

Tab 1

# Prose, Pinot & Provolone: A Book Club Mystery

Allie Pairington

For Sarah.

Who deserves all the nonsense she desires.

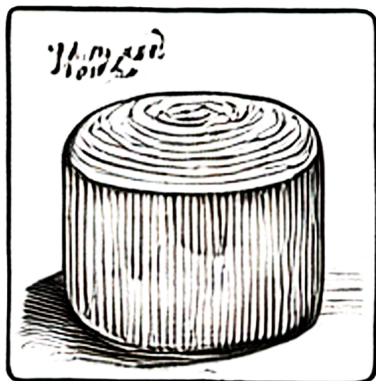
This novel was written entirely by an LLM (generative AI). The minimum possible effort was given to plot, character development, pacing, editing, or pun censorship. I literally did not read any of the generated text before I sent it to the printer. It probably will take you longer to read this than it did to create it. You have truly reached the bottom of the barrel, and I'm not sure how you got ahold of this book. You should probably burn it and/or compost it.



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# Chapter 1: A Sharp Beginning



Mari Paige flipped the sign on the door of Bound Together from "Closed" to "Open" with a flourish that belied her fifty-two years. The morning sun streamed through the bay windows, casting golden light across her carefully arranged display of mystery novels. Today's selection featured prominently at eye level: *Death by Decoupage*, the latest from cozy mystery darling Amelia Thornberry, which the Novel Sippers

would be discussing this evening.

"Perfect," Mari whispered, adjusting a hardcover so the knife on its cover caught the light just so. Running her own bookstore had been her dream since college, but it had taken a divorce at forty-eight to finally give her the courage—or perhaps the desperation—to make it happen.

The bell above the door chimed as she made her way to the small counter at the back of the store, where a glass-fronted refrigerator displayed a modest but curated selection of local cheeses. She'd added the cheese counter six months ago, and it had quickly become a favorite among her regular customers. Books and cheese, Mari often said, were civilization's greatest gifts to introverts.

"Morning, book wizard!" called a familiar voice. Trish Martinez bustled in, her librarian's tote bag bulging with flyers. At fifty, Trish had the energy of someone decades younger and an encyclopedic knowledge of mystery novels that even Mari, a lifelong devotee, found intimidating.

"Right on time," Mari said, accepting the stack of library event notices Trish handed over. "I'll put these by the register."

"Those are the ones advertising the mystery author workshop next month," Trish said, then lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Between us, I've heard a rumor that Victoria Sterling might be coming to town around then. Can you imagine? *The Victoria Sterling!*"

Mari's heart skipped. Victoria Sterling was her literary hero, creator of the Isabel Greene detective series featuring a middle-aged sleuth who managed anxiety with medication and solved crimes while sampling rare cheeses. The parallels to Mari's own life weren't lost on her; Sterling's books had helped her through the darkest days of her divorce.

"That's just a rumor, though," Trish added, tempering Mari's excitement. "Nothing confirmed."

"Still worth hoping for," Mari replied, arranging the flyers in a neat stack. "Are we still on for tonight's discussion? I've prepared some discussion questions that I think will really get everyone talking."

"Wouldn't miss it," Trish said, wandering toward the mystery section. "I've got some thoughts about the red herrings in chapter three that nearly had me throwing the book across the room."

Mari smiled. "That's the sign of a good mystery—genuine frustration."

"Speaking of genuine," Trish said, turning toward the cheese counter, "what are you featuring tonight?"

Mari's smile widened as she gestured toward the refrigerator. "I'm calling it my 'Criminal Cheese Board.' Midnight Moon goat cheese for our nighttime murder, Blood Orange Stilton for the telltale splatter, and Drunken Goat soaked in red wine—for obvious reasons."

"You're incorrigible," Trish laughed. "We should start calling you the big cheese."

"I've been called worse," Mari replied with a wink.

After Trish left with a promised rereading of the final chapters, Mari checked her phone and saw a text from Liv: *Bringing a 2018 Pinot Noir tonight. Dark cherry notes will pair beautifully with that Midnight Moon you mentioned. Also bringing that Australian Shiraz we tried last month—perfect with the Blood Orange Stilton!*

Mari smiled and texted back: *Grape expectations as always, Liv! See you at 7.*

As she slipped her phone back into her pocket, it buzzed with her daily reminder: *LEXAPRO - 10mg with breakfast*. Mari dutifully reached into her purse for her pill case, swallowing the small white tablet with a sip of cooling coffee. Four years on, and she still needed the reminder. But the medication had been life-changing, giving her what she jokingly called her "prose-ac vision"—the ability to see patterns and connections others missed, both in books and in life.

The morning drifted by in a pleasant blur of customers, book recommendations, and the peaceful rhythm of ringing up sales. By late afternoon, Mari's thoughts had turned fully to the evening ahead. The Novel Sippers had been meeting monthly for three years now, evolving from a casual gathering of friends into the highlight of Mari's social calendar.

She closed the shop at five to prepare, carefully arranging the back reading nook with extra chairs borrowed from The Wine Plot next door. The cheese board took center stage on the vintage trunk that served as their coffee table, each cheese labeled with a small card featuring a murder-themed pun. Mari stood back and admired her handiwork, particularly pleased with "The Gouda, The Bad, and The Ugly" label for the aged Gouda.

As she moved toward the window to adjust the blinds for the evening ambiance, something caught her eye. Across the street, partially obscured by the shadow of the oak tree on the corner, stood a figure watching the store. Mari squinted, trying to make out details, but could only discern that it was a woman, elegant in posture, seemingly writing something in a small notebook.

A customer, perhaps, noting the store hours? A mystery enthusiast attracted by the display? Or something else entirely?

The figure looked up suddenly, as if sensing Mari's gaze, and for a brief, electric moment, their eyes seemed to meet across the distance. Then the woman closed her notebook, turned on her heel, and disappeared around the corner.

Mari felt a shiver of something—anticipation? unease?—travel up her spine.

"Well," she said aloud to the empty shop, "every good story needs a mysterious stranger."

She turned back to her preparations, unaware that the evening ahead would bring more mystery than even her Novel Sippers could have hoped to discuss.

## Chapter 2: Aged to Perfection



The Wine Plot buzzed with the gentle hum of evening conversation as Mari arranged the final pieces of her elaborate cheese board. The cozy wine bar, connected to Bound Together by a rustic wooden door that had once separated two Victorian storefronts, provided the perfect backdrop for the Novel Sippers' monthly gatherings. Edison bulbs cast a warm glow over polished oak tables, and the walls were

lined with bookshelves interspersed with wine racks—a design collaboration Mari had insisted upon when her friend Garrett opened the place two years ago.

"That spread is nothing short of criminal," said a voice rich with appreciation.

Mari looked up to see Olivia Winters examining the cheese board, her silver-streaked dark hair pulled back in an elegant twist. At forty-eight, Liv carried herself with the quiet confidence of a woman who had faced loss and emerged stronger. Since her husband's death three years ago, she had channeled her grief into a passion for wine that had evolved from hobby to expertise.

"Just wait until you taste the pairings," Mari replied, gesturing to the small cards she'd placed beside each cheese. "I've left notes, but I'm counting on you to tell me if I've made any egregious matching errors."

Liv lifted a bottle from her canvas tote bag. "The 2018 Pinot as promised, and I've also brought a surprise." She produced a second

bottle with a flourish. "A Tempranillo that will make that manchego sing arias."

Mari laughed. "You're the only person I know who can make cheese sound musical."

"That's because, like books," Liv said, uncorking the Pinot with practiced ease, "the best ones get better with age." She winked as she poured a small amount into a glass, swirled it gently, and inhaled. "Mmm. Grape expectations fulfilled."

The door chimed as Denise Sharma entered, her tall frame silhouetted against the evening light. At fifty-five, the retired detective moved with the measured precision of someone accustomed to observing before acting. Her keen dark eyes took in the room in one sweeping glance—an old habit from her police days that she claimed was impossible to break.

"I come bearing gifts," Denise announced, holding up a bottle of whiskey. "For after the wine, when we start dissecting the killer's motives."

"Planning to apply your interrogation techniques to fictional characters again?" Mari teased, accepting the bottle.

"Always." Denise patted the leather-bound notebook tucked under her arm. "I've updated my cheese-to-mystery subgenre pairing chart. Did you know that Pecorino Romano works particularly well with police procedurals? Something about the sharp, salty bite complementing the gritty realism."

"Is that what you're writing in that notebook of yours?" Liv asked, handing Denise a glass of Pinot. "I was beginning to think it was filled with our dirty secrets."

"Who says it isn't both?" Denise replied with a smile that revealed nothing. "I'm spinally attuned to finding killers—and the perfect cheese to contemplate them with."

Trish arrived next, her librarian's tote now exchanged for a vintage handbag that matched her vibrant red reading glasses. "Sorry I'm late! I was updating 'The Cultured Page' with a review of this amazing Humboldt Fog I discovered. I'm calling it 'the Agatha Christie of goat cheese—complex, layered, and with a surprise at every turn.'"

"How many followers does your cheese blog have now?" Mari asked, pouring Trish a glass of wine.

"Nearly a thousand," Trish said with poorly concealed pride. "Turns out there's a substantial overlap between mystery readers and artisanal cheese enthusiasts. Who knew?"

"I did," Mari said, tapping her temple. "Prose-ac vision."

The women laughed, settling into their usual spots around the reclaimed wood table that Garrett had reserved for them with a small brass plaque: "Novel Sippers—Solving Fictional Crimes Since 2021."

"Where's Ellie?" Liv asked, checking her watch. "It's not like her to be late."

"Text from her ten minutes ago," Mari said, pulling out her phone.

"Running behind. Bringing peace offerings in pastry form."

As if summoned by her name, the door swung open and Eleanor Chen rushed in, a pink bakery box clutched in her hands. At forty-seven, the psychiatrist somehow managed to look both perfectly put together and perpetually harried, her glossy black bob swinging as she hurried toward them.



"I am so sorry," Ellie said, slightly out of breath. "Session ran late, and then the oven timer didn't go off, and then—"

"Breathe," Denise instructed with the calm authority that had served her well during decades on the force. "The book's not going anywhere."

"But the pastries might," Trish said, eyeing the box. "What divine creation have you stress-baked this time?"

Ellie set the box on the table and opened it with a flourish. "Gouda and caramelized onion puff pastry spirals. Fresh from the oven."

A collective sigh of appreciation rose from the group as the warm, savory aroma filled their corner of the wine bar.

"You're forgiven," Liv declared, reaching for one. "Especially since these will pair beautifully with the Tempranillo."

As the women settled in, Mari couldn't help but feel a wave of gratitude for this monthly ritual they'd created. Each of them had found their way to the book club through different paths—Liv after her husband's passing, Denise upon retirement, Trish through library connections, and Ellie after treating Mari for her anxiety—but together, they'd formed a bond that went beyond their shared love of mysteries.

"Before we dive into *Death by Decoupage*," Mari said, lifting her wine glass, "a toast to the Novel Sippers."

"To mysteries and manchego," Liv added.

"To friendship and fiction," Trish continued.

"To killers and camembert," Denise said with a wry smile.

"To happy endings," Ellie concluded, "in books and in life."

They clinked glasses, the soft ring of crystal punctuating the moment before they took their first sips.

Mari opened her dog-eared copy of the novel, post-it notes marking passages she wanted to discuss. "So, what did everyone think of the victim being found face-down in a vat of decoupage glue?"

"Implausible," Denise said immediately. "The viscosity is all wrong. She would have had to be unconscious before being placed there."

"Which means premeditation," Trish added, reaching for her own heavily annotated copy. "But then why use such an elaborate method? The killer could have simply—"

"Used a common household poison that would look like natural causes," Ellie finished. "From a psychological perspective, this killer wanted recognition—needed it, even. The elaborate staging speaks to a grandiose personality with deep-seated insecurities."

"Or," Liv countered, swirling her wine thoughtfully, "the author simply needed a creative murder method to sell books. Sometimes a decoupage death is just a decoupage death."

