

The Ruthless Rice

By Ana T. Drew

Chapter 1

I stand on tiptoe and crane my neck. “That’s it, I’m getting a periscope for the next parade!”

Next to me, Gabriel is completely engrossed in the charming extravaganza. I pout, annoyed. Outdoor processions are so much more fun for someone like him because he’s tall enough to see over people’s heads! Don’t get me wrong—I’m not complaining about my boyfriend being tall. I’m just stating a fact.

Gabriel points to my sneakers. “Next time, wear your platform shoes.”

“They’re uncomfortable.”

“Climb on my shoulders?” He flashes a smile. “You’ll see everything, and I’ll get a workout. Win-win.”

Though tempted, I shake my head, reluctant to draw attention. I prefer to lurk in the background and observe, thank you very much. My sisters are like me, even Flo. The only adult in the family who enjoys standing out in a crowd is my grandmother Rose. She lives to be noticed. That’s fine for her current activities and even desirable as an elected queen of our town, Beldoc. But it might pose a problem the day she gets her license to become a PI.

“Julie, stand on my feet,” Gabriel says.

I look at his sturdy shoes and take him up on the offer.

Ah, finally! I can see!

The Fête du Riz is winding its way down the Boulevard d’Émile Combes where we stand, surrounded by a compact crowd. The exuberant, joyously nostalgic procession displays every generation of Arlesians, all decked out in eighteenth-century costumes.

The men wear hats and formal suits with ties or bow ties. Almost all the women wear the iconic *Arlésienne* dress. It consists of a long skirt, lace breastplate, pretty shawl, choker with the Provençal cross, and, last but not least, a flirty mini headdress that sits high on the head.

Rose owns an *Arlésienne* and often wears it when on official duty as Queen of Beldoc.

The delicious smell of churros reaches my nose and overrides all other thought. I sniff the air around me. The scent must be coming from a food truck somewhere behind us. The moment I realize this, I know exactly what my boyfriend and I will do next. *Find that truck!* Because Julie Cavallo, the sophisticated pastry chef trained at the Cordon Bleu school in Paris, simply can’t resist the olfactory call of deep-fried dough.

The rumbling of wheels and clanking of metal redirect my attention to the parade. Colorful floats glide onto the boulevard. Kids and grownups alike cheer with delight. Decorated with all things Provençal such as bees, lavender, rosemary and olives, the floats celebrate the flavors of southern life.

A marching band follows, playing their *galoubets-tambourins*—Provençal flute-and-drum sets.

“Look, Julie, cowboys!” Gabriel exclaims.

I follow his gaze to the line of dashing Camargue cowboys, their horses neatly trotting. My head is far from the only one to turn in that direction. A hush falls over the boisterous crowd as a dozen of these mounted *gardians* make their entrance amid the pageantry of the parade. Dressed in their traditional attire of black hats, crisp white shirts, embroidered vests and dark trousers tucked into tall leather boots with rounded toes, they ooze rugged charm and pride in their heritage.

Their white horses prance with a grace that matches that of their riders. From my elevated position atop Gabriel's feet, I listen to the rhythmic click-clack of hooves and gawk at the cowboys. Their hats are tipped at a uniquely debonair angle, casting shadows on their faces tanned by a life in the open air.

One of the riders is paler than the others. I take a closer look at him, and my heart skips a beat.

Can it be? Is this really the elusive man I've been trying to track down for years? Am I looking at the man responsible for my mother's death? *Yes, I think so.*

"It's him," I whisper to Gabriel, my voice trembling.

"Who?" he asks.

"The beach house contractor."

There's a brief pause. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

He tilts his head toward mine. "Where? Point with your chin."

"The third gardian from our side," I say, already moving. "We have to follow him!"

We push our way through the throng, dodging small children and sidestepping enthusiastic festivalgoers. The crowd thickens, making it harder to keep the riders in sight.

I glance back at Gabriel, my blood boiling with urgency. "Keep up!"

"I'm right behind you!"

