one Rhett and I settled on. It was simple, yet elegant. Like our relationship.

“How is Tito?” I asked.

“As happy as a clam.” He’d served as the editor at the *Courier* for a New York minute and, hating the responsibility, had ceded the job to another reporter who had jumped at the chance. “He’s working on a new story about graft in politics.”

“I’ll bet our illustrious mayor isn’t happy about that.”

“The story deals with politics in Silicon Valley, not here. He’ll also be doing some fluff pieces for the expo.”

“He loves doing those,” I teased.

“Not.” She snorted.

“Silverware, please.” I removed the silverware I’d installed in the display—not elegant enough—and juttled out my hand.

Bailey placed a Lenox Gorham fork, knife, and spoon in my palm. “Ahem.” She cleared her

throat on purpose. “Why didn’t I know that you’d secured CC Vineyards for your venue until your aunt told me?”

“Because we didn’t know ourselves until last week, and then I forgot to tell you. Harmony pulled out all the stops to get it. Did you know there’s a two-year waiting list for it?”

“I know!”

“Well, there was a cancelation!” I whooped with glee.

“Lucky you.” Bailey and Tito had gotten married at Baldini Vineyards, a local site with an ocean view. The CC Vineyards’ view was quite similar, but the terrace was much less formal and more in keeping with Rhett’s and my taste. Soft greens, creamy whites, and burgundies were going to be our color palette. “Are you still planning to have the out-of-towners’ dinner at Intime?” Bailey asked. She stood, lifted a silk bridal bouquet from the main display table, and brushed it against my ear.

“Stop.” I shooed her away. “Put that down.” For a bit of pizzazz, we’d set a dozen silk wedding bouquets around the shop. All the brides that were coming in were drawn to them.

Bailey obeyed and plucked her short spiky hair sassily. “So . . . are you . . . the dinner . . . at Intime?”

“Absolutely.” Intime was the French bistro that Rhett owned with partners. From the day it opened, it had garnered rave reviews and repeat customers. “Rhett has been working on the perfect menu. Onion tart appetizers. A choice of steak au poivre or rotisserie chicken. A selection of crème brûlée, chocolate soufflé, and profiteroles for dessert.”

“Yum. I’m gaining pounds imagining it.” Bailey was as slim as a reed. I doubt she’d ever put on weight. Her little girl kept her hopping.

“Yoo-hoo! I’m here.” Aunt Vera, clad in a silver caftan, waltzed into the shop. She set her

turban on the sales counter and smoothed the red hair that was fringed around her face. “Is my client here yet?” She scanned the store.

“Not that I know of.”

My aunt was my father’s older sister and had been like a mother to me since my mother had passed away. In addition to managing the shop with me, Aunt Vera offered tarot card and palm readings.

“Do you see her?” I asked.

There were only a few customers browsing the cookbooks and assorted kitchen items we stocked.

“Him,” she corrected me.