The discussion flowed as freely as the wine, each woman bringing her unique perspective to the fictional crime. Denise dissected the procedural elements with professional precision, while Ellie analyzed character motivations with clinical insight. Trish referenced similar plot devices in classic mysteries, and Liv played devil's advocate, challenging their theories with alternative readings.

As the evening progressed and they moved from the Pinot to the Tempranillo, Mari noticed Ellie glancing at her phone with increasing frequency.

"Everything okay?" she asked quietly during a lull when Denise and Trish were debating the significance of a clue found in chapter eight.

Ellie sighed, keeping her voice low. "Just checking the time for my Lexapro. First week on it."

Mari nodded with understanding. "The adjustment period can be rough. How are you feeling?"

"Like my brain is rewiring itself," Ellie admitted. "Which I suppose it is. It's strange being on the patient side of the prescription pad."

"Well, you've got an experienced guide," Mari said, giving Ellie's hand a quick squeeze. "Any side effects questions, weird dreams, or existential 3 a.m. thoughts, I'm your woman."

Ellie smiled gratefully. "It helps knowing someone who's been through it. Thanks, Mari."

Their private moment was interrupted by Garrett, the owner of The Wine Plot, approaching their table with an unusual expression—something between excitement and disbelief.

"Ladies," he said, leaning in conspiratorially, "don't look now, but Victoria Sterling just walked into the bar."

Five heads immediately swiveled toward the entrance, where a slender woman in her sixties with a distinguished shock of white in her auburn hair stood surveying the room.

"Oh my god," Mari whispered, feeling her heart rate accelerate. "It's really her."

"The Victoria Sterling?" Liv asked, straightening her posture. "Creator of Isabel Greene?"

"The very same," Garrett confirmed. "Apparently, she's staying at the Harborview Hotel for a few days. Something about research."

"Research?" Trish repeated, eyes widening. "For her next book?"

"In Inkwell Cove?" Denise looked skeptical. "What could possibly interest a bestselling mystery author in our little town?"

But Mari wasn't listening anymore. Her eyes were locked on Victoria Sterling, who had now noticed their table and was making her way toward them with purposeful steps.

"Ladies," Victoria said when she reached them, her voice as rich and commanding as it had been at the book readings Mari had attended in Boston. "I couldn't help but notice your lively discussion. A book club, I presume?"

"The Novel Sippers," Mari managed to say, finding her voice despite the surreal nature of the moment. "We're discussing *Death by Decoupage* tonight."

"Amelia Thornberry's latest," Victoria nodded appreciatively. "A worthy selection. Though I found the decoupage glue rather... adhesive to plausibility."

The women laughed, tension breaking.

"Would you... would you care to join us?" Mari asked, hardly believing her own boldness.

Victoria's eyes sparkled with interest as they swept over the table, lingering on the elaborate cheese board and the open bottles of wine.

"I wouldn't want to intrude," she said, though her tone suggested otherwise.

"It would be an honor," Trish assured her, already pulling up an extra chair.

"Well then," Victoria said, settling into the offered seat, "I accept. Though I should warn you—I have strong opinions about fictional murder methods."

"So does our resident detective," Liv said, nodding toward Denise.

"Former detective," Denise corrected, extending her hand to Victoria. "Denise Sharma. I spent twenty-five years with Boston Homicide before retiring to this peaceful little hamlet."

Something flickered in Victoria's eyes—recognition? interest?—before she smiled and shook Denise's hand. "How fascinating. I do love speaking with real detectives. Adds such authenticity to the writing process."

As introductions continued around the table, Mari couldn't shake the feeling that this was no coincidence. Victoria Sterling, here in Inkwell Cove, at their book club?

The evening had just taken a turn worthy of one of Victoria's own novels.

Beyond the windows of The Wine Plot, dusk settled over Inkwell Cove, and as if on cue, conversation throughout the bar swelled with excitement as word spread that the famous mystery author was in town. But none of that registered with the Novel Sippers, now captivated by the unexpected twist in their monthly gathering—unaware that this was merely the opening chapter of a mystery that would soon engulf them all.

# Chapter 3: A Novel Appearance



Mari's hands trembled slightly as she arranged the stack of Victoria Sterling's latest novel, *The Camembert Conspiracy*, on the front display table of Bound Together. After last night's unexpected encounter at The Wine Plot, she'd barely slept, her mind racing with questions about why the famous author had chosen their small coastal town for research.

When Victoria herself had suggested a last-minute book signing at the store—"Just something casual, dear, to thank you for your hospitality"—Mari had nearly dropped her phone in shock.

"Breathe," she whispered to herself, unconsciously echoing Denise's command to Ellie the previous evening. "It's just a book signing. With your literary hero. No pressure."

She stepped back to assess the display, tilting her head critically. The sterling silver cheese knife she'd positioned next to the books seemed appropriate given the novel's title and the author's famous detective's penchant for exotic cheeses. A small chalkboard sign announced: "TODAY ONLY: Victoria Sterling Book Signing, 2-4 PM."

The bell over the door chimed, and Mari's heart leapt before she saw it was only Trish, arriving an hour early with a stack of library flyers advertising Victoria's unexpected appearance.

"These are still warm from the printer," Trish said, waving them triumphantly. "I called in every favor I had at the copy shop. They're already posted all over town."

"You're a miracle worker," Mari said, taking the flyers. "Have I mentioned I'm terrified?"

"Only six times in your texts last night," Trish replied with a grin. "But seriously, you look like you need a Lexapro top-up. She's just a person, Mari."

"A person whose books got me through my divorce," Mari countered, straightening a stack of hardcovers that didn't need straightening. "You know how it was back then."

Trish's expression softened. "I do."

Four years ago, when David had announced he was leaving after twenty-three years of marriage—for his twenty-three-year-old assistant, no less—Mari's world had collapsed. The panic attacks had started soon after, followed by the insomnia, then the days when she couldn't bring herself to leave the house. It was Isabel Greene—Victoria Sterling's anxiety-prone detective who solved murders while managing her mental health—who had become Mari's unexpected lifeline.

"I read *The Stilton Stalker* cover to cover in one sitting," Mari said, lost in the memory. "It was the first time I'd seen a character dealing with anxiety who wasn't portrayed as broken or weak. Isabel took her medication, she had her bad days, but she was still brilliant and capable."

"And she solved the case," Trish added gently.

"And she solved the case," Mari agreed. "That book made me believe I could solve my own case too."

Within months, Mari had filed for divorce, started therapy, gotten her Lexapro prescription, and begun the small steps that eventually led to opening Bound Together. She'd even written to Victoria Sterling once, a heartfelt letter of thanks that she'd never expected a response to.

"Did you ever tell her about the letter you sent?" Trish asked, as if reading her thoughts.

Mari shook her head. "God, no. Can you imagine? 'Hi, I'm the pathetic divorcée who wrote you that embarrassing fan letter.' No thank you."

"There was nothing embarrassing about it," Trish insisted. "And you're hardly pathetic. Look at what you've built." She gestured around the bookstore, with its warm wooden shelves and cozy reading nooks filled with customers. "You're living the dream, my friend."

Before Mari could respond, the door chimed again and Ellie rushed in, her arms full of freshly baked goods.

"Stress-baking again?" Mari asked with a knowing smile.

"It's called displacement activity," Ellie replied, setting the box on the counter. "My brain needed something to do with my nervous energy about meeting a famous author, and apparently it chose cheese scones."

"Your brain has excellent taste," Trish said, immediately opening the box. "Oh my god, they're still warm."

"I figured we could offer them at the signing," Ellie said. "I made them with that smoked cheddar from Marcel's shop."

At the mention of Marcel Fontaine, owner of The Aged Page cheese shop, Mari felt a flutter of anxiety. "I should have ordered a proper cheese platter from him for today. What was I thinking?"

"That this was all arranged less than twelve hours ago," Trish said firmly. "Stop catastrophizing. The book signing will be perfect."

The bell chimed again, and Liv entered, carrying what looked suspiciously like a bottle bag.



"Don't tell me you brought wine to a daytime book signing," Mari said.

"Not for consumption," Liv assured her, pulling out a beautifully labeled bottle. "For signing. It's a 2015 Châteauneuf-du-Pape, which happens to be mentioned in chapter seven of *The Camembert Conspiracy* as Isabel's celebratory bottle when she solves the case."

Mari stared at her friend. "How do you even remember these details?"

Liv winked. "Some people memorize batting averages, I memorize fictional detectives' wine preferences. We all have our quirks."

The door chimed yet again as Denise arrived, looking uncharacteristically nervous in a blazer and pressed slacks rather than her usual casual attire.

"Don't say a word," she warned as the others exchanged glances. "I'm not fangirling. I simply respect her attention to procedural details."

"Said while wearing your good shoes," Trish teased. "Very convincing, Detective Sharma."

"Former detective," Denise corrected automatically, then glanced around. "How can I help set up?"

For the next hour, the five women transformed Bound Together into a worthy venue for a literary celebrity. Chairs were arranged in neat rows facing the antique desk Mari had positioned as a signing table. Ellie's scones were artfully displayed on a vintage silver platter, alongside a carafe of coffee and a selection of teas. Liv had created small cards with suggested wine pairings for each of Victoria's last three novels, which they placed in the displayed books.

As the designated time approached, customers began to filter in—regulars at first, then unfamiliar faces drawn by Trish's flyers. By

ten minutes to two, the store was comfortably full, with a buzz of anticipation filling the air.

"Where is she?" Mari whispered to Trish, glancing at her watch for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"Fashionably late?" Trish suggested. "Or stuck in traffic? Is there even such a thing as traffic in Inkwell Cove?"

"There is when the fishing boats come in," Denise offered, though she too kept glancing toward the door.

At precisely two o'clock, the bell chimed one final time, and Victoria Sterling swept in. Today, she wore a tailored charcoal pantsuit that set off the dramatic white streak in her auburn hair. She carried a small leather attaché case and moved with the confident grace of someone accustomed to commanding attention.

Mari stepped forward, suddenly tongue-tied in the presence of her hero in the full light of day. Last night, in the intimate setting of The Wine Plot with wine flowing freely, she'd managed to hold her own. Now, in her professional capacity as bookstore owner, she felt the full weight of the moment.

"Ms. Sterling, welcome to Bound Together," she managed, extending her hand.

Victoria took it with a warm smile. "Please, it's Victoria. And you've created such a lovely space here, Mari. It reminds me of bookshops I've loved in Europe—intimate but not cluttered, personable but professional."

The praise sent a flush of pleasure through Mari. "Thank you. We're all thrilled you could join us today. I've set up the signing table, if that arrangement works for you?"

"Perfect," Victoria said, following Mari to the antique desk. She ran her fingers appreciatively over the polished wood. "Is this a Hepplewhite? The inlay work is exquisite."

"Good eye," Mari said, impressed. "It belonged to my grandmother."

Victoria nodded approvingly, then turned to face the gathered crowd. A hush fell immediately.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she began, her voice carrying effortlessly through the store. "What a pleasure to find myself in Inkwell Cove, surrounded by such dedicated readers. Though this signing wasn't planned, sometimes the best literary encounters happen spontaneously, don't they?"

A murmur of agreement rippled through the audience.

"Before I begin signing your books, I thought I might read a short passage from *The Camembert Conspiracy*. Would that be agreeable?"

The crowd's enthusiastic response made Mari glow with pride for her small community of book lovers. Victoria opened her copy, turning to a dog-eared page with practiced ease.

"'Isabel knew that cheese, like murder, revealed its secrets slowly,'" Victoria read, her voice taking on a mesmerizing cadence. "'Both required patience, both involved a transformation of elements, and both could be deceptively complex beneath a seemingly simple surface. As she examined the cut edge of the Camembert—the thin bloom of white mold protecting the creamy interior that held the key to Alderman's death—she wondered, not for the first time, if her medication had sharpened her observational skills rather than dulled them. The world insisted that anxious minds were unreliable, but hers had learned to notice what others missed in their certainty.'"

Mari felt a chill run through her. The passage could have been written about her own experience—how the Lexapro had given her a clarity that others might not understand. She glanced at Ellie, who was listening intently, and wondered if she felt the same recognition.