As we weave through the sea of people, I do my best to keep my eyes locked on the man who's now at the back of the group of cowboys. He turns his head and looks over his shoulder as if he senses our pursuit. My heart pounds in my chest.

I can't lose him. Not again!

The parade turns a corner, and the crowd surges, pushing us back. I lose sight of the riders for a moment. Sticky, nauseating panic flares in my stomach. I grab Gabriel's hand tightly and pull him forward with renewed urgency.

"There!" he gasps, spotting the horses again.

The boulevard narrows, funneling the parade and the crowd into a tighter space. We press on. My shoulders brush against strangers, my breath comes in strained gasps. Gabriel stays close. His eyes are fixed ahead, and his hand is clasping mine.

"Julie, watch out!" he warns.

We dodge two small kids.

The riders start to pick up speed. We accelerate, too, but the crowd around us continues to grow. As does my frustration. *What if he gets away?*

We reach a particularly dense cluster of people. Gabriel steps in front of me and tries to push through, but the mass of bodies blocking our path seems to solidify into an impenetrable wall. I frantically scan the area for an opening. There is none. When I turn back, my heart drops as I see the riders vanish one by one around the sharp bend.

“Nooo!” I yell in helpless rage.

Tears of frustration well up, and I slam a fist into my palm.

Gabriel puts a hand on my shoulder. “Julie, we’ll find him.”

I wipe away the tears. “I can’t believe I lost him again. He was right there!”

“Let’s try the side streets.”

I nod, fighting defeatism with all I have. We turn away from the main boulevard and duck into a narrow alley that runs parallel to the parade route. The noise of the crowd fades, replaced by the echo of our footsteps against the cobblestones. A glimmer of hope returns.

Gabriel points to another alley that curves back toward the main route. “We can cut through here.”

“Let’s hurry!”

We streak down the alley flanked by nondescript buildings that loom over us on either side. As we approach its end, the distant sounds of the procession grow louder. My pulse quickens. *There’s a chance we might catch up.*

We burst out onto the main street and find ourselves at the edge of the crowd. The parade is still underway, but the riders are nowhere to be seen. I squint, straining to find them as I catch my breath.

“Do you see him?” I ask Gabriel.

He shakes his head. “He’s gone. All the guardians are gone.”

I let out an angry curse.

He squeezes my hand. “We’ll find him, Julie! We’re getting closer. Next time, we won’t let him slip away.”

I want to believe him, to take comfort in his words. But after nineteen years of chasing a man as elusive as a ghost, it’s hard to hold onto hope. The thought of another failed attempt fills me with trepidation.

Will I ever catch him?

Doubt consumes me, but I push it away. I’ll never give up. I’ll never stop looking.

And, maybe, just maybe, next time I won’t let him get away.

Chapter 2

Eric boxes up the last of the éclairs, while I collect the payment. We watch the customer leave with a satisfied smile. She's shopped here before. Not quite a regular yet but getting there.

The thought brings a smile to my face, chasing the concerns.

My sous chef turns to me. "We're doing great so far today, Chef!"

"We are." I lean against the counter. "But it's not today that worries me."

Eric raises an eyebrow. "You're still having doubts about Ritzy Rice? Why? You're going to come out on top."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is," he counters. "A prestigious culinary competition right here in our hometown was an opportunity not to be missed. So, you signed up—"

"No, you and Gabriel browbeat me into signing up," I correct him.

"And I'm not going to apologize for that. You'll thank us later."

"Only if I win," I point out. "If I don't, this whole thing could come back to bite me."

I don't spell it out, but Eric knows as well as I do that *The Rampal Guide to the Gastronomic Gems of Provence* can make or break a business.

He wipes the counter. "Your two recipes for the competition are terrific. You've got this."

I'll be making a rosemary and honey Camargue red rice pudding for the first round and an Arborio rice and almond milk flan for the second. Eric and I spent the last week perfecting the recipes. We also had everyone in our entourage taste the successive iterations and give us feedback. If my execution is flawless, I believe I do have a chance. But if my nerves get the better of me...

"You have nothing to worry about, Chef," Eric insists.

