

Chapter One

Lauren Abbott pressed both palms against the cool stainless-steel surface of the dishwasher, savoring the sharp chill against her steamy hands, then snapped it shut and pushed the ‘on’ button. She lifted the left cuff of her chef jacket and glanced at her watch. Ten fifteen.

A few deep breaths were futile in providing extra strength to finish out a seemingly endless shift. She’d still have to scrub down the metal counters and disinfect them. The appeal of working as a chef in a successful suburban D.C. restaurant had expired months ago. Of course, back then, it hadn’t exactly been a choice.

“It’s gonna be bad out there,” said Bryan, who’d started in the kitchen only a week before. His face tensed as he cast a glance through the kitchen window toward the swirling flakes of snow. “We shoudda left hours ago.”

Lauren followed his gaze and silently agreed. How much more white glitter would fall before she made it back into her own bed?

A faint aroma of grilled salmon still laced the air. The kitchen was calmer now as the evening wound down. The familiar voice of Chef Daniel, the owner of the Fins and Feathers Restaurant, rumbled from the dining room. He was shouting again, his complaints unintelligible, apart from the way he emphasized

particular words, like *always*, *customer*, and *waiting*. He was often red-faced, from his bushy black eyebrows down to his white collar, as if in the midst of a colossal catastrophe even when there was none. Even when the customers had left over an hour ago amidst reports of seven inches of snow. By this time, the doors would be locked and the restaurant empty, except for the busboys who blew out candles and pulled the soiled linen cloths off the tables and into a pile.

Christmas Eve, and Chef Daniel's holiday special, flame-broiled surf and turf at prix fixe, had gone over like gangbusters, snowfall or not. No employee had taken a break all evening. Instead, each one did the work of three. Lauren leaned back against a counter as exhaustion rippled through her, down her back and pooled in her legs. A glance outside confirmed a steady swirl, like a cloak of dust in the blackness of the night.

Chef Daniel barged back into the kitchen with a loud bang through the swinging metal doors. Lauren flinched. He appeared more subdued now, though he still growled a few decibels lower about something that had happened at table eight. Lauren straightened and put her rag back into motion. Three other white-clad cooks scurried around the kitchen mopping up and putting food into the large double-door walk-in refrigerator. They tried to stay out of his target range until he returned to the dining room with an impatient stride.

A tap at the window caught Lauren's attention. She glanced up and saw the outline of a man peering in through the steam on the panes and the backdrop of swirling snowflakes. She squinted, then a wave of recognition. Mark, bundled in a parka, a wooly cap encasing his head. What was he doing here on Christmas Eve in the snow?

Lauren shot him a perplexed look with a tilt of her head, but her hands kept moving, changing the circular motion to back and

forth strokes. Mark mimed a steering wheel turning as his troubled brown eyes beseeched her. He wanted to drive her home.

She shook her head and mouthed, “Thanks, though,” adding a friendly smile. She couldn’t. It was too soon. And she had no idea what time she’d be finished for the night. She caught his eyes through the frosty glass and shrugged with her palms up. She pointed to her watch, hoping he’d understand.

His shoulders drooped but he nodded then mouthed back the words, “Be careful.” He waved and trudged away.

Her eyes burned for a moment, though no tears followed. Instead, a lump spread in her throat and began to throb. She swallowed. Mark had come out on a snowy night to accompany her home. That was Mark. Part of her wanted to let him, to allow him to navigate the icy roads while she rested against the car seat, entrusting her safety to him.

But she knew she couldn’t. They would only start talking again about their relationship and it would all lead nowhere. Again. She wasn’t ready because, well, what could she tell him? She didn’t know herself, so how could she explain anything to him? Right now, she just needed a break from it all. From this restaurant. And from him.

She swiped the rag over the newly-disinfected stainless-steel prep table again and blinked. Why did seeing Mark always do that to her? Fill her with guilt and regret so heavy it felt like she’d swallowed lead?

Finally, she was able to work the buttons down the left side of her white smock, pull the toque off her head, and slip into her down coat. Only one thing would do now, to slide between the sheets of her bed and leave the difficult questions of her life for a few hours. That was her preferred way to spend that particular Christmas Eve.



Mark sighed, his breath rising from an unsearchable cavern inside his body and filling the night air with a puff of vapor. He wasn't surprised that Lauren had refused to leave with him. He would have waited for her to get off work. He didn't want her out in this tempest. He himself had fish-tailed more than once on the route from his house to the Fins and Feathers. A fill-in job, she had claimed, until she figured out what she wanted to do with the next chapter of her life.