As Victoria closed the book, applause filled the store. She smiled graciously and took her seat at the desk, removing an elegant fountain pen from her attaché case.

"Now then," she said, "who would like their book signed first?"

What followed was a proper Inkwell Cove welcome, with locals and visitors alike lining up for their moment with the acclaimed author. Victoria was gracious with everyone, taking time to chat and personalizing each signature. Mari circulated through the store, refilling coffee cups and offering Ellie's scones, feeling a growing sense of accomplishment.

From her vantage point near the mystery section, she watched Victoria interact with her friends when they finally reached the front of the line. Trish was visibly starstruck despite her earlier teasing of Denise. Liv presented her wine bottle for signing, which delighted Victoria. Ellie mentioned that she was a psychiatrist, prompting an engaged discussion about the portrayal of mental health in literature.

But it was Denise's turn that caught Mari's attention. The conversation seemed to shift when Denise mentioned her former career. Victoria's posture changed subtly—a slight stiffening of the shoulders, a more focused attention. They spoke longer than Victoria had with the others, their voices too low for Mari to hear.

As the signing continued, the bell above the door chimed again, and Mari turned to see Marcel Fontaine enter. The French owner of The Aged Page, with his silver-streaked black hair and perpetual expression of mild disdain, was not a regular bookstore customer. He carried a small wicker basket covered with a checkered cloth.

"Marcel," Mari greeted him with surprise. "What brings you by?"

"I heard about your famous visitor," he said, his accent still pronounced despite twenty years in America. "I thought perhaps she might appreciate some proper cheese to accompany her literary endeavors." He lifted the cloth to reveal an exquisite selection of small cheese portions, each labeled with handwritten cards.

"That's incredibly thoughtful," Mari said, genuinely touched by the gesture. "She'll be thrilled. Her detective is famous for her cheese appreciation."

"Yes, I am aware," Marcel said, with a hint of something Mari couldn't quite identify in his tone. "We have crossed paths before, Ms. Sterling and I."

Before Mari could ask what he meant, Marcel moved toward the signing table. Victoria was between customers, taking a sip of water, when she noticed him approaching. The transformation in her expression was instant and unmistakable—a flash of recognition, followed by what Mari could only describe as wariness.

Marcel set the basket on the corner of the desk with a slight bow. "Ms. Sterling. A small welcome from The Aged Page. I thought you might appreciate some local varieties during your stay in our town."

Victoria's smile was perfectly polite but didn't reach her eyes. "Marcel. What a surprise to find you in Inkwell Cove. It's been, what, fifteen years?"

"Sixteen," he corrected. "Since the Cheese Artisans Guild conference in Vermont."

"Of course," she nodded. "How... fortuitous that we should both end up in the same small town."

"Fortuitous indeed," Marcel agreed, the word hanging between them with unspoken weight.

Mari watched the exchange with fascination. There was history here—not pleasant history, judging by the tension crackling between them. Before she could observe more, the next customer stepped up for a signature, and Marcel withdrew with another slight bow.

As he passed Mari, he murmured, "Your famous author might not be exactly who she appears to be. The Sterlings have a way of presenting an appealing rind over a complex interior."

He left before Mari could ask what he meant, the bell jingling cheerfully as the door closed behind him.

The signing continued for another hour, with Victoria showing no signs of fatigue despite the steady stream of admirers. When the last customer had finally departed with a signed copy, Victoria sank back in her chair with a sigh.

"My goodness, for an impromptu event, that was remarkably well-attended," she said. "You have a wonderful community here, Mari."

"Thank you for suggesting it," Mari replied, still processing the strange interaction she'd witnessed between Victoria and Marcel. "Can I get you anything? Tea? Something stronger, perhaps?"

Victoria smiled. "Tea would be lovely. And perhaps one of those delicious-looking scones? The aroma has been torturing me throughout the signing."

As Mari prepared a fresh pot of Earl Grey, she noticed Victoria examining Marcel's cheese basket with a curious expression. She lifted one of the small wedges, reading its label, then replaced it without sampling any.

"Not to your taste?" Mari asked, setting down the tea tray.

"I'm afraid I'm rather particular about cheese," Victoria said lightly. "One of the hazards of writing a cheese-loving detective—everyone assumes I share her tastes."

Mari blinked in surprise. "You mean Isabel's passion for cheese isn't based on your own?"

Victoria laughed. "Good heavens, no. I'm practically lactose intolerant. Isabel's cheese obsession was inspired by a colleague who could wax poetic about rinds and molds for hours. I simply borrowed her enthusiasm and did extensive research."

"But you describe the cheeses so vividly," Mari said, unable to hide her disappointment at this revelation. "The way Isabel uses them as metaphors for the cases she solves..."

"That's what writers do, my dear," Victoria said, stirring her tea. "We observe, we research, we imagine, and then we convince our readers that we know what we're talking about." She took a sip and closed her eyes appreciatively. "Now tea, on the other hand—tea I understand intimately."

Mari poured herself a cup as well, trying to reconcile this small crack in her image of Victoria Sterling. It was silly, she knew, to feel let down by something so trivial. And yet, it felt like the first sign that the author might not be exactly who Mari had imagined her to be.

As if sensing her thoughts, Victoria leaned forward. "May I confess something, Mari? Something I don't tell many people?"

"Of course," Mari said, intrigued.

"Isabel's anxiety, the Lexapro, her occasional panic attacks—those aren't researched. Those are mine." Victoria's voice was quiet but

steady. "Writing Isabel was my way of giving my anxiety a purpose, making it a strength rather than just a burden. When she notices details others miss because her mind is always scanning for threats—that's me. When she needs her little white pill to face a press conference—that's me too."

Mari felt a rush of emotion. "That... that means a lot to hear. Your books, especially *The Stilton Stalker*, they helped me through a really dark time."

Victoria's eyes softened. "I remember your letter, you know."

Mari froze, her teacup halfway to her lips. "My letter?"

"Dear Ms. Sterling," Victoria recited, "Your detective Isabel Greene has become my unexpected companion during the loneliest year of my life...' It was a beautiful letter, Mari. One of the most meaningful I've ever received."

The shock of being remembered, of having her words quoted back to her, left Mari speechless. Victoria had hundreds of thousands of readers, yet she remembered one letter from four years ago?

"You never included a return address," Victoria continued, "so I couldn't respond. But I've wondered, from time to time, how the woman who signed herself 'Gratefully, M. Paige' was faring."

"I'm faring well," Mari managed, her throat tight with emotion. "Better than I could have imagined back then."

"I can see that," Victoria said, glancing around the bookstore. "You've created something wonderful here." She hesitated, then added, "Which brings me to another confession. My presence in Inkwell Cove isn't entirely coincidental."

Mari's pulse quickened. "What do you mean?"



"I've been researching small coastal towns for my next novel," Victoria explained. "But when I came across Inkwell Cove and saw a listing for 'Bound Together, proprietor Marianne Paige,' I couldn't help wondering if you were my letter-writer. The book club mention on your website—the Novel Sippers—clinched it for me."

"So you came here... because of me?" Mari asked, struggling to process this revelation.

"Partially," Victoria said. "The town genuinely is perfect for my setting. But yes, I was curious about you. And after meeting your book club last night, I'm even more intrigued. You've assembled quite the fascinating group of women."

"They're amazing," Mari agreed, still dazed by the turn of events.

"Which is why I have a somewhat unusual request," Victoria said, setting down her teacup decisively. "I'd like to join your next book club meeting."

"Join our... but you were already there last night," Mari said, confused.

"No, I mean really join it. Not as a visiting author, but as a participant. I'm researching authentic book clubs for my next Isabel novel, and yours is exactly what I'm looking for—intelligent women with diverse perspectives and genuine passion for mysteries." Victoria leaned forward. "Would that be possible?"

"Of course," Mari said without hesitation. "The others would be thrilled. But..." she paused, thinking of the strange exchange with Marcel, "may I ask why Inkwell Cove, specifically? There must be hundreds of small coastal towns to choose from."

Something flickered in Victoria's eyes—a momentary guardedness. "As I said, your bookstore caught my attention. And the town has a fascinating history. Did you know there was an unsolved case here in

the 1980s? A local dairy worker who disappeared under mysterious circumstances?"

"I've heard rumors," Mari admitted. "But most locals don't talk about it much."

"Cold cases have always fascinated me," Victoria said, a new intensity in her voice. "The stories that get buried, the truths that fester beneath picturesque surfaces." She glanced at her watch and stood abruptly. "Oh my, is that the time? I should let you close up shop."

The sudden shift in tone left Mari feeling slightly off-balance. "When would you like to join us? The regular meeting is next month, but we could certainly arrange something sooner."

"Sooner would be wonderful," Victoria said, gathering her attaché case. "I'm only in town for a week. Perhaps the day after tomorrow? I'd be happy to host at my hotel suite—the Harborview has given me a lovely room with a sitting area."

"I'll check with everyone," Mari promised, walking Victoria to the door. "And thank you again for today. It means more than you know."

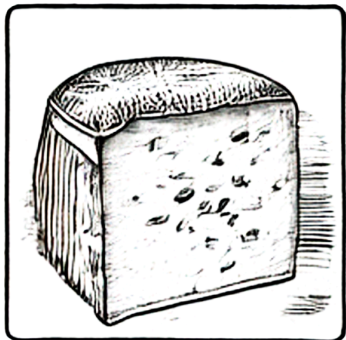
Victoria paused at the threshold, studying Mari with an unreadable expression. "You know, there's something special about women our age, Mari. We've weathered enough to recognize truth from fiction, to spot the patterns others miss." She smiled, but there was something melancholy in it. "Every good mystery has layers, just like a fine Brie. Sometimes the most important clues are hidden in plain sight."

With that cryptic remark, she was gone, leaving Mari staring after her with a mixture of elation and unease. The Victoria Sterling she'd met today was both more and less than the author she'd idolized—more human, more complex, but also more mysterious.

As she turned to begin cleaning up the remnants of the signing, her gaze fell on Marcel's cheese basket, still untouched on the signing table. Victoria had left it behind without taking a single piece.

The first hole in her story.

# Chapter 4: The First Hole in the Story



"She actually remembered your letter?" Liv asked, leaning forward with her wine glass poised halfway to her lips. "Word for word?"

The Novel Sippers had convened for an emergency pre-meeting at The Wine Plot to discuss Victoria Sterling's unexpected request to join their book club. Mari had related the events of the book signing, including Victoria's surprising revelation about remembering her fan letter.

"Not the whole thing," Mari clarified, feeling her cheeks warm. "Just the opening line. But still, it was written four years ago. She must get thousands of letters."

"Which means yours made an impression," Denise said, her detective's eyes narrowing slightly. "Interesting."

"What's that tone supposed to mean?" Mari asked.

Denise shrugged. "Professional habit. When someone shows unusual interest or attention, I ask why."

"Maybe because Mari's letter was genuinely moving?" Ellie suggested. "Not everything has ulterior motives, Denise."

"Besides," Trish added, "she explained her interest—she's researching authentic book clubs for her next novel."

"And just happened to remember a four-year-old letter from someone in a small coastal town she's visiting for research?" Denise raised an eyebrow. "That's quite a coincidence."

"You're making it sound sinister," Mari protested. "She's a mystery writer, not a criminal mastermind."

"The best mystery writers think like criminals," Denise countered. "It's how they create convincing plots."

"Speaking of plots," Liv interrupted, ever the peacemaker, "what's the plan for tomorrow night? Are we really having Victoria Sterling join our book club?"

"Unless you all object," Mari said, looking around the table. "She suggested hosting at her hotel suite."

"Object? To having a bestselling author join us?" Trish nearly squealed. "I've already selected my outfit and practiced what I'm going to say about her structural approach to red herrings."

"I've been reviewing her work to analyze her portrayal of anxiety disorders," Ellie admitted. "From a professional perspective, of course."

"And I've already chosen the wines," Liv added with a smile. "A vertical tasting of Pinot Noirs that pair with different stages of a mystery plot—bright and lively for the setup, complex and layered for the development, and rich with a lingering finish for the resolution."