I chew on my lip. "Are the potential rewards really worth the risk? Am I right to put my business, and our livelihoods, on the line?"

"If you win, it'll be a game changer for us," he says. "Julie's Gluten-Free Delights in the *Rampal Guide* with a glowing review and five lavender sprigs? Imagine the sales boost! We'll have people lining up outside the shop."

"But what if I fail? One bad review from Seraphin Rampal could ruin us."

Eric dismisses my fears with a casual wave of his hand. "You're overthinking it, Chef."

"Remember Ugo Drugeon and his fancy restaurant in Cavaillon? It went from always full to half empty overnight, and all because Rampal stripped him of two lavender sprigs in one go!"

Eric rolls his eyes. "It's a temporary effect, I'm sure. If Chef Drugeon lowers his prices, his customers will return. He just needs to ride out the storm."

"Maybe you're right," I say. "Gabriel and I actually like the food he makes."

He casts a look at the door. "Let's taste the flan again while we're alone to remind you why you're going to win."

We each take a spoonful.

I let the creamy texture and delicate flavors melt in my mouth. "It's pretty good."

He scoffs. "It's *incredible*. Trust me, Rampal will be blown away."

I set a dreamy gaze on the wall. “If your prediction comes true, we could hang the certificate right here next to the window, fire Flo, and hire a motivated full-time shop assistant.”

“A full-time salesperson would be gre— Did you just say, ‘fire Flo?’”

“I should’ve fired her months ago.”

He knits his eyebrows. “But she’s your little sister, and she’s fun, and she needs this part-time job.”

“What she needs is to work up the courage to tell her boss at the gallery to give her a full-time contract.”

“Then why don’t you wait until does that, and only fire her if the gallery says yes?”

“Because, if she asks and they say yes, I won’t get to tell her ‘You’re fired!’,” I explain. “She’ll text me ‘I quit!’ the second she signs her full-time contract.”

He shakes his head. “Nah, she’ll call you. It’s a matter of courtesy.”

“This is Florence Cavallo we’re talking about,” I remind him, “the woman who most of the time acts like I work for her, and not the other way around.”

He considers my words. “True. Anyway, I’ve been meaning to ask: Was Gabriel able to ID the gardian from the Fête du Riz?”

I groan. “He’s working on it.”

“Do you have a theory yet? Would you like to bounce some ideas off FERJ?”

I shake my head. FERJ is what we call our little detective group, including Flo, Eric, my grandmother Rose and yours truly, Julie—hence the acronym. All of us are amateurs. Well, except for Rose, who can be considered a semipro, as she’s been taking an online PI course for over a year and hopes to get her license soon.

Right on cue, Rose sails into the shop with her spaniel, Lady, trotting beside her. She gives me a barrage of happy licks. I’m talking about Lady, of course.

Rose blows an air-kiss to Eric and me. “Julie, you need to come with me right now!”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, alarmed.

“It’s Victor,” she replies. “I’m mobilizing everyone I can to attend the municipal council meeting.”

Lady yips in support.

Eric gives me a reassuring nod. “Go ahead, Chef. I’ve got things under control, and Flo should be here any minute now.”

“All right.” I untie my apron.

Rose is already halfway out the door.

I hurry to catch up, nearly tripping over Lady. “Will you tell me what exactly is going on?”

“Our dear mayor is planning to ruin the rice festival in Beldoc!” Rose practically spits with rage.

“What? How?”

“That fool wants to radically change the way we celebrate it! You see, Provençal traditions aren’t good enough for him.”

Here we go again.

Every now and then, the mayor of Beldoc, Victor Jacquet, tries to force-feed his idea of modernity to our small town. It often backfires. His Christmas tree ban was a total fiasco. The public urinal in front of Magda’s shop resulted in a catfight at the council meeting, and the

subsequent removal of said urinal. The refractory denizens of Beldoc push back every time, and Victor caves in, loath to risk his seat in the next election.