That next chapter opened up a hollow space inside him. It was the one thing that drove him to his knees.

Large, sticky flakes of snow swirled faster now, clinging to his knit hat and his face. It would have been futile for him to insist that Lauren come with him just because he was worried. She could be stubborn and would have been infuriated at his interference. She had to do this herself. And whatever passage she was traveling, whatever discovery she felt she had to make alone, he'd have to let her find it. He didn't have a choice.

The Lauren he'd dated for the last two years would have greeted him with a soft smile, worried that he'd come out in the snow. Once he'd safely accompanied her home, she'd have insisted on warming him up with some spiced hot cider.

In the last six months or more he'd seen small fissures open up between them. Little by little a distance appeared in her gaze. He'd helplessly watched her pull away in steady increments until finally she said the dreaded words. She needed space.

Space, well, he could give her that if she wanted it. He only hoped the space didn't stretch wider and wider until he could no longer even see her silhouette.

The cars in the parking lot were already coated with at least two inches of snow. Icy flakes pelted against his bare face. He blinked against those that hurtled into his eyes. His wool cap was already coated with crusty flakes, as was his collar, and a few rogue flakes slipped underneath, stinging his neck with wet cold.

He squinted into the darkness. It took him a moment to identify Lauren's blue Kia SUV, wrapped like a cake in fluffy, white frosting. Hopefully, its tires and weight would get her home safely. He'd send a prayer. It was all he could do.

Despite his dark thoughts, Mark smiled. She'd looked so cute in her chef garb, her shoulder-length brown hair mostly tucked up into the puffy, white cap, though numerous strands had escaped on either side. A frown followed. Best not to let his thoughts go there.

He gripped an ice scraper in one hand. The stiff brush on one end was perfect for a night like this. A year earlier Lauren had broken hers scraping ice off the windshield after a particularly nasty ice storm. As far as he knew, she hadn't replaced it, and this was the first snowfall of the year. She wouldn't realize until she arrived dog-tired at a snow-covered car that she'd never bought a new snow scraper.

He brushed the snow off of the windshield first, long strokes piling a stack of wet flakes toward the street. Then he circled the car and took care of the back and side windows, finally finishing off with the mirrors. There would be more snow accumulated before she drove home, but this would help. He set the scraper on the windshield above the wipers and turned to locate his own car.

Over the last year, each time she returned from a tour in France, she seemed to miss him less, allowed less time to catch up and reconnect. He missed her terribly when she and her friend Bree left for two weeks at a time to lead tourist trips to France with their travel business, *Le Bon Voyage*. But when she returned with a

slowly fading light in her eyes, the one that used to say how much she missed him, it was more painful than her absence had been.

Driving slowly through the net of hurtling snowflakes, he gritted his teeth and told himself she'd be okay. She'd get home, resilient, capable woman that she was. Woman who no longer needed him. Or wanted him.

She'd be okay, that was true. But without Lauren, would he?



On the way home Lauren spun wheels at stoplights, fishtailed at turns, and held her breath for much of the journey. Finally, she maneuvered her car into what she guessed was her parking space in front of her apartment, though she wasn't absolutely sure. There weren't even tracks in the snow to indicate a road beneath.

She killed the motor and sat for a moment in her car, relishing the cocoon of stillness only a snowfall could offer. When she was little, she used to bundle up and go outside just to listen to the silence and see what kind of monster tracks she could create stomping around in freshly fallen snow. Her older sister, Michelle, never understood why she was so drawn to the silent wonderland. Lauren would stay outside as long as she could until the chill seeped into her parka. Or until her mother came out in her old red ski jacket to join her, tossing a snowball at her and making tracks of her own before urging her inside.

Lauren pushed the frozen car door and stepped out to begin the trek toward her apartment building. Icy flakes filled her shoes and dampened her socks. Mark had kindly left her a scraper, bless him. Otherwise she'd still be in the Fins and Feathers parking lot, finding creative ways to clean off her buried and frozen car.

She shivered and tried to pick up the pace across the caked sidewalk toward the building, but nearly slipped several times. At

last, she slid into the warm hallway and rubbed her hands briskly to reboot her circulation. She mounted the stairs, feeling like she was seventy instead of thirty-two. Next to her apartment door was the crouched form of a child.

“Hey, Shelby. What are you doing there?” She smiled down at her neighbor’s ten-year-old daughter who peered up at her from under a pink and yellow knit hat. “It’s so late. Did you forget your key?”