"Denise?" Mari asked, turning to the former detective who had remained thoughtfully silent.

"I'm in," Denise said simply. "But I'll be bringing my notebook."

"For your cheese and mystery pairings?" Trish asked.

"Among other things," Denise replied cryptically.

"Then it's settled," Mari said, pulling out her phone. "I'll text Victoria that we're on for tomorrow night at the Harborview. She said 7:30 would work for her."

As she typed the message, Mari couldn't help but recall the strange tension between Victoria and Marcel Fontaine, and his parting warning: *Your famous author might not be exactly who she appears to be.* Should she mention it to the others? But what was there to say, really? That Victoria Sterling didn't like cheese? That seemed hardly worth dramatizing.

"What's that little wrinkle between your eyebrows?" Ellie asked, her psychiatrist's eye missing nothing. "You're worried about something."

Mari sighed. "It's probably nothing. Just something odd that happened at the signing."

She related the encounter between Victoria and Marcel, and Victoria's admission that she didn't actually like cheese despite her detective's famous passion for it.

"That's... unexpected," Liv said diplomatically.

"It's fraud!" Trish exclaimed, less diplomatically. "Her entire character is built around cheese appreciation!"

"It's called fiction, Trish," Denise said dryly. "I doubt Agatha Christie actually poisoned people."

"But it does raise an interesting question," Ellie mused. "What else about her books, about Isabel Greene, isn't based on her own experiences? She told Mari that the anxiety and Lexapro were autobiographical."

"Which I believed completely," Mari added. "She seemed so genuine when she said it."

"She's a writer," Denise said. "Creating believable characters is literally her job."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the table as they all considered the implications.

"OK, let's not spiral into conspiracy theories," Liv finally said. "So Victoria Sterling doesn't like cheese but writes about a detective who does. That's hardly criminal. Let's just enjoy having a famous author join our book club and see what happens."

"Liv's right," Mari agreed, pushing away her unease. "I'm letting my imagination run wild. Too many mystery novels."

"Speaking of which," Ellie said, "did we decide on a book to discuss tomorrow? We already covered *Death by Decoupage* at our last meeting."

"I thought we could discuss one of Victoria's books," Mari suggested. "It seems appropriate, and I'm sure she'd appreciate the gesture."

"*The Camembert Conspiracy*?" Trish suggested. "It's her latest, and it features that lovely passage she read at the signing."

"Perfect," Mari said, making a note. "We've all read it, and it'll give us a chance to ask her about her writing process."

"And I'll bring a selection of cheeses that feature in the book," Liv offered with a mischievous gleam in her eye. "Let's see if we can get her to at least try some."

"That's diabolical," Trish said admiringly. "I love it."

Mari laughed, feeling some of her tension ease. Whatever mysteries surrounded Victoria Sterling—her unexpected appearance in Inkwell Cove, her connection to Marcel, her knowledge of the old cold

case—they would sort themselves out in time. For now, she would focus on making tomorrow's book club meeting memorable for her friends.

"Just one more thing," Denise said, her expression serious. "Has anyone else looked into this old cold case Victoria mentioned? The dairy worker who disappeared in the 1980s?"

The others shook their heads.

"I vaguely remember my parents mentioning something about it when I was young," Liv said. "But they always changed the subject when I asked questions."

"It might be worth doing some research before tomorrow," Denise suggested. "If Victoria's interested in it, she might bring it up."

"I could check the library archives," Trish offered. "We have back issues of the local newspaper on microfiche."

"And I'll ask around at the shop tomorrow," Mari said. "Some of my older customers have been in Inkwell Cove their entire lives. They might remember details."

"Good," Denise nodded approvingly. "Information is power, ladies. And in my experience, it's better to know what you're walking into."

With plans set for the following evening, the women said their goodbyes, each absorbed in her own thoughts about their unexpected literary visitor and the mysteries—fictional and perhaps real—that swirled around her.

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The Harborview Hotel stood on a bluff overlooking Inkwell Cove's picturesque harbor, its Victorian architecture a testament to the town's



heyday as a prosperous fishing port. Mari arrived early the next evening, a canvas tote bag heavy with books slung over her shoulder. The Novel Sippers had agreed to meet in the lobby before heading up to Victoria's suite together—safety in numbers, as Denise had put it.

The hotel lobby retained its nineteenth-century grandeur, with a sweeping staircase, crystal chandeliers, and dark wood paneling that gleamed with the patina of age. Mari settled into a velvet wingback chair to wait, watching as tourists and locals mingled in the adjoining bar.

Trish arrived next, clutching a leather portfolio that Mari knew contained her meticulously organized discussion notes.

"Found anything about the cold case?" Mari asked as Trish sat beside her.

"Not much," Trish admitted. "Most of the newspaper coverage was frustratingly vague. A worker at the old Blackwood Dairy disappeared in 1988—Michael Landry, 32 years old. Initial suspicion fell on industrial accident, but no body was ever found. The investigation stalled after a few weeks, and the Blackwood family sold the dairy soon after. Converted the land to real estate development."

"The Blackwoods," Mari mused. "Aren't they still one of the wealthiest families in the area?"

"Elizabeth Blackwood sits on half the boards in town," Trish confirmed. "Old money that successfully transitioned to new."

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Ellie, then Liv, who carried an insulated bag that clinked with the unmistakable sound of wine bottles.

"I may have gone overboard," Liv admitted when Trish raised an eyebrow. "But how often do we get to pair wines with a mystery writer's actual work, in her presence?"

"Did you bring the cheese board too?" Mari asked.

Liv patted a flat package tucked under her arm. "Complete with labels featuring puns from the book. The 'Suspect Stilton' is my personal favorite."

Denise was the last to arrive, her tall figure commanding attention as she strode through the lobby doors. She wore her usual practical attire, but Mari noticed the leather notebook tucked under her arm was not her usual one—this one looked newer, with a brass lock.

"Are we ready?" Denise asked, glancing toward the elevator.

Mari nodded and led the way to the front desk to inquire about Victoria's suite number. The clerk directed them to the top floor—the Elizabeth Blackwood Suite, named after the hotel's most generous benefactor.

"Speak of the devil," Trish whispered to Mari as they entered the elevator. "Guess who's funding Victoria's luxurious accommodations?"

"Coincidence?" Mari whispered back.

"In a mystery novel? Never," Trish replied with a knowing smile.

The elevator doors opened directly into a private foyer leading to a single door. Mari knocked, suddenly feeling nervous again despite yesterday's easy conversation with Victoria.

The door swung open to reveal Victoria Sterling in a silk tunic over tailored slacks, her distinctive white-streaked hair swept into an elegant updo. "The Novel Sippers! Right on time. Please, come in."

The suite was as impressive as its name suggested. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the harbor, where fishing boats bobbed gently in the evening light. A sitting area with plush sofas had been arranged around a low table, already set with crystal glasses and small plates.

"This is gorgeous," Liv said, moving to the windows. "The perfect setting for a mystery."

"I thought the same," Victoria agreed. "I always try to stay somewhere atmospheric when I'm researching. It helps me capture the essence of a place." She gestured toward the sitting area. "Please, make yourselves comfortable. Can I offer anyone a drink?"

"Actually," Liv said, setting her bag on the table, "I've brought a selection of wines specifically paired to moments in *The Camembert Conspiracy*. I thought it might be fun to taste them as we discuss the book."

"What a marvelous idea," Victoria said, looking genuinely delighted. "I've never had my work paired with wine before."

As Liv began unpacking her bottles, explaining each selection with her characteristic enthusiasm, Mari watched Victoria circulate among the other women. She greeted each with warm familiarity, as if they were already friends rather than recent acquaintances. With Ellie, she discussed the psychological aspects of creating complex characters. With Trish, she debated the merits of various mystery subgenres. With Denise, she exchanged what appeared to be law enforcement anecdotes, both laughing at some shared joke about interrogation techniques.

Victoria Sterling was charming them all, Mari realized. And doing a very good job of it.

"Mari," Victoria called, gesturing her over to where Liv was setting up the wine tasting. "Liv tells me you've brought a special cheese selection as well?"

"I have," Mari confirmed, unpacking the flat wooden board and arranged cheeses that Liv had brought. "We thought it would be appropriate, given Isabel Greene's famous appreciation for fine cheese."

Was it Mari's imagination, or did something flicker briefly in Victoria's eyes—a momentary tension quickly masked?

"How thoughtful," Victoria said smoothly. "Though I should warn you again about my unfortunately limited palate when it comes to cheese. A failing in a mystery writer who created a cheese-loving detective, I know."

"That's the beauty of fiction," Denise said, joining them at the table. "We create characters who can do what we cannot."

"Exactly," Victoria nodded, seeming relieved by Denise's understanding. "Though I've certainly sampled enough varieties for research purposes over the years. Hazards of the job."

"Speaking of research," Trish said, settling onto one of the sofas with her portfolio open on her lap, "you mentioned you're working on a new Isabel Greene novel?"

"I am," Victoria confirmed, taking a seat in a high-backed armchair that framed her like a throne. "It's in the early stages yet, but I'm thinking of setting it in a coastal town much like Inkwell Cove. The working title is *The Curdled Truth*."

"Another cheese reference," Ellie noted with a smile.

"Isabel wouldn't have it any other way," Victoria said. "In this one, she's investigating a cold case involving a small-town dairy operation that might have been a front for something more sinister."

Mari and Trish exchanged glances.

"That sounds familiar," Denise said carefully, settling into the sofa across from Victoria. "Any connection to the cold case you mentioned to Mari? The dairy worker who disappeared here in the 1980s?"

Victoria's smile didn't waver. "Sharp as ever, Detective Sharma. Yes, that case caught my attention during my preliminary research. It has all the elements I look for—a mysterious disappearance, a family business with potential secrets, and a town that's moved on perhaps a bit too efficiently."

"The Blackwoods," Liv said, looking around the opulent suite meaningfully. "Their name does seem to come up rather often in Inkwell Cove."

"Old families often leave deep impressions on small towns," Victoria noted. "Their histories become intertwined with the community's identity."

"And sometimes buried within it," Denise added.

An interesting tension filled the room, as if they were all suddenly aware of having shifted from social pleasantries to something more consequential. Mari watched Victoria carefully. The author seemed perfectly at ease, sipping the wine Liv had poured for her, but there was a new alertness in her posture.

"Well," Mari said, deciding to steer the conversation back to safer ground, "shall we begin our discussion of *The Camembert Conspiracy*? I thought we might start with the theme of hidden identities that runs throughout the novel."

"An excellent place to begin," Victoria agreed, visibly relaxing. "Though before we dive in, perhaps we could sample some of these lovely wines and cheeses you've brought? The Pinot Noir, Liv—it's exceptional."

As Liv beamed with pleasure and began describing the wine's provenance, Mari arranged the cheese board on the table, placing it directly in front of Victoria with a small gesture of challenge. She had labeled each cheese with its name and a clever descriptor connecting it to the novel: "Suspect Stilton: Crumbly alibi with blue veins of deception," "Detective's Drunken Goat: Soaked in wine, reveals hidden flavors," "Victim's Valencay: Ash-covered pyramid with a story to tell."

"This is delightful," Victoria said, admiring the presentation. "Such creativity."

"Please," Mari urged, gesturing to the board. "Try the Stilton first. It pairs beautifully with the Pinot Noir."

Victoria hesitated, her wine glass halfway to her lips. "I shouldn't really... lactose issues, you understand."

"Even just a tiny taste?" Liv pressed. "I've selected these specifically to match scenes from your book."

"The Stilton features prominently in chapter nine," Trish added. "When Isabel realizes the victim's cheese board was arranged by someone who knew the victim's preferences intimately."

Victoria set down her wine glass with a small sigh. "You've gone to such trouble. Perhaps just a small sample."

With evident reluctance, she took the smallest piece of Stilton from the board and placed it on her plate, but made no move to taste it. Instead, she deftly redirected the conversation.

"That scene in chapter nine was inspired by a real murder case, you know. In Sussex, England, where the victim's cheese preferences became a crucial clue. The killer had arranged an elaborate cheese board but made one critical error in the selection."