Fun fact: the younger, bra-burning hippie version of Rose would've applauded Victor's efforts. But like many, Grandma has grown more conservative with age—and more appreciative of all the unnecessary things that give a place a soul.

That's partly why she entered the traditional Queens of Provence pageant, and why she ran as Victor's challenger for mayor of Beldoc—the main reason being that she needed the money. Rose was elected Queen of Beldoc. Victor managed to stay on as mayor. And so, Rose became the leader of the opposition. True to her title, she makes it a point to oppose Victor at every turn.

“Hasn't our mayor learned anything from his previous debacles?” I wonder aloud as we join Igor and Magda waiting outside.

Igor sighs. “Apparently not.”

Rose shakes her fist in the direction of the town hall. “And he chose this special month of September, the Camargue rice month, to annoy us again!”

“This protest better be quick,” Magda says. “I've left Leslie in charge.”

Leslie moved to Beldoc two months ago in early July. Magda hired her less than two weeks ago at the end of August.

“Weren't you satisfied with her performance?” I ask Magda, lowering my voice.

“I am,” she confirms. “Her prior experience shows. But minding two shops at once is hard. Even for me it was a challenge, and I'm the best salesperson in the universe.”

“Our protest will take as long as it needs,” Rose declares, adopting her Gran Boss tone. “The people of Beldoc deserve our best effort.”

Magda checks her watch. “*My* protest will take forty-five minutes. After that, the people of Beldoc are on their own.”

Chapter 3

Our protest group snowballs as we march toward the town hall. Rose's cronies join us, looking like they're ready to storm the Bastille. Shop owners who have skin in the game, a young reporter from *Beldoc Live* with a camera dangling from her neck, and a bunch of concerned citizens all flock to our cause. By the time we reach the council room, we're a full-fledged mob.

We burst in with a cacophony of excited voices and waving hands. Victor looks up from the notes in front of him. When he spots Rose among the protesters, he narrows his eyes. Chantal, his unfazed secretary, ushers us to the vacant seats.

"Rose and uh... everyone," Victor says, "I'm glad you could join us."

"No, you're not," Rose snaps. "You scheduled this meeting last night, hoping I wouldn't see the email in time to make it."

She hands Lady to her bestie Sarah, strides to the front, and stands with her hands akimbo. "Let's hear your latest bright idea."

"I thought it was time to modernize the rice festival," Victor says.

Magda stands up. "You mean ruin it?"

"How do you propose to modernize our festival, Mayor?" Igor asks politely.

Victor adjusts his glasses. "For example, instead of the boat parade, we'll host an international seminar on decolonizing rice production around the world as part of the intersectional struggle against imperialism."

"Indeed, nothing says 'festival' like a PowerPoint with graphs," Igor teases him gently.

The room erupts in laughter.

Victor, desperate to regain control, gestures to a man sitting by his side. "This is our consultant from Paris, Romain Chauvet. He plans events."

Chauvet nods to us with an air of self-importance that makes Victoria Beckham appear humble. He's tall, thin as a reed, and impeccably dressed. His hair is faux disheveled. Trendy eyeglasses complete the look of a man who spends more time in art galleries than at country fairs. He's styled himself so that no one would think he grew up anywhere near a rice field.

"Thank you, Victor," Chauvet says to the mayor, before turning back to the room. "Distinguished fellow humans, I'm thrilled to be here today!"

What's wrong with ladies and gentlemen?

Next to me, Magda whispers something to Igor, but all I can make out is "Parisian snob."

"It is time to bring your Camargue rice festival into the modern era!" Chauvet enthuses. "Your mayor and I see this year's celebrations as an opportunity to replace the narrow-minded local stereotypes with the broad-minded global ones."

Igor whispers to Magda and me, "Is it me, or does he want the Camargue rice festival without the Camargue in it?"

"The events we've planned include the antihegemonic seminar that Victor mentioned," Chauvet goes on, "but also exhibitions on the ecofeminism of Afghanistan's poppy fields, the toxic masculinity of Europe's weekend barbecues, and so much more!"

The crowd remains silent, processing his buzzwords.

