

SEEDS OF PASSION

Chapter One

Isabella Martinque, on the way to her first day of work at the National Mustard Museum, came within a foot – more like six inches to be precise – of killing a handsome young man in the prime of his youth.

Luckily for both Isabella and the young man, the right front bumper of her 1993 Toyota Tercel caught only the tattered brown leather suitcase he was carrying in his left hand, propelling it onto the shoulder where it opened and spilled out its contents. Socks, underwear, jeans, a few shirts, and several books were strewn along the side of Highway 78 about a quarter mile outside the village of Mount Horeb.

Isabella had been preoccupied with her new job as chef-in-residence at the Mustard Museum. Her brain was racing, conjuring up new and unique recipes for the golden condiment. *Mustard crème brûlée. Eggplant à la Dijon. Fig and mustard coulis.*

She was not paying attention to her driving and knows it. Still, why was this man walking on the wrong side of the road? You walk facing oncoming traffic, everyone knows that.

Jolted from her musings on the challenge of developing recipes at the world's largest collection of mustards and mustard memorabilia, Isabella jumped on the brakes and brought her rust bucket to a dead stop. She had caught a glimpse of the dusty-haired pedestrian seconds before impact.

She spun herself around in the seat and let out a breath of relief when she saw the young man standing in the road, shaking his fist at her. Isabella thought briefly about driving off and leaving the young man to fend for himself. But she knew that would be wrong. So she got out of the car and walked towards him. She would apologize and be on her way.

He stopped shaking his fist and stood with hands on hips, as a stern teacher would pose before imposing harsh discipline on a misbehaving student. She caught the intense look from his piercing green eyes but immediately zeroed in on his quivering lips that opened ever so slightly to reveal the most perfect and brilliant white teeth she had ever seen.

He took off his hat, a Boston Red Sox baseball cap, and ran his fingers through waves of chestnut hair. From fifty yards away, Isabella could see his anger subside as he sprouted a gentle smile and laughed. "Ma'am, that is some kind of driving you do."

Isabella was taken aback. She was ready to defend herself, to warn the young man of the dangers of walking on the wrong side of the road. Then she looked at her watch and realized that she had no time for chit chat.

“I’m really sorry, sir. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Can I help you with anything? Can I give you a ride?”

“Ma’am, that’s four questions so I should probably talk to my lawyer before answering.”

Isabella froze in a pool of perspiration.

He laughed again. “Ma’am, I’m just kidding. I’m fine and you should get to where you’re going. You must have something important to do. And I have to walk.”

“Are you sure?”

“A pleasure meeting you, ma’am. And I do apologize for shaking my fist at you. That was uncalled for. You get on your way now.”

With that unexpected sendoff, Isabella wiped the beads of perspiration from the back of her neck and got back in her car. *Who is he? Good looking, in a dusty kind of way.* Her thoughts turned back to cooking with mustard and the job she had so desperately wanted, so desperately needed.

Isabella had splurged on a manicure and a pedicure. She knew she had no business spending what little money she had on such luxuries but she wanted to make a good impression. Her hair, raven black and turned smartly at the shoulders, exuded a modest elegance and professionalism. The only problem was that she didn’t believe it. Isabella saw herself as a failure, at life, at love, at everything. Maybe this job at the prestigious National Mustard Museum would change things around for her.

The Curator had told her not to worry about dressing up for the job but Isabella could not resist the sunflower yellow spaghetti strap cami and chocolate tencel gaucho she found at “Her Closet,” Mount Horeb’s stylish women’s clothing boutique. Seventy dollars – on sale – but worth every penny (she hoped).

Not for a single moment did Isabella imagine that her quickened pulse and oozing pores might have been brought on by something more than the oppressive heat and stress of the day. No, it never crossed her mind that she was showing all of the outward signs of primal, raw, burning desire. Subconsciously, perhaps, but still real. *Who was that man?*

Isabella parked behind the Museum. From a hanger in the back seat she took her chef’s tunic, starched white with her name embroidered in gold on the pocket. And her chef’s toque, too, the fluffy white hat that she had earned through years of hard work.

A chunky little redhead, with a nose three sizes too small for her swollen pink face, greeted her at the back door. “You must be our little cook. I’m Phyllis Comstock, chief condiment counselor. I’m in charge of making our visitors comfortable, happy, and eager to buy mustard.”

Isabella hated that word: *cook*. She was a professionally trained chef. She had studied at the Culinary Institute of America and worked in two three-star restaurants, or maybe it was three two-star restaurants. Whatever.

“I’m Isabella Martinique, the new *chef*.”

The squat redhead looked her over, up and down, with a savage critical stare, and then rolled her eyes. “So is that what today’s fashionable chefs are wearing?”

“Nice to meet you, too, Phyllis,” said Isabella, with a newly found sense of defiance.