And just like that, Victoria had them all leaning forward, engrossed in her story of the real-life crime that had inspired her fictional one. Mari noticed that as Victoria spoke, she absently pushed her plate with the untouched Stilton slightly away from her.

Throughout the next hour, a pattern emerged. Victoria would captivate them with insider details about her writing process, personal anecdotes that seemed to reveal vulnerability, or fascinating tidbits about real criminal cases. But each time one of them offered her cheese from the board, she would find a way to defer, distract, or take a piece only to leave it untouched on her plate.

"For someone who wrote six pages describing the complexity of Roquefort in *The Stilton Stalker*," Denise observed during a lull in the conversation, "you seem remarkably resistant to actually eating cheese."

The directness of the comment seemed to catch Victoria off guard. For a moment, her polished facade slipped, and Mari caught a glimpse of something uncomfortable—almost fearful—in her expression.

"A professional hazard," Victoria recovered quickly. "When you research something extensively for your fiction, the reality can never quite match the fantasy you've created."

"Like how crime novelists often can't stand the sight of real blood," Ellie suggested helpfully.

"Precisely," Victoria seized the explanation gratefully. "Isabel's relationship with cheese is much more sophisticated than my own."

The moment passed, but Mari noticed Denise making a small note in her leather book, and Trish giving her a meaningful glance. They had all noticed the discrepancy, this first hole in Victoria Sterling's carefully constructed persona.

As the evening progressed and the wine flowed more freely, Victoria became increasingly animated, sharing stories about her publishing experiences and the challenges of maintaining a long-running detective series. After her third glass of wine—more than Mari had seen her drink at The Wine Plot—Victoria's usual polish began to show small cracks.

"The pressure to keep producing," she said, swirling the ruby liquid in her glass, "it never stops. Readers expect a new Isabel Greene every eighteen months, like clockwork. And each one has to be fresh, surprising, yet familiar enough to satisfy the fans."

"That sounds exhausting," Ellie said sympathetically.

"It can be," Victoria admitted. "Especially when... well, when certain complications arise."

"Complications?" Mari prompted gently.

Victoria hesitated, then set down her glass with a decisive motion. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you. I've been receiving letters. Disturbing ones."

"What kind of letters?" Denise asked, her detective instincts visibly sharpening.

"Accusations. Someone claiming I've stolen their ideas, their experiences. That Isabel Greene isn't my creation at all." Victoria's voice had lowered, as if she were sharing a shameful secret. "At first, I dismissed them as the ramblings of an unbalanced fan. But the latest



ones... they contain details about my research, my movements. Almost as if I'm being watched."

A chill settled over the room. Outside, the harbor lights twinkled innocently against the gathering darkness, but within the suite, the atmosphere had shifted from convivial to something more ominous.

"Have you contacted the police?" Denise asked.

Victoria waved a dismissive hand. "What would I say? 'Someone's sending me mean letters'? It's hardly a priority for law enforcement. Besides, publicity of any kind would only encourage whoever is doing this."

"These letters," Mari said carefully, "are they connected to your interest in Inkwel Cove? In the cold case?"

Victoria met her eyes, and for a moment, Mari saw a flicker of genuine fear. "I don't know. But I've learned to trust my instincts, and they led me here. There's something about this town, about that old case... something important."

She fell silent, staring into her wine glass as if it contained answers.

"The Blackwood Dairy case," Denise prompted. "What specifically interests you about it?"

Victoria looked up, her expression suddenly guarded. "It has certain elements that align with a theory I'm developing for the book. The timing of the disappearance, the rapid closure of the dairy afterward, the family's transition to real estate... It suggests a narrative beyond the official one."

"And what narrative is that?" Trish asked, leaning forward.

Victoria opened her mouth to respond, then glanced at her watch with an exaggerated start. "Oh my goodness, is that the time? I'm afraid I've kept you all much later than intended. I have an early call with my editor tomorrow."

The abrupt change of subject was jarring, but undeniable. Victoria stood, signaling an end to the evening just as the conversation had reached its most intriguing point.

"But we've barely discussed the book," Trish protested, gesturing to her portfolio of notes.

"Another time, perhaps," Victoria said smoothly. "This has been so illuminating that I'd love to join you again before I leave town. If you'll have me, of course."

"Of course," Mari said, though she shared Trish's disappointment at the sudden conclusion. "Maybe at The Wine Plot next time? Their private room might be more comfortable for a proper discussion."

"Perfect," Victoria agreed, already moving toward the door. "Shall we say the day after tomorrow? Same time?"

As the women gathered their belongings, Mari noticed Victoria discreetly scraping her untouched cheese samples into a napkin and depositing it in a waste bin. A small action, but one that reinforced the evening's strange undercurrent.

At the door, Victoria thanked them each warmly, but when Mari, the last to leave, turned to say goodbye, she found the author's expression had grown serious.

"Mari," Victoria said quietly, taking her hand, "I meant what I said about those letters. There's someone out there who seems to know a great deal about my work, my process... things no one should know."

"Have you any idea who it might be?" Mari asked, disconcerted by the intensity in Victoria's usually composed face.

"I have theories," Victoria replied. "But in my experience, theories need testing before they become conclusions. That's why I'm here."

"In Inkwell Cove?"

Victoria nodded. "There's a connection, I'm sure of it. Between those letters, the old case, and..." she hesitated, then finished, "certain people."

"People like Marcel Fontaine?" Mari guessed, remembering the tense interaction at the signing.

Something flickered in Victoria's eyes—recognition, wariness, or perhaps both. "Among others. Be careful, Mari. Small towns keep secrets in plain sight. Every good mystery has layers, just like a fine Brie. Remember that."

With that cryptic warning, Victoria released Mari's hand and stepped back, her public persona settling back into place like a well-worn garment. "Until the day after tomorrow, then. Thank you for a delightful evening."

As the elevator doors closed on the Novel Sippers, silence reigned until they reached the lobby. The moment they stepped out, however, the questions erupted.

"Did anyone else notice she didn't eat a single piece of cheese?" Trish demanded.

"Or that she conveniently ended the evening just as we started asking about the Blackwood case?" Liv added.

"And those threatening letters," Ellie mused. "Suspiciously timely revelation, don't you think?"

"What did she say to you at the end?" Denise asked Mari, her detective's eyes sharp. "You two had quite the intense moment."

Mari related Victoria's parting comments as they walked through the hotel lobby and out into the cool evening air. The harbor stretched before them, the water black and still beneath the rising moon.

"She's definitely investigating something beyond just book research," Denise concluded. "Those letters may be real, but they're not the whole story."

"What do we do?" Ellie asked. "Should we be concerned?"

"About Victoria? I don't think so," Mari said slowly. "But I am curious about what she's not telling us. About her connection to Marcel, and to this cold case."

"Then we do what any good book club discussing a mystery would do," Denise said with a slight smile. "We investigate."

"What, like amateur sleuths?" Liv asked, raising an eyebrow. "Isn't that a bit... cliché?"

"Sometimes clichés exist for a reason," Trish said, warming to the idea. "We have unique access to resources. I have the library archives, Denise has her detective experience, Mari knows the local shopkeepers, Liv has connections with the old families through her wine business..."

"And I have a professional understanding of human behavior," Ellie added, catching the enthusiasm. "Plus, we're just a book club showing interest in local history. Nobody would suspect a thing."

Mari looked at her friends, suddenly seeing them as Victoria might—a perfect, ready-made team of investigators hiding in plain sight beneath the innocent guise of middle-aged women discussing books over wine and cheese.

"Are we really considering this?" she asked, half-amused, half-serious.

"Consider it research for our own cozy mystery," Denise suggested with a wry smile. "Besides, what's the harm in asking a few questions about an old cold case? At worst, we learn some local history. At best..."

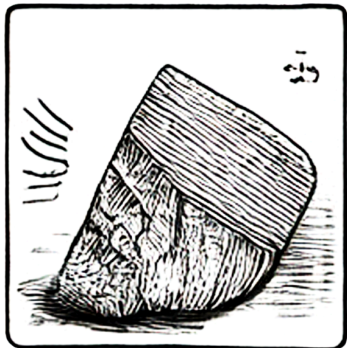
"We figure out what Victoria Sterling is really doing in Inkwell Cove," Trish finished.

As they parted ways in the hotel parking lot, each heading to her own car, Mari couldn't shake the feeling that they had just crossed some invisible threshold. The Novel Sippers had always discussed fictional mysteries. Now, it seemed, they were about to step into one of their own.

And like the cheese board Victoria had so carefully avoided, this mystery had distinct and possibly dangerous layers—ones that someone might not want uncovered.

The first hole in Victoria's story had appeared. Mari wondered how many more they would find before they reached the center of the truth.

# Chapter 5: Layers Like Fine Brie



The autumn night had turned chilly by the time the Novel Sippers spilled out of The Wine Plot, their voices animated after an evening that none of them had anticipated when they'd gathered for their regular meeting. Victoria Sterling—*the* Victoria Sterling—had not only joined their discussion but had asked to meet them

again. Mari wrapped her cardigan tighter around herself, still trying to process everything that had happened.

"I still can't believe she just showed up like that," Trish said, her librarian's tote swinging as she gestured excitedly. "Do you think she planned it all along? Finding us here in Inkwell Cove?"

"She did mention research for her next book," Ellie reminded them, pulling her car keys from her purse. "Though it does seem like quite a coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidences," Denise said, her expression thoughtful in the glow of the streetlamp. "Not after twenty-five years in homicide."

"Oh, come on," Liv laughed, brushing a silver-streaked curl from her face. "This isn't one of your murder cases, Denise. It's just a famous author visiting a charming coastal town. No bodies, no crime scene."

"Yet," Denise said dryly, prompting a round of laughter that dissipated some of the strange tension that had built during the evening.

As the others said their goodnights and headed to their cars, Victoria emerged from The Wine Plot, pausing in the doorway. The light behind

her cast her distinctive silhouette—tall, elegant, with that dramatic streak of white in her auburn hair.

"Mari," she called softly. "Do you have a moment?"

Mari turned back, surprised. "Of course."

She waved goodbye to her friends and approached Victoria, noting how the author's composed demeanor seemed slightly less certain now that they were alone.

"I wanted to thank you," Victoria said, her voice lower than it had been inside. "For including me tonight. Your book club is exactly what I've been looking for in my research."

"We're hardly representative of most book clubs," Mari demurred. "Five middle-aged women with very specific tastes in mysteries and very strong opinions about fictional murder methods."

Victoria's laugh was genuine. "That's precisely why you're perfect. Isabel's next case involves a group very much like yours—women who understand both the conventions of mysteries and the complexities of life at our age." She glanced over Mari's shoulder to where the others were getting into their cars. "They're remarkable, your friends."

"They are," Mari agreed, unable to suppress the pride in her voice. "Though I'm not sure they'd all consider themselves remarkable."

"That's part of it, isn't it?" Victoria mused. "How we become invisible at a certain age. People look past us, underestimate us. It can be... useful, in the right circumstances."

There was something pointed in her tone that made Mari look at her more closely. "Useful for what, exactly?"

Victoria seemed to consider her words carefully. "For seeing things others miss. For asking questions others wouldn't think to ask." She paused, then added, "For investigating matters that might otherwise remain hidden."

A chill that had nothing to do with the night air traveled up Mari's spine. "What kind of matters?"

Instead of answering directly, Victoria glanced around, as if checking for listeners. "Would you mind walking with me for a bit? I find I think more clearly when I'm moving."

Curiosity getting the better of her caution, Mari nodded. They fell into step together, moving away from The Wine Plot toward the harbor promenade that wrapped around this end of town. The moon had risen fully now, casting silver light across the gentle waves of the cove. Fishing boats bobbed at their moorings, their masts making soft tapping sounds that punctuated the quiet.

"I told your group that I'm researching a new novel," Victoria said after they had walked in silence for several minutes. "That's true, but it's not the whole truth."

Mari waited, sensing that Victoria needed to reveal information at her own pace.

