

Chapter 1

‘Bonjour, Bon appétit!’ She sat quietly observing the scene between the Head Chef and his apprentice, Silvain, wishing she could erase the nostalgia. Why hadn’t she been more attentive to the Chef de cuisine while working at the Mange de Paris, a three-star restaurant, the best in London? She had decided that it was better to work independently as a caterer instead of trying to please someone else, adhering to his rules and ideas for his satisfaction. Certainly, she would not be a puppet on a string at someone else’s restaurant. As far as she was concerned, those days were over after her departure. She remembered the nagging and scolding from the Head Chef, despite his gentle nature. It became an anthem in her mind and oh, the dreadful Chef pâtissier who always made her tremble. Oh, how she hated chocolate mousse! He was so intimidating that he became an infinite portrait in her mind. The kitchen was an endless nightmare which drove her crazy; nevertheless, she was determined to succeed. Sometimes she thought of his handsome rustic features like Hercules carved in a frozen chocolate bar, but he was more like vinegar. This strange tall man always made her emotionally upset like hot cayenne peppers because of his rigid attitude. Where was he? Did he take an early retirement? she wondered as a smile appeared across her cherry face. She giggled, distracting the couple in the far corner who gazed at her in bewilderment. Really, what happened to that chef? What had triggered those vivid memories of him? Maybe it was his godly features or his arrogance in the kitchen which gave her an upset stomach. His attitude stunk like spoiled food in the bin, and he made her life miserable like the time she drank too many icy martinis. Remembering the humiliation she endured, under his hard training and supervision, she vowed revenge.

The waiter soon interrupted her thoughts, ‘Your Salade niçoise, Madam.’

‘Eh, Silvain, I’d like the main dish and a bottle of Chateau Rosiere Blanc please.’

‘Tonight, it’s Caviar with smoked salmon. Enjoy the champagne, Madam.’

‘Thank you, Silvain.’

Giving the chef a piece of her mind would be easy. She was no longer a fearful turkey awaiting the Thanksgiving dinner but an intrepid soul who could challenge anything. She would protest against his inexcusable behaviour and report him to the Hospitality Association one day. There would be repercussions for his ill-mannered attitude which was like a bitter chocolate mousse. Regret would consume him, and she would reject his apologies or any attempts at reconciliation. If she saw him today, she promised through clenched teeth that he would not escape the embarrassment. Glancing sideways with envy at the happy couple who were now exchanging spoonfuls of chocolate mousse, this could have been her three years ago, had she not

left her fiancé at the altar like spoilt leftovers after a hangover. She had a feeling of selfishness, stupidity, arrogance and she was still known as the 'runaway bride'. Oh, how she wished she could disappear like her favourite tarte au pomme, enjoyed whenever she visited her family and friends in Burgundy. Still staring in disgust, she wondered, why had all her past memories crept into her troubled mind? She took another a drink of her wine which left her doubtful and indecisive about her next course.

Across the room unknown to her, sat that miserable Chef pâtissier, André. He came every night hoping to start a conversation with her, but her arrogant attitude made him nervous. Nevertheless, Marie Elle was a sweet distraction, and he enjoyed every glimpse of her from Table Seven. André was hypnotised at this incomparable beauty whose thoughts penetrated his heart and mind.

Chapter 2

‘André, did you enjoy the meal?’ asked the Head Chef.

‘Absolutely!’ replied André.’

‘The mousse was excellent!’

‘We are thankful to have had your expertise and Silvain is an excellent pastry chef. He even created his signature vanilla white chocolate and coconut mousse cake.’

‘That’s quite a variety, Philippe,’ said André

‘I know, but he is so creative!’ Philippe responded.

‘Have you heard from Marie Elle?’

‘Since our last encounter she hasn’t returned, and that was about two weeks ago. She is like a dish of sour grapes, unsweetened coffee and frozen pork chops. I don’t think any gentleman would be able to satisfy her. Don’t you know she usually orders Salade Niçoise with red wine and a very first for her was our special Raclette dish?’

‘Is she a widow?’ queried André.

‘Single perhaps. I don’t think Marie Elle would have a chance at the altar with any man,’ laughed Philippe hysterically.

‘What are you thinking, Andre?’

‘Can you arrange a meeting?’

‘Like a Sherlock Holmes’ mystery date?’

‘Precisely!’

‘Are you interested, André?’

‘She is my chocolate mousse, Philippe.’

After a brief conversation, the head chef and his childhood friend said farewell and went their separate ways.

André Roche’s black Bentley disappeared down the quiet street, and the Head Chef returned to his kitchen.

‘No, no, Silvain, it’s not done that way. With much patience and love, you can be excellent at this. Understood? Now watch carefully.’ Silvain observed as the Head Chef made Mousse au Chocolat served with a raspberry sauce which had every couple in London craving for more.

‘I will start over, Chef.’

Nodding in agreement and half-smiling to himself, the chef thought that his quick transformation had awarded him the title of Head Chef. Finally, he could depend on someone reliable and retire comfortably with no regrets, visiting the Mange de Paris occasionally like André Roché.

‘You are exhausted Silvain; I’ll drive you home.’

‘Thank you, Chef,’ Silvain replied.

‘Have a goodnight’s sleep. See you tomorrow at 9:00 a.m.,’ said the Head Chef.

All Silvain heard was a weird sound made by the exhausted 1970 automobile.

Couldn’t he have gotten rid of that junk? I would have done so, honourably.

Still yawning, he dashed in quickly, shutting the door behind him and was soon consumed in a deep sleep.