“Yeah. I was at my friend’s house until ten then got a ride. My mom said she’d beat me home, but she didn’t. I guess she’s running errands or something.” Shelby pulled herself up and yanked off the cap from her round face, causing her wavy blond hair to spring up in all directions.

A likely explanation. Shelby’s mom was late more often than not. But it was Christmas Eve. And it was eleven-thirty. The poor kid had been waiting an hour or more.

“Come on inside, don’t wait in the hall.” Lauren unlocked the door and ushered the girl into the darkened living room. She hit the switch and a sudden splash of light filled the room. “Maybe if you had a nice necklace with your key on it you wouldn’t ever lose it.” She pulled off her down jacket and helped Shelby with hers. “Want something to snack on until your mom gets home?”

“Sure.”

While Lauren rummaged in the cupboards searching for those fig cookies she always had on hand, Shelby wandered around the kitchen observing and commenting. “Your canisters match your towels. It’s cute. I like this one with the flowers.” She touched the top of the largest of three canisters. “Everything’s so clean, it looks like you never cook in here. You’re a professional cook, though, aren’t you?”

Lauren's head was partially inside the cupboard. "I saw them in here just yesterday." She pulled back from the cupboard and turned back to Shelby. "I'm a chef, not the main one. Sometimes I like cooking for myself and my friends when I'm not working at a restaurant. But I'm not motivated now, since I do it all day."

"I understand. I would feel the same." Shelby nodded, her head bobbing emphatically. She turned and continued exploring the bright corners of Lauren's kitchen, the refinished vintage dish cupboard, a side table laden with a massive food processor that didn't fit anywhere else in the kitchen, botanical framed drawings on the wall.

Shelby had always struck Lauren like a half-child half-adult, one moment using the tone and vocabulary of an adult, the next moment, erupting in childlike glee over something simple. Lauren smiled, as warmth stirred inside her for the girl. Shelby reminded her so much of herself at that age. And for some of the same reasons.

"My mom is always late. This morning I reminded her that tomorrow was Christmas and she should be home on time, but I guess that didn't work."

Where were those crackers? There, wedged in the back of the cupboard. Well, maybe some almond butter on the crackers would do the trick. Lauren opened the fridge and pulled out a jar of almond butter. "Maybe your mom is finishing up her Christmas shopping for *your* gifts. Ever think of that?"

"Yeah, maybe." Shelby had turned to watch Lauren. She rocked back and forth on her shoes, hands in her pockets.

Lauren ventured weakly, "It'll make you more independent to be on your own every now and then, don't you think?" She'd try the positive approach, since Shelby's mother wasn't likely to change. In fairness, the woman was probably doing the best she could with a job and a child to raise alone. And she *had* left Shelby a key.

Shelby shot Lauren a look as if to clearly say that she wasn't buying it. "I'm only ten. I have time to be independent."

Lauren laughed. "You're right. Here, sit at the table. This is almond butter on the crackers."

"You don't have any cookies?"

"No, I'm out of the fig ones, and the others have too much sugar. On top of that, and if I had them, I'd eat them all." That wasn't the reason she didn't make cookies. Of course, she'd never *buy* them, but she hadn't a teaspoon of Christmas spirit that year. She'd forgone the usual lavish holiday decorations, lights, Christmas cookie exchanges, and continuous Christmas music.

"But you're skinny. You can have some cookies and you'll probably stay skinny. This cracker isn't as good as a cookie. It's dry. Tastes like—I dunno, sawdust or something. A cake of sawdust. The almond isn't bad, though."

Lauren sighed and slid down in the chair, with her own almond cracker on a napkin in front of her. She should have gotten a few things from the grocery store that week. The next day was Christmas and nothing would be open. Wish she'd thought of that.

"Sorry, it's all I've got. Hey, how about an apple? Almond butter is real good on apples." Shelby shook her head.

Lauren slathered more almond butter on a cracker, suddenly ravenous. "What are you guys doing for Christmas?" She glanced up in time to see Shelby delicately rescue an oily blob of almond butter about to drip off of her cracker.

The child made a face and said in a dramatic voice, "Aunt *Alice*. We'll be having Christmas dinner with *her*. She's okay, but she talks *all* the time—I mean, a lot—about people I don't know, especially ones dying of cancer or sick with some other disease. I don't know

why she likes to talk about that. It's depressing." She rolled her eyes and shuddered. It was funny coming from a ten-year-old. "Are you going somewhere?"