"I've been receiving letters," Victoria continued, echoing what she'd mentioned earlier inside the bar. "Disturbing ones. At first, I thought they were from an overzealous fan or someone with a grudge against my success. That happens in publishing more often than you'd think."

"What kind of letters?" Mari asked, thinking of the times she'd received unhinged reviews of her bookstore online—the hazards of running a public business in the internet age.



"Accusations," Victoria replied, her voice dropping further. "Someone claiming I've stolen from them—not just ideas, but entire life experiences. That Isabel Greene is based on them, not on me. That I've been... what was the phrase? Ah yes, 'mining another's pain for profit.'"

"That sounds disturbing, but not exactly threatening," Mari observed. "More like someone who feels their story has been appropriated."

Victoria nodded. "That's what my agent said. Ignore them, move on. But then they began to include details—specific details about my research process, about trips I've taken, about conversations I've had in private. As if the sender has been watching me, following me." She shuddered visibly. "The most recent letter arrived just before I came to Inkwell Cove. It said, 'The truth, like fine cheese, has layers. Return to where it began, where the curd was cut, and you'll find what you've been missing.'"

Mari stopped walking, the literary reference striking her immediately. "'Where the curd was cut'—that's from *The Stilton Stalker*, isn't it? When Isabel realizes the cheese factory is connected to the murders."

"Precisely," Victoria said, looking impressed. "You have an excellent memory for detail."

"It's my favorite of your books," Mari admitted. "I've read it multiple times. But what does that reference have to do with Inkwell Cove?"

Victoria resumed walking, her pace slower now. "Three months ago, I began researching cold cases for my new novel. I was looking for something specific—disappearances connected to food production facilities, particularly dairies or cheese operations. Specialized enough to be interesting, but with enough universal elements that readers could connect."

"And you found the Blackwood Dairy case," Mari said, pieces starting to align in her mind.

"I found several potential cases," Victoria corrected. "But as I narrowed my research, I kept coming back to Michael Landry's disappearance. The timing of it, the circumstances, the way the investigation seemed to... evaporate. And then, most intriguingly, the location."

"Inkwell Cove isn't exactly famous," Mari pointed out. "What made it stand out?"

Victoria stopped at a bench overlooking the harbor and sat down, gesturing for Mari to join her. "Because twenty years ago, I spent a summer here, researching my first Isabel Greene novel."

Mari blinked in surprise. "You were in Inkwell Cove before? I don't remember that, and I've lived here most of my life."

"I kept a low profile," Victoria explained. "I wasn't Victoria Sterling then, not as the public knows me now. I was still writing under my birth name, Victoria Matthews, and my first book hadn't even been published. I stayed at a small bed and breakfast on the outskirts of town, spent my days at the library or walking the coast, taking notes."

"And you came back now because...?"

"Because the letters mentioned cheese production. Because I remembered there had been a dairy here that closed under mysterious circumstances. And because when I started looking into the Landry disappearance, I found connections I couldn't ignore." Victoria leaned closer, her voice hardly more than a whisper now. "I believe Michael Landry discovered something at Blackwood Dairy—something worth silencing him for. Something that might have continued long after the dairy closed."

"What kind of something?" Mari asked, both skeptical and intrigued.

Victoria shook her head. "I don't know yet. But I intend to find out. The letters... they feel personal, Mari. As if someone knows why I'm interested in this case, as if they're daring me to dig deeper." She looked out at the dark water. "Or warning me away."

Mari studied Victoria's profile in the moonlight, trying to reconcile this earnest, slightly fearful woman with the polished, confident author who had commanded attention at The Wine Plot earlier. Which version was real? Or were they both performances?

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked finally. "We barely know each other."

Victoria turned to her with a small smile. "Your letter."

"My letter?"

"The one you wrote four years ago, after your divorce. You said Isabel Greene had become your 'unexpected companion during the loneliest year of your life.' That she had shown you that anxiety could be a superpower rather than a weakness." Victoria's voice had softened. "It was one of the most genuine responses I've ever received to my work. You understood exactly what I was trying to do with Isabel."

Mari felt heat rise to her cheeks, embarrassed and touched that her words had made such an impression. "It was a difficult time," she said simply.

"For both of us," Victoria replied. "I was going through my own divorce when I received your letter. It reminded me why I write, why Isabel matters." She paused. "And that's why I trust you with this. Because you see beneath the surface, just as Isabel does."

The compliment warmed Mari, though a part of her remained wary. Victoria Sterling was, after all, a master storyteller. This could be another performance, another layer of fiction.

"What exactly are you asking of me?" Mari said carefully.

"Information," Victoria replied. "Access. Your book club friends are embedded in this community in ways I could never be as an outsider. The librarian, the former detective, the psychiatrist, the wine expert—you're positioned perfectly to help me understand what happened here all those years ago."

"You want us to investigate a cold case from the 1980s?" Mari asked incredulously. "We're a book club, not a detective agency."

"But you discuss detective work every month," Victoria pointed out. "You analyze fictional crimes, identify clues, question motivations. I'm simply suggesting you apply those same skills to a real mystery." She leaned forward, her eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Besides, aren't you curious? About what happened to Michael Landry? About why someone might be sending me these letters now?"

Mari couldn't deny that she was curious. Her "prose-ac vision," as she jokingly called it, had already been cataloging the inconsistencies in Victoria's behavior, the strange coincidences of her arrival in Inkwell Cove, the tension between her and Marcel Fontaine.

"I'd need to discuss this with the others," she said finally. "This isn't a decision I can make alone."

"Of course," Victoria agreed immediately. "I wouldn't want you to. In fact, I'm counting on all of you."

She reached into her pocket and withdrew a small, folded piece of paper. "This arrived at my hotel this afternoon."

Mari took it gingerly. The paper was expensive, creamy and thick, with a watermark she couldn't quite make out in the dim light. Unfolding it, she read the typed message:

*The Novel Sippers meet over cheese and wine, while old secrets curdle beneath Inkwell Cove. Ask them about the dairy, about what ripens in dark places. Some traditions never die, they just change their appearance—like a fine Brie, layers hiding what's beneath.*

"This is addressed to you, but it's about us," Mari said, a chill running through her. "How would anyone know you've met with our book club?"

"Exactly my question," Victoria replied grimly. "Someone is watching. Not just me anymore, but all of us."

Mari refolded the paper and handed it back, her mind racing. "Have you shown this to the police?"

"And tell them what? That someone wrote a vaguely ominous note about cheese?" Victoria shook her head. "No, I need to understand what I'm dealing with first. I need to know why the sender connected you—your book club—to the Blackwood case."

They sat in silence for a moment, the gentle lapping of waves against the harbor wall the only sound. Mari felt as if she were standing on a threshold, one foot in her comfortable, predictable life and one foot hovering over something else entirely—something that might be dangerous, but might also be exhilarating.

"I have a suggestion," she said finally. "You mentioned you'd like to join our book club again. Why don't you come to my store the day after tomorrow? I'll arrange for the others to be there, and we can discuss this properly. If—and it's a big if—we decide to help you, we'll do it on our terms, as a group."

Relief washed over Victoria's face. "That would be perfect. Thank you, Mari."

As they rose to leave, Victoria placed a hand on Mari's arm. "One more thing. Be cautious about who you trust with this information, even in Inkwell Cove. Especially in Inkwell Cove."

"Why especially here?" Mari asked, puzzled.

"Because every good mystery has layers, just like a fine Brie," Victoria said, her expression grave. "And in my experience, the most dangerous secrets are hidden in plain sight, protected by those who seem most respectable."

With that cryptic warning, she turned and walked back toward the main street, her figure gradually disappearing into the shadows between the streetlamps.

Mari remained by the harbor for a few minutes more, trying to make sense of the conversation. Part of her wanted to dismiss Victoria's concerns as the overactive imagination of a mystery writer. Another part—the part that had devoured countless detective novels—recognized the patterns of a genuine mystery unfolding.

As she finally turned to head back to her car, her phone buzzed with a text. Expecting one of her friends checking that she'd gotten home safely, she was surprised to see an unknown number.

*The cheese shop. Tomorrow, 9 AM before opening. I have information about VS that you need to hear. Come alone. —M*

M for Marcel? Mari wondered, remembering the French cheesemonger's enigmatic warning at the book signing. First Victoria with her talk of threatening letters and cold cases, now Marcel with his cryptic text. What exactly had the Novel Sippers stumbled into?

As she drove home through the quiet streets of Inkwell Cove, Mari couldn't shake the feeling that Victoria was right about one thing: beneath the picturesque surface of this town, something had been

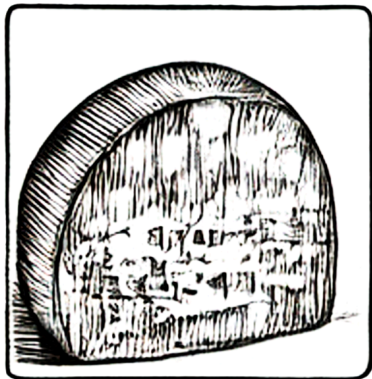
hidden for a very long time. Something that was beginning to rise to the top, like cream separating from milk.

Or like a body, preserved in the cold depths, finally breaking free of its weights and floating to the surface.

The thought made her shiver as she pulled into her driveway, the familiar sight of her small cottage suddenly less comforting than it had been that morning. She checked her locks twice before going to bed, something she hadn't done since the early days after her divorce.

Sleep, when it finally came, was fractured by dreams of cheese caves deep beneath Inkwell Cove, where secrets aged in the darkness, growing stronger and more pungent with each passing year.

# Chapter 6: A Fatal Pairing



The shrill ring of Mari's phone cut through her dreams of dark cheese caves and buried secrets. Fumbling in the pre-dawn darkness, she squinted at the screen—5:17 AM and an unfamiliar local number.

"Hello?" she croaked, voice thick with sleep.

"Ms. Paige? This is Detective Ryan Armstrong, Inkwell Cove Police Department. I apologize for the early call, but there's been an incident at the Harborview Hotel involving Victoria Sterling. I understand you met with her yesterday evening?"

Mari sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake. "Yes, I did. What's happened? Is she all right?"

The pause that followed told her everything.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. We'd appreciate if you could come down to the hotel. Ms. Sterling had your contact information prominently displayed on a notepad beside her bed."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," Mari said, already reaching for yesterday's jeans draped over her reading chair.

After a hasty splash of water on her face and a reminder from her phone to take her Lexapro, Mari was in her car, driving through streets still wrapped in predawn stillness. The sky was just beginning to lighten at the edges, a thin line of pale gold against the dark water of the harbor as she pulled into the Harborview's circular drive.



The scene that greeted her sent a chill through her body despite the warmth of her hastily grabbed cardigan. Two police cruisers and an ambulance stood outside the entrance, their lights casting rhythmic red and blue patterns across the Victorian façade. A small cluster of early-rising hotel guests huddled in the lobby, their faces a blend of curiosity and concern.

A uniformed officer directed her to the elevator. "Detective Armstrong is expecting you, ma'am. Top floor."

The Elizabeth Blackwood Suite. Where just two evenings ago, the Novel Sippers had gathered around Victoria Sterling, drinking wine and discussing mysteries over an elaborate cheese board that their famous guest had carefully avoided.

The elevator doors opened directly into the suite's private foyer, now transformed by the grim efficiency of police procedure. Evidence markers dotted the plush carpet, and two people in what Mari recognized as medical examiner jackets were conferring in low voices near the bedroom door.

"Ms. Paige?"

A tall man with salt-and-pepper hair approached, extending his hand. Detective Ryan Armstrong had the weathered face of someone who spent time outdoors, with crow's feet at the corners of intelligent gray eyes. In his mid-fifties, Mari guessed, and carrying himself with the quiet confidence of long experience.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," he said, his voice a low baritone that seemed designed for delivering difficult news. "I understand you were one of the last people to see Ms. Sterling alive."

Mari nodded, trying to ignore the word "were." "We met for our book club two nights ago, and then I spoke with her privately afterward. What happened, Detective?"