I’m a chef! I’m not going to be pushed around, put down, or demeaned by anyone. The Curator hired me and I will not disappoint him. I will develop the most exciting, the most imaginative, the most delicious recipes to pay homage to the greatest condiment in the world. I won’t let the Curator down. I won’t let myself down. Most of all, I won’t let my little boy down!

As Isabella passed through the doorway to the Mustard Museum, the dusty stranger in the Boston Red Sox baseball cap turned onto the main road into town. He took a deep breath and surveyed what lay ahead. He saw before him the glistening white water tower that proclaimed the name of the village below: MOUNT HOREB. He knew that he was only minutes away from the place that had been calling to him for nearly three years.

Phyllis brought Isabella into the break room and introduced her to the other condiment counselors. “Okay, everyone, this is the cook the curator told us about. What’s your name again?”

“Isabella. Isabella Martinique. If you don’t mind, I’m not a cook. I am the Mustard Museum’s chef.”

The counselors shared “the look” and mouthed the words to each other: “la-de-da.”

That’s when Isabella Martinique first met Claudia Counsell, Serena Shokas, and Daphne Ames, three women of varying sizes, shapes, temperaments, and virtues. She

didn't know it then but one would become a friend for life, one a friend for only the moment, and the other a fierce and bitter rival.

"I'm Claudia, the good witch," said Claudia Counsell, rising to extend a hand to Isabella. "Don't pay any attention to Phyllis, she was born unpleasant."

"And I'm Serena but I'm anything but serene, dearie." Serena Shokas didn't speak; she shrieked. It wasn't her fault, just one of those God-given voices that somehow escaped quality control at the baby factory.

"That leaves me, the lovely and luscious Daphne Ames." That was no exaggeration. Daphne Ames possessed perfect skin, perfect hair, and a body that made men cry. Isabella wondered: what on earth is this gorgeous woman doing here?

"I know what you're thinking," said Daphne, "what is this perfect specimen of feminine splendor doing in a place like this? I'll tell you, Izzie. Can we call you 'Izzie'?"

Isabella hated that name but figured she had enough on her plate with the whole "chef" business.

"A lot of famous people come through here," said Daphne, "including movie stars and Hollywood producers. I have as good a chance of being discovered here as I do if I moved out to L.A. Without the California high cost of living."

"And she can still eat all the bratwursts she wants," sniped Phyllis.

"Very true, Phyl," said Daphne, "but it doesn't seem to show up on me like it does on some of you farm girls." Daphne pointed first to her size six waist and then poked Phyllis's hefty paunch.

Isabella wanted no part of this kind of banter.

"By the way, Izzie," asked Claudia, "if you're really an 'Isabella,' where's your Ferdinand?"

Phyllis, Claudia, and Serena all laughed but Daphne just shook her head. She didn't grasp the obvious reference to Christopher Columbus, King Ferdinand, and Queen Isabella. She didn't grasp a lot of other things, too.

It wasn't funny for Isabella either but for a very different reason. There had been a Ferdinand – Fernando Miguel Rivera – the father of Isabella's six-year old boy, Tony. Fernando had been a brilliant second year medical student when Isabella met him and their love came on as quickly as the turning cape of a Barcelona matador. Technically, Fernando may still be Tony's father but no one knows for sure. On the morning of little Tony's second birthday, Fernando drove to the grocery to pick up the birthday cake and no one has seen him since.

“Let’s go, you hussies,” said Phyllis, “it’s time to open. There’s already a crowd of mustard fanatics lined up on the sidewalk.”

Mount Horeb’s Fab Four, as the curator called them, rose as an army ready for battle, ready for their holy crusade to spread the gleaming golden condiment on the tongues of all who would enter this sacred temple of mustard.

“Sorry, I forget,” said Phyllis, tossing an envelope at Isabella, “this is from the curator.”

Isabella Martinique, unsettled, unsure, and under a mountain of stress, opened the envelope to find this message from the curator:

My Dear Isabella on Your First Day,

This museum is of the heart. When you find yourself wondering what to do next, do not look at the dishes that great chefs have prepared. Look into your soul and the great dishes that you will create.

My advice to you: take the seeds into your hand and caress them. They are seeds of passion for all who crush them with unquestioning love.

The Curator

Isabella Martinique donned her chef’s coat and toque. She looked at the shelves of mustard seeds, vinegars, and spices. She surveyed the knives, the bowls, the pans, and all the equipment waiting for her artistry. She then sucked in a deep breath and walked, head high, into the museum. She had finally arrived at her lifelong destination.

Only a few yards away, the dusty stranger who had walked more than nine hundred miles over the course of four soul-searching weeks, entered the front door of the National Mustard Museum, dropped his suitcase, and fell to his knees. He, too, had arrived at his destination.