

## *Artistic License*

### Chapter One

I was a basket case. Not your everyday “Gee, I’m a little uptight, maybe I should have a glass of wine to calm down” basket case. Nope. Not me. I’m talking real-life crazy. I’m talking nutcase—chicken with its head cut off, wacko, psycho, neurotic—in bilingual terms, loco.

My first show was opening in seven hours, and I was a little nervous. That’s putting it mildly. Truth be told, I was a nervous wreck. My skin was blotchy, pimples were sprouting, and I was retaining water. Limp, unenthusiastic curls hung from my head, an unusual feat for someone who was normally a dead ringer for Little Orphan Annie. Minus the little and minus the red. My hair was more of a soft, sable color if you were lucky enough to catch it in a dim, candlelit room. Otherwise it was brown... the definition of brown. Not the rich color of bare mountain peaks in autumn, and not the color of warm buttered toast or cafe’ mocha. Just plain mousy brown. The color of swamp muck.

But I digress. My first venture into the sculpting world was just around the corner and I was too nervous to stand still. I was driving Mark, the manager and overseer of The Outlook, the very upscale gallery where my work was being displayed, unequivocally nuts. And that’s not easy to do. This man never got ruffled. He reminded me of the soldiers who stand guard outside Buckingham Palace. The ones who never move a muscle no matter how many times you wave a hand in front of their face or whisper dirty words in their ear or describe an itch that must drive them crazy. No matter what—rain, sleet, or snow—these guys remain starch stiff, staring stoically ahead, which seems, in my opinion, to be an awful waste of healthy male bodies. I mean, let’s be honest. The queen is moving up in years, and certainly no one would ever accuse her of being “a looker.” So, what exactly are they guarding?

This isn’t to say that Mark is cold or aloof or anything like that. In fact, he’s quite the opposite. He is warm and sweet, and has a gentle sense about him. No matter how crazy the outside world, a strong current of peace seems to flow through him. Mark believes in quiet leadership. He can, and often does, slip into a room unannounced

and calmly assess a situation without speaking a word. Then he stands completely still until the chaos and noise subsides. And surprisingly, it does. It's an amazing thing to watch. He doesn't scream or yell or, my personal favorite, offer a middle finger salute. Before you know it, though, the room is so quiet, you can hear people breathing. After several moments, he gives a few succinct directions and suddenly, once again, the earth is spinning smoothly on its axis.

But that was before *my* show. Much to Mark's distress, I'd been hovering over his back and breathing down his neck for the past five hours, questioning his every move and decision. Which was a joke, trust me. I knew next to nothing about staging an art show. But that didn't matter, and it certainly didn't stop me. They say that ignorance is bliss, and I guess, in this situation, it was. Empowered by my naiveté, I suggested new colors for the walls, loudly discussed alternate traffic flow patterns, and hotly debated the placement of my different pieces.

We were now in the midst of a rather heated discussion regarding the titles for my sculptures. He was completely unperturbed and I was pulling my hair out.

"It's simply a way to focus your art, Maggie. The titles you've given your pieces are simple and direct, but they need more. People respond to patterns and organization; it's what the mind is built to do. The mind will seek order, even in the midst of chaos."

"You're saying my work is chaos?"

"Of course not. And don't try and put words in my mouth. I simply meant that it is easier for people to walk into a room filled with art and appreciate what they're seeing if there is a unifying theme."

I took a deep breath and tried to get a hold of myself. Mark was staring at me with a half-amused, half-irritated expression, and I wondered again for the thousandth time how it was possible that the two of us managed to get along. We were polar opposites, and I do mean opposites. Where Mark was quiet, organized, and neat to the umpteenth degree, I was noisy, random, and sloppy. Mark was compactly built, lean but not skinny, with a body that spoke well-modulated volumes about order

and discipline. On the other hand, I managed to be bony and soft at the same time. I don't think a muscle would dare show up on my body. What would be the purpose? I'd have them slacking off in no time. I'm exaggerating, of course. Given all the molding I do, my upper body was actually rather strong, but I was still a long way from boasting a chiseled physique.

"Why can't they just walk in and observe, appreciate and buy?"

He shook his head. "Maggie, we're good friends, right?"

"I think so," I agreed cautiously.

"Then go home. It's after twelve. Eat lunch, pour yourself a glass of wine, take a hot bath, and relax. Put this out of your mind for the next few hours. I'll take good care of everything." He picked up my hand and reassuringly squeezed it. "Remember, this is my show, too. It reflects my name and my reputation, also. Believe it or not, I want everything to be as perfect as you do."

I looked into those gentle blue eyes and sighed. "I've been a bitch, haven't I?"

Mark smiled. "You're a little on edge."

I threw up my hands. "Okay, you win. Group them; tag them, and theme the whole lot of them. Just don't make it look like a Martha Stewart 'Crafts in Clay' show."

He grinned. "I'll do my best. Go home, take a nap or whatever you do to relax, and come back this evening ready to drink champagne."

I put my arms around him and kissed his cheek. "Why are all the good men taken?"