"First, I'm going to relax." Lauren leaned back in her chair. "I just worked a twelve-hour shift and I'm almost asleep as we speak. Tomorrow I'll be meeting some friends." She hoped she was, anyway. Diane hadn't confirmed yet and it was nearly midnight. Her best friend, Bree, had left the day before for Arizona with her boyfriend to visit his mother for the holidays.

And Mark—she flinched as something twisted inside—she'd normally be spending the holiday with him, maybe with his parents too. Not being there with him or with his loving, stable parents—people who accepted her and loved her like their own—was a palpable loss she'd rather not dwell on.

She took a breath and tried to brighten. This year was simply off by a few degrees and would get better. So, she'd just stay alone with the complete disorientation that had colored her life for over a year.

"So, what happened to the guy who used to come over all the time?" Shelby must have been reading her mind. "You guys break up?" Lauren stared back at the girl and something on her face must have sent a warning. "Oh, never mind. I'm nosy. My mom always says that."

Lauren frowned and sighed. "No, it's okay. He has other things to do this year." Yeah, like wonder why she won't celebrate Christmas with him. She hated hurting him, especially after dating for so long. She just couldn't keep going without being sure. It was the humane thing, to let him go and to find herself. By herself.

"Where do your parents live?" Shelby was on a roll with questions capable of jamming a blade into all of Lauren's wounds.

“They’re dead.” She thought she saw Shelby flinch. “Long time ago.” That helped to soften the truth for the hearer, even if it didn’t for Lauren herself.

Lauren heard a knock on the door. Relief coursed through her. She might get to sleep before midnight after all. “That’s probably your mom.” She slid the chair back and went to the door, hoping it wasn’t Mark.

Shelby’s mother stood there, an annoyed look on her face, as if Lauren had stolen her daughter instead of giving her refuge. Her tired face was ruddy with cold, mapped with tiny lines that belied the youthful puff of golden hair. “Hi, Eileen. Yes, she’s here.”

Shelby’s mother stepped into the apartment as Shelby emerged from the kitchen to greet her. “I’m sorry, Baby. I had to drive real slow to get here without slipping and having an accident. I was worried when I didn’t see you at home. You musta lost your key again.” She turned to Lauren. “Thanks for letting her stay a bit.”

“Oh, she was no trouble at all.”

“Merry Christmas, Lauren,” said Shelby and her mother nodded in agreement with a pinched smile.

After the door shut behind them Lauren stood silent for several seconds. The stillness of the apartment was almost too loud. How would she stand it for the next three days until the restaurant opened again? The restaurant was the refuge she hated, but a refuge nonetheless. She’d find some friends still in town or browse for housewares or décor. That always lifted her spirits.

Restless, Lauren walked to the window then back to the dining table. Her small apartment was bathed in creamy yellow and turquoise, her favorite colors. She’d coordinated everything in a way that was both beautiful and cozy. Normally, it was a comfort to be there. Her nest. She went abruptly to the window and back again,

needing to break the ice block of sad inertia. But first, sleep. Things would look clearer, more hopeful, in the morning.

She cast a glance toward the foyer where the phone sat on the small table. The fading memory of his face had been flitting in and out of her thoughts for the last few days. She'd listened to his message a number of times and it always brought a smile and a tiny shiver.

Lauren stared at the phone then slowly walked toward it. She pushed the small arrow where the messages were played. She listened again to the voice she hadn't heard in person for months.

"Bonjour, Laur-hen." The musical accent always made her smile. "Merry Chreesmas to you, my dearest. I hope you are at a party but steel thinking of me. Will you come to France when the wea-der ees better? I invite you, when you want. Whenever you want. *Joyeux Noël. Heureuses fêtes, ma Chère.*"

Jean-Pierre. He'd left the message three days earlier, but she'd been too busy at the restaurant to call him back. They spoke a couple of times a month, sometimes in French, other times in English. She knew he wanted to practice his English with her and had shown improvement since she met him seven months earlier during her last trip to France, her final trip with Bree.

Another puzzle in her existence, Jean-Pierre. Was *he* the reason she felt as if a continent lay between her and Mark? Had Jean-Pierre somehow caused her to feel so little for the man she, at one time, thought she'd marry?

For sure, it was a puzzle. And she didn't have a clue to its answer. So, here she was, no more Bon Voyage, no Mark, and no France. Only the shadowy persistence of a charming Frenchman.

A Promise in Provence