Armstrong guided her to the sitting area—the same space where they had tasted Liv's wines and discussed *The Camembert Conspiracy*. Even the furniture had been arranged the same way, though now a camera on a tripod stood where Victoria had sat in her armchair throne.

"Ms. Sterling was found by housekeeping this morning when they came to deliver her requested 5 AM wake-up coffee," he explained, gesturing for Mari to sit on the sofa. "Based on preliminary examination, she appears to have passed away sometime during the night, likely between midnight and 3 AM."

"How?" Mari managed, the single word catching in her throat.

Armstrong's expression grew careful. "At this point, it appears to be an unfortunate combination of her medication and alcohol. There was an empty wine bottle beside the bed and her prescription medication container open on the nightstand."

Mari frowned. "That doesn't make sense. Victoria was extremely careful about her medication. She mentioned to me specifically that she never mixed it with alcohol."

"People make mistakes, Ms. Paige. Especially when they're in unfamiliar surroundings, perhaps had one glass too many..."

"No," Mari shook her head firmly. "She was meticulous about it. She told me her character Isabel Greene's caution about medication interactions was based on her own habits."

Armstrong studied her with new interest. "You seem quite certain about this."

"I am. I take the same medication—Lexapro. I know the warnings by heart, and so did she." Mari met his gaze steadily. "Victoria wouldn't have made that mistake."

The detective made a note in a small leather-bound notebook that reminded Mari eerily of Denise's. "That's useful information, thank you. Is there anything else you noticed about Ms. Sterling's habits or behavior that might be relevant?"

Mari hesitated, uncertain how much of Victoria's confidences she should share. Before she could decide, Armstrong continued.

"For instance, the room service tray beside her bed included a plate of local cheeses, completely untouched. Does that strike you as unusual?"

The detail hit Mari like a physical blow. "Yes," she said quietly. "Victoria claimed to be lactose intolerant. She avoided cheese entirely when she joined our book club, despite her character's supposed passion for it."

"Yet she ordered a cheese plate delivered to her room late last night," Armstrong mused. "Curious."

"It suggests she was expecting company," Mari said, the realization forming as she spoke. "Someone she wanted to impress or accommodate, but not herself."

Armstrong's eyebrows rose. "That's an interesting observation, Ms. Paige. One I was considering myself."

Something in his tone made Mari look at him more closely. He didn't have the dismissive attitude she might have expected from a small-town detective toward a bookstore owner's amateur insights. Instead, he seemed genuinely interested in her perspective.

"May I see her?" Mari asked suddenly.

Armstrong hesitated. "That's not typically allowed—"

"Please," Mari interrupted. "I might notice something important. Something that relates to what she told me last night."

A silent calculation seemed to take place behind Armstrong's eyes before he nodded. "Briefly. The medical examiner has completed her initial examination."

He led Mari to the bedroom doorway but stopped her from entering. "Look, but don't cross the threshold."

The bedroom was as opulent as the rest of the suite, dominated by a four-poster bed where Victoria Sterling lay. Mari had expected to be horrified by the sight, but instead found herself struck by how peaceful Victoria looked—as if she had simply fallen asleep while reading. The bedside lamp was still on, casting a warm glow over the scene.

On the nightstand stood an open prescription bottle, a half-empty glass of water, and Victoria's signature fountain pen beside an open notebook. On the other side of the bed, a room service tray held the promised cheese plate—an elegant arrangement of local varieties, each labeled with a small card. Beside it stood an empty wine bottle and a single used glass.

But what caught Mari's attention was the second glass on the nightstand. Clean, unused, waiting.

"She was definitely expecting someone," Mari murmured.

"I came to the same conclusion," Armstrong said quietly beside her. "The question is, who? And did they arrive before or after she died?"

Mari's gaze swept the room again, absorbing details with what she called her "prose-ac vision"—the hyperaware state that sometimes accompanied her anxiety but which she had learned to channel into observation rather than panic.

The covers were disturbed only on one side of the bed. Victoria was wearing silk pajamas, her hair loose around her shoulders rather than in her usual elegant updo. The book on her lap was one of her own—a copy of *The Stilton Stalker*, Mari realized with a pang of emotion.

"Detective, when you move the book, check if it's open to chapter seven," she said.

Armstrong looked at her curiously. "Why chapter seven specifically?"

"Because that's where Isabel Greene realizes that the medication found in the victim's system wasn't Lexapro at all, but something that looked like it—a counterfeit pill that became lethal when combined with alcohol."

A moment of silence stretched between them as Armstrong absorbed her words. "You believe someone might have deliberately tampered with her medication?"

"I'm saying it's worth checking," Mari replied. "Victoria was researching the Blackwood Dairy cold case from the 1980s. She believed it connected to something ongoing in Inkwell Cove, something dangerous enough that someone might want to stop her investigation."

Armstrong's expression shifted, professionalism momentarily giving way to surprise. "She told you this?"

"Last night, after our book club meeting. She'd been receiving threatening letters related to her research." Mari took a deep breath. "Detective, I think Victoria Sterling was murdered, and I think it was made to look like an accidental interaction between medication and alcohol."

Instead of the skepticism she expected, Armstrong studied her thoughtfully. "You're very observant, Ms. Paige. And you might be right."

But I'll need more than literary parallels to convince my captain to treat this as a homicide investigation."

"Check her research materials," Mari suggested. "She kept extensive notes. If she was getting close to something dangerous, it might be in there."

"We haven't found any research notes," Armstrong said. "Just her published books and personal items."

A chill ran through Mari. "Someone took them. That's what they were after."

Before Armstrong could respond, a young officer appeared at the bedroom door. "Detective? The hotel manager would like to speak with you about the deceased's personal effects."

"I'll be right there," Armstrong said, then turned back to Mari. "Thank you for your insights, Ms. Paige. I may have more questions for you later."

As they walked back to the suite's entrance, Mari gathered her courage. "Detective Armstrong, you're taking my concerns seriously. May I ask why? Most police officers would dismiss a bookstore owner's suspicions based on a mystery novel."

Armstrong's mouth quirked in a half-smile that softened his serious face. "Let's just say I've learned that sometimes the most obvious explanation isn't the correct one. And..." he hesitated, then added, "I happen to be something of a mystery reader myself. *The Stilton Stalker* is actually my favorite of Ms. Sterling's books."

The unexpected connection startled a small laugh from Mari despite the grimness of the situation. "Mine too."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd make yourself available for further questions," Armstrong said, his tone returning to professional. "And if you recall anything else about your conversation with Ms. Sterling—anything at all—please contact me immediately." He handed her a business card. "My direct line is on the back."

As Mari made her way back to the elevator, she glanced once more at the bedroom doorway, where the medical examiner's team was now preparing to remove Victoria's body. The peaceful scene was being dismantled, reduced to evidence and procedures. Yet something about it continued to nag at Mari—some detail she had noticed but not yet processed.

The elevator doors closed, and Mari leaned against the wall, suddenly exhausted. Victoria Sterling was dead. The woman whose books had helped her through the darkest period of her life, whose detective had shown her that anxiety could be a strength rather than a weakness, was gone.

And her final words to Mari had been a warning.

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By mid-morning, news of Victoria Sterling's death had spread through Inkwell Cove like spilled milk. Mari had barely opened Bound Together when Trish burst through the door, eyes wide with shock.

"Tell me it isn't true," she demanded, librarian's tote swinging wildly from her arm. "The entire town is saying Victoria Sterling died last night at the Harborview."

Mari nodded grimly, the reality still sinking in. "I was there this morning. The police called me because apparently, she had my contact information beside her bed."

"Oh my god," Trish whispered, sinking into the nearest reading chair.  
"What happened?"

"The official line is accidental death—her Lexapro mixed with alcohol," Mari said, lowering her voice though the store was empty of customers.  
"But I don't believe it for a second."

The bell above the door chimed again as Liv entered, her usually perfect composure visibly shaken. "I just heard. Please tell me everyone's overreacting and she's just checked out early."

Before Mari could respond, Denise arrived, followed minutes later by Ellie, who was breathless from rushing over between patient appointments. The five women huddled in the small reading nook at the back of the store, speaking in hushed tones despite being alone.

Mari recounted everything—the early morning call, the scene at the hotel, her conversation with Detective Armstrong, and most importantly, the untouched cheese plate and the unused second glass.

"She was definitely expecting someone," Denise agreed, her detective's mind already working through the scenario. "Someone she wanted to impress or accommodate with the cheese, since she didn't eat it herself."

"Could it have been one of us?" Ellie asked, the psychiatrist in her considering all possibilities. "She might have wanted to continue our conversation from the book club."

"None of us mentioned going to see her last night," Liv pointed out.  
"And I can vouch for myself—I was hosting a wine tasting at The Vineyard Villa until nearly midnight."

"I was cataloging new arrivals at the library until late," Trish added.  
"The system timestamps my entries, so that's verifiable."



"I was home, but my building has security cameras in the lobby," Denise said. "They'd show I didn't leave after 9 PM."

"And I was finishing case notes until at least eleven," Ellie said. "My assistant can confirm I was sending emails until then."

Mari felt a chill. They were all establishing alibis, as if they already knew this was a murder investigation rather than an accident.

"I need to tell you all something," she said, deciding it was time to share everything. "The night before last, after we left The Wine Plot, Victoria asked me to stay behind. She told me things—important things—about why she was really in Inkwel Cove."

She recounted her moonlit conversation with Victoria—the threatening letters, the connection to the Blackwood Dairy cold case, Victoria's suspicion that Michael Landry had discovered something worth killing for.

"She was investigating, not just researching," Mari concluded. "And she wanted our help because we have connections throughout Inkwel Cove that she couldn't access as an outsider."

"The librarian, the former detective, the psychiatrist, the wine expert, and the bookstore owner at the heart of the community," Denise mused. "She assembled her own little investigation team."

"And now she's dead," Trish said, her voice small. "The timing can't be coincidence."

"There's more," Mari said, pulling out her phone to show them the text she'd received after parting from Victoria. "This came from an unknown number, just after Victoria and I finished talking."

The others leaned in to read the message: *The cheese shop. Tomorrow, 9 AM before opening. I have information about VS that you need to hear. Come alone. —M*

"M for Marcel?" Liv guessed. "The cheesemonger who had that tense interaction with Victoria at the book signing?"

"That's what I assumed," Mari agreed. "I was going to meet him this morning, but then the police called..."

"You need to go," Denise said decisively. "We need to know what Marcel knows."

"But Victoria is dead," Ellie protested. "Shouldn't we leave this to the police?"

Denise shook her head. "If Mari's right and someone tampered with Victoria's medication, the police might not discover it without knowing what to look for. Detective Armstrong seems reasonably competent, but he needs more to go on."

"So what are you suggesting?" Liv asked. "That we investigate ourselves?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting," Denise replied, her expression serious. "Victoria came to us for a reason. She trusted us to help her uncover the truth about the Blackwood Dairy case, and now she's dead because of what she discovered."

"Or what someone thought she discovered," Mari added quietly.

"We're a book club, not detectives," Trish pointed out, though her tone suggested she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea.

"We're women who've spent years analyzing murders, motives, and methods," Denise countered. "We know this town and its people in

ways an outside investigator never could. And most importantly, no one would suspect a group of middle-aged women discussing books of conducting a serious investigation."

"Our invisibility is our superpower," Mari said, recalling Victoria's words about how women their age became unseen, underestimated.

"I can access library records and archives without raising eyebrows," Trish said, warming to the idea. "Historical documents, old newspapers..."

"And I hear things in my therapy room that would surprise you," Ellie added. "Patient confidentiality prevents me from sharing specifics, but I can certainly keep my ears open for relevant patterns."

"My wine business gives me access to social events, including those hosted by the Blackwoods," Liv mused. "Elizabeth Blackwood has personally invited me to several tastings at her estate."

"And I've maintained contacts in law enforcement," Denise said. "Including a few who owe me favors from my Boston days."

They all turned to Mari, who felt a familiar flutter of anxiety in her chest, followed by the steady calm that her medication had taught her to find. "And I'm at the center of it all," she said. "The bookstore owner who everyone talks to, who no one sees as a threat."