“We’ve budgeted two evenings of musical activism,” Chauvet adds.

Since no one cheers, Victor fills the awkward lull. “It’s time to look beyond the local and embrace the global!”

The room boos.

Igor leans over to me. “Could this be a prank?”

“I’m afraid they’re serious,” I say.

Believing he’s on a roll, Chauvet continues. “There will be interactive installations where visitors can immerse themselves in the history of rice through the prism of class, race, and gender.”

“Boring!” Magda shouts.

People laugh.

“I think I speak for everyone here,” Rose chimes in, “when I say that we prefer our usual ways of celebrating rice month.”

“Well, then you all need to be educated,” Chauvet says.

I stare at him, impressed. He’s so unshaken in his belief that he knows better than us how we should celebrate Camargue rice it’s almost endearing.

“And to kick off the Ritzy Rice culinary competition,” he says, “we’ll have an expert who’ll deconstruct the reactionary narratives and open our minds to new global perspectives.”

Rose clears her throat. “Let’s put this proposed lecture to a vote. I know how much Victor values democracy, so I’m sure he’s totally fine with it.”

Chauvet sends Victor a *Mayday!* look.

Victor shifts uncomfortably in his seat but doesn’t dare to object.

Rose turns to the room. “All in favor of this educational experience?”

Not a single hand goes up.

Chauvet looks around, visibly thrown. His smugness shrinks while Rose’s expands in beautifully inverse proportion.

She grins. “And all opposed?”

Every hand in the room shoots up. Even Victor’s loyal secretary, Chantal, lifts her hand. His deputy, Clothilde, has both hands in the air.

“Motion carried!” Rose declares triumphantly. “The lecture is off the agenda of Ritzy Rice.”

“Here in the South,” Magda says to the consultant. “We don’t deconstruct our rice. We eat it.”

Laughter ripples through the room. Rose sits down.

“Well, that was unfortunate,” Chauvet says. “I’ll have to find another slot in the festival program for the lecture. We might have to cancel the farandole.”

The room erupts again. Canceling the favorite folk dance of Provence isn’t something the Beldocians can be strong-armed into accepting. Loud voices overlap, all speaking at once. Once again, Rose leads the charge. Victor is fuming. Chauvet adjusts his glasses, looking more and more like a lost boy. Clothilde tries to defuse the situation but fails.

Maybe I can do it.

I stand up to command attention. “Did you know that the Ritzy Rice contestants will be making sushi, pilaf, chili con carne, and all sorts of international dishes? Global perspectives guaranteed!”

Chauvet lifts his eyes skyward as if he's losing patience with us hicks. "You can't cook your way out of bourgeois small-mindedness, madame!"

"What a load of—" I clamp a hand over my mouth.

Zip it, Julie! Better not to rattle our mayor's cage any more than Rose has already done.

"We don't want this year's rice month to be another boring ode to the glorious past," Victor jumps in. "I want Beldoc to drink the tonic of disruption!"

"More like Kool-Aid," I mutter.

Chauvet points a finger at me. "That, right there, is exactly the reactionary attitude we need to move away from!"

"What did I do?" I flash my palms in a show of innocence.

Curling his lip, the consultant turns to Victor. "Monsieur Jacquet, you commissioned a plan, and I delivered one. But your townsfolk aren't ideologically ripe for it."

"Then help them ripen!" Victor pleads.

"I'll do what I can, but I don't deal in miracles."

Victor's shoulders slump in defeat as he looks from Rose to me and then to the rest of the room. "We'll keep the farandole, the boat parade, and the food market, but we'll also host most of Monsieur Chauvet's events. Deal?"

I know an olive branch when I see one. "That sounds great," I say quickly, before Rose can intervene. "Thanks for being so democratic, *Monsieur le Maire!*"

He responds with a weary smile.

Chantal claps. "The meeting is adjourned! Thank you, everyone!"

As we leave the town hall, Igor turns to Rose. "You think Victor will keep his word?"

"Yes," Grandma replies. "He has many flaws, but underhandedness isn't one of them."