Silvain arrived early the next morning. ‘What’s today’s menu Chef?’

‘Raclette, ham and baguettes, Salade Niçoise and Gougères with white wine; Caviar, smoked salmon with red wine, *Mousse au Chocolat* with a bottle cognac specially requested by Mr and Mrs Rosenbery who are celebrating their thirty year anniversary and they’ve made reservations for forty guests.’

‘What about Marie Elle?’ asked Silvain.

‘Put her at Table Seven,’ the Head Chef ordered.

That arrogant woman who is always dissatisfied; it has been two weeks since their altercation. How was she? he wondered. She hadn’t made any reservations or peered inquisitively through the window. She seemed to have disappeared from the city. Was she ill or perhaps a sudden death? Marie Elle was a storm in all its versatility. What had caused such a dramatic and drastic transformation? he wondered. He remembered her apprenticeship. Was he too strict or was it André who made her constantly cry like the time he cleaned many onions to make Vegetables à la Grecque with white wine, olive oil and green herbs or perhaps her wrong

wedding decision and the title as ‘the runaway bride’? Despite hearing rumours of her bankruptcy, he wanted to believe that all was well, but from his current observation, she seemed unhappy and lonely. What a fate for a promising young woman!

‘Chef, I have prepared a few dishes for today’s menu. Please taste them?’ Silvain asked. ‘Hmm! Fantastic, Silvain. Today you have transformed from a man to an excellent chef. I’m very proud of you!’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

The elderly couple was laughing with family and friends, enjoying every single dish on the menu. They were congratulated on their thirtieth anniversary by the restaurant’s staff.

‘This was the ideal place for us; well-known for creating our favourite chocolate mousse dessert,’ said Mr Rosenbery.

Suddenly, Marie Elle reappeared out of thin air. She seemed pale and worn from her depression of the past two weeks.

She glanced at table three; it was occupied by the Rosenbergs. ‘How dare them! Didn’t they think I’d return? Only two weeks and they reserve my table! I am a regular here, more considerably a shareholder. Huh!’

Walking toward her, the waiter trembled as he braced for impact.

Silvain grabbed the waiter’s hand. ‘Let me.’

She looked as if she were about to scream but suddenly turned toward the entrance. Chez Claude was across the street so she would settle there for the very first time, her grand entrance worthy of the World Book of Records.

‘Marie Elle,’ he whispered, which made her freeze like a popsicle.

‘Are you following me?’ she asked.

‘Please return, I’ve missed you.’ He hoped he seemed genuinely convincing. She wore a smudged smile, like creamy yoghurt smeared on a toddler’s face.

‘Oh really, Silvain.’

‘Yes, we have missed you, including Head Chef.’

‘Is he apologetic? I’m not!’

‘What has passed, let it pass,’ Silvain retorted. ‘I am happy that you’ve decided to return. I have reserved a special table for you. Please follow me, Madam.’

‘Tonight’s menu was fantastic; I have never eaten so much food!’ she exclaimed.

‘Would you like to try our special dessert tonight?’

‘What is it?’

‘It is a surprise. I think you’ll love it.’

Suddenly, a man appeared towering over her.

She looked up.

‘Excuse me, Sir, are you lost?’

‘I am indeed lost for words. According to my schedule, I made reservations for this table.’

‘Really, but’

‘I have always sat here,’ interrupted the man. Was he lying? Perhaps not.

Then she remembered the gentleman with the moustache who never spoke to anyone except the Head Chef and sometimes Silvain. Who was he? Now clean shaven, she tried not to look at his handsome face.

He seemed familiar. Had she encountered him before? She couldn’t tell. Deciding it was best to leave; she summoned the waiter and left the cheque.

‘Marie Elle, wait; why are you leaving?’ asked Silvain.

‘Apparently, there’s a misunderstanding, Silvain. Why did you ask me to sit here?’

‘I’m sorry for this, Madam. Don’t leave,’ he interjected.

Immediately the man said, ‘I don’t like dining alone; I’d rather be accompanied by anyone.’ She managed to give a wry smile and sat obediently like a daughter adhering to her father’s wishes.

‘Your chocolate mousse, Madam.’

‘I didn’t order that,’ Marie Elle replied.

‘But it is tonight’s special dessert,’ said Silvain.

She gathered her thoughts, staring closely at the man. Who was he and where had she seen him?

‘Sir, your specialty, *Mousse au Chocolat*.’

‘Splendid, Silvain.’ He was now staring gently at her. Should he tell her who he was and apologise or wait and see how the night unfolded.

How dare he look at her in such a manner and how dare he love chocolate mousse.

She glanced at the elderly couple at the nearby table who were engaged in a delightful conversation about the menu and their next celebration.

‘Are you alright, Miss?’ asked the man sitting with her.

How could he ask such a ridiculous question? She wondered whether she should respond arrogantly or politely.

‘I am fine, thank you, Sir,’ she replied.

‘I see that you haven’t tried your chocolate mousse,’ he said.

‘Would you like to have it, Sir?’ she questioned.

His heart jolted. ‘I beg your pardon? I have had it for many years and never got tired of this delicacy. You should have some often, Madam,’ he said.

‘Oh no, I am not fond of chocolate at all,’ she murmured.

Staring into her repulsive grey eyes, he replied, ‘Try it.’

Taking a spoonful, it dissolved quickly like cotton candy in her mouth leaving her speechless.

‘Oh my god!’ she cried, ‘This is an excellent dessert!’

‘I’m glad you love it, Marie Elle,’ he responded.

Was she mistaken? Did he say her name?

It must have been her imagination.