"Then it's settled," Denise said, her expression grim but determined. "The Novel Sippers are officially forming a Plot Committee."

"A what?" Ellie asked.

"A Plot Committee," Denise repeated. "It's what we called our special investigations unit in Boston. Seemed appropriate for a book club turning detective."

"I like it," Trish said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.  
"Literary and mysterious."

"Then as our first official action," Mari said, drawing strength from her friends' resolve, "I'll meet Marcel at The Aged Page at 9 AM tomorrow and find out what he knows about Victoria."

"Not alone," Denise insisted. "I'll be nearby. You may trust Marcel, but someone in this town was willing to kill Victoria Sterling. We need to be careful."

"Agreed," the others said almost in unison.

As they worked out the logistics of their nascent investigation, a strange mix of emotions swirled through Mari—grief for Victoria, anxiety about the danger they might be facing, but also a sense of purpose she hadn't felt in years. This wasn't a fictional mystery they were discussing over wine and cheese. This was real, with real stakes and real danger.

"We need to cheese the day," Mari said suddenly.

The others looked at her in confusion.

"Seize the day," she clarified with a small smile. "But with cheese. It's what Victoria would have appreciated—a terrible pun in the midst of a deadly serious situation."

"To cheesing the day," Liv agreed, raising an imaginary glass. "And to finding justice for Victoria Sterling."

As her friends echoed the sentiment, Mari felt the weight of responsibility settling on her shoulders. Victoria had trusted her with her suspicions, had seen something in the Novel Sippers that made her believe they could uncover the truth.

"One more thing," Mari said, suddenly remembering. "Detective Armstrong mentioned the hotel manager was handling Victoria's personal effects. I should check if she left anything for me. She knew my contact information was by her bed—maybe she left other messages we should know about."

"Good thinking," Denise approved. "Call the hotel right away."

Twenty minutes later, after a brief phone conversation with the Harborview's manager, Mari was hanging up with a puzzled expression.

"Victoria did leave something for me," she said slowly. "A package at the front desk, with instructions it should be given to me if anything happened to her."

"That's... ominous," Trish said. "As if she expected something might happen."

"The manager said I can pick it up anytime," Mari continued. "The police have already examined it and cleared it for release."

"We'll go together," Denise decided. "Right now, before whoever killed Victoria realizes what she might have left behind."

The five women moved with new purpose, locking up the bookstore and heading to their cars with the synchronized efficiency of long friendship. As they pulled away from the curb, none of them noticed the figure watching from across the street—a solitary observer making a note in a small book before walking unhurriedly toward the harbor.

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The package from Victoria was waiting at the Harborview's front desk, a simple manila envelope with "For Marianne Paige" written in

Victoria's elegant handwriting. The manager handed it over with a sympathetic smile.

"Such a tragedy," she murmured. "Ms. Sterling was a lovely guest."

Back in the privacy of Mari's car, the Novel Sippers gathered around as she carefully opened the envelope. Inside was a leather-bound notebook similar to the one Mari had noticed on Victoria's nightstand, but older, its cover worn with use.

A small note was paper-clipped to the front cover:

*Mari—*

*If you're reading this, something has gone wrong. Trust your prose-ac vision. The truth is here, between the lines, where the curd was cut.*

*—Victoria*

With trembling fingers, Mari opened the notebook. Inside were dozens of pages filled with Victoria's handwriting—notes, diagrams, newspaper clippings carefully taped to the pages. All of it centered around one case: the disappearance of Michael Landry from Blackwood Dairy in 1988.

"She left us her research," Denise breathed, leaning over Mari's shoulder. "Everything she had uncovered about the cold case."

"But why?" Ellie wondered. "Why not turn this over to the police?"

"Because she didn't know who to trust," Mari said quietly, remembering Victoria's warning about being careful in Inkwell Cove. "And because she believed that we—the Novel Sippers—were the only ones who could uncover the truth."

"Then that's exactly what we'll do," Trish said with uncharacteristic fierceness. "For Victoria."

As Mari flipped through the pages, a small photo slipped out—a group shot from decades earlier, showing a dairy operation with workers posed in front of milk cans. Her breath caught as she recognized one face.

"Is that...?"

"Marcel Fontaine," Liv confirmed, peering at the young man in the image. "Much younger, but definitely him."

"He worked at Blackwood Dairy?" Mari said in surprise. "He never mentioned that when he talked about knowing Victoria."

"Look at the date," Denise pointed to the caption beneath the photo. "1988. The same year Michael Landry disappeared."

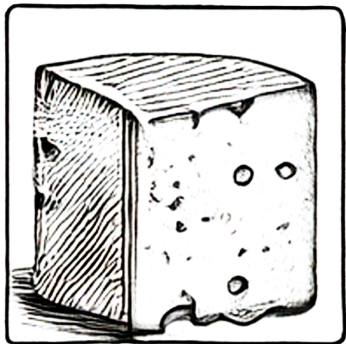
The five women exchanged glances, the implications settling over them like a chill fog rolling in from the harbor. Their investigation had just begun, but already they were uncovering connections they never imagined existed in their small, supposedly peaceful town.

"I think," Mari said slowly, "we need to have a very serious conversation with Marcel Fontaine."

As the Novel Sippers left the hotel, the notebook safely tucked into Mari's tote bag, none of them noticed Detective Ryan Armstrong watching thoughtfully from his unmarked car across the street—or the fact that he was making notes in a leather-bound notebook remarkably similar to Victoria Sterling's.

The Plot Committee had formed, the investigation had begun, and somewhere in Inkwell Cove, a killer was watching.

# Chapter 7: Aging Process



The Aged Page cheese shop sat at the corner of Harbor Street and Maple Lane, its storefront distinguished by hand-painted blue shutters and window boxes overflowing with herbs. A wooden sign bearing a wedge of cheese superimposed over an open book creaked gently in the morning breeze. Mari checked her watch—8:55 AM—before glancing across the street to where Denise

sat in her car, pretending to read the morning paper but keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings.

Mari took a deep breath, feeling the familiar flutter of anxiety in her chest. The Lexapro helped moderate it, transforming what once would have been paralyzing fear into manageable nervous energy. After Victoria's death, this meeting with Marcel felt fraught with possibilities both enlightening and dangerous.

The shop's door was locked as expected, but when Mari knocked, a shadow moved behind the frosted glass. The lock clicked, and Marcel Fontaine's distinctive silver-streaked head appeared.

"Ms. Paige," he said, his accent more pronounced than usual. "Thank you for coming. Please, enter quickly."

He ushered her inside, immediately relocking the door behind them. The interior of The Aged Page was cool and dimly lit, with glass-fronted refrigerated cases displaying cheeses of every description, each labeled with both its origin and Marcel's personal tasting notes. The shop smelled of the earthy, complex aromas of aging milk—pungent but not unpleasant, like a forest floor in autumn.



"I was not certain you would come," Marcel said, gesturing toward a small table in the corner where two espresso cups waited alongside a plate of sliced bread. "After what happened to Victoria."

"You've heard," Mari said, studying his face for any reaction.

Marcel's expression tightened. "The entire town speaks of nothing else. They say it was her medication mixed with wine. An accident."

"But you don't believe that," Mari guessed, taking the seat he offered.

"Neither do you, or you would not be here." Marcel poured espresso into the tiny cups with the practiced precision of someone who had grown up with the ritual. "Victoria Sterling was many things, but careless with her health was not one of them."

"How well did you know her?" Mari asked directly.

Marcel's eyes, dark and shrewd, met hers. "Better than most in this town would guess. And not always as adversaries, despite what you witnessed at your bookstore." He pushed one of the espresso cups toward her. "Sugar?"

Mari shook her head. "You worked at Blackwood Dairy in 1988."

The statement clearly caught him off guard. His hand froze momentarily in the act of lifting his cup. "You have been investigating already. Impressive."

"Victoria left her research notebook," Mari explained. "There was a photograph of the dairy workers. You were among them."

Marcel sipped his espresso, the tiny cup almost disappearing in his weathered hands. "Yes. I worked there briefly when I first came to America. Before I opened this shop."

"The same year Michael Landry disappeared."

"Yes," Marcel said again, setting down his cup with deliberate care.  
"The same year."

"Was that why Victoria came to Inkwell Cove?" Mari pressed. "Because of your connection to the dairy?"

Marcel's laugh held no humor. "Victoria did not know I was in Inkwell Cove until she saw me at your bookstore. That, I assure you, was genuine surprise on her part."

"Then why was she here? Why was she researching the Landry disappearance?"

"Because she believed it was connected to something much larger," Marcel said, leaning forward. "Something that began at Blackwood Dairy but did not end when it closed. Something that continues to this day."

"Which is?"

Marcel glanced toward the windows, as if checking for observers, before continuing in a lower voice. "What do you know about counterfeit cheese, Ms. Paige?"

The question was so unexpected that Mari nearly laughed.  
"Counterfeit... cheese?"

"Yes. It is a serious matter, though few realize it." Marcel's expression remained grave. "The fine cheese market is worth billions. Where there is money, there is fraud. Inferior products labeled as premium varieties, with fabricated provenance and artificially aged rinds."

"And this connects to Victoria's death how, exactly?"

"Victoria was investigating money laundering operations," Marcel explained. "Specifically, operations that used artisanal food businesses

as fronts. The dairy industry, with its cash transactions and subjective quality assessments, is particularly vulnerable."

Mari tried to process this information. "Are you saying Blackwood Dairy was laundering money through... fake cheese?"

"I am saying that is what Victoria was investigating." Marcel stood suddenly. "But perhaps it is better if I show you than tell you. Come."

He led her toward the back of the shop, past a swinging door marked "Employees Only" and into a small storage area lined with wheels of cheese in various stages of aging. One wall held a large map of cheese-producing regions in France, marked with colored pins. The other featured a heavy wooden door with an old-fashioned metal lock.

Marcel produced a key from his pocket and turned it with a satisfying click. The door swung open to reveal a stone staircase descending into darkness. He flipped a switch, and antique-looking bulbs illuminated the passage.

"Watch your step," he cautioned. "These stairs are older than both of us combined."

The descent felt like entering another world. The temperature dropped noticeably with each step, and the air grew thicker with the complex aromas of aging cheese. At the bottom, Marcel paused to let Mari take in the sight before them.

They stood at the entrance to what could only be described as a cheese cave—a long, vaulted chamber carved from the living rock beneath Inkwell Cove. Wooden shelves lined the walls, each holding wheels and wedges of cheese in various stages of maturation. Some were covered in bloomy white rinds, others wrapped in leaves or cloth, still others naked and glistening with moisture. The chamber extended farther than the shop above, suggesting it predated the current building.

"Welcome to my aging room," Marcel said, his voice taking on a reverent quality. "Few customers see this place. It is the heart of my operation."

"It's... incredible," Mari breathed, the scene eerily reminiscent of her dream after speaking with Victoria. "How long has this been here?"

"The cave itself? Since before Inkwell Cove was founded. The early settlers used it for food storage. The Blackwood family later expanded it for their dairy operation."

Mari looked at him sharply. "This cave connects to the old Blackwood property?"

"It did once," Marcel nodded. "The tunnels extended beneath much of the original dairy land. Most have been sealed now, when the property was developed for real estate. But this section remained intact, and when I purchased this building twenty years ago, I reclaimed it for its original purpose."

He walked deeper into the cave, gesturing for Mari to follow. The space opened further into a round chamber where larger wheels of cheese rested on stone shelves carved directly from the rock walls.

"This is where I age my most special varieties," Marcel explained, pride evident in his voice. "The temperature and humidity are perfect, controlled by the natural properties of the stone and the flow of air from the harbor."

"It's beautiful," Mari said sincerely. "But what does this have to do with Victoria's investigation?"

Marcel ran a hand along one of the cheese wheels, checking its consistency with experienced fingers. "Victoria believed that the original Blackwood Dairy operation used these caves not just for

cheese production, but for hiding evidence of their financial dealings. A secret ledger room, if you will, where the true accounting took place."

"And Michael Landry discovered it," Mari realized. "That's why he disappeared."

"That was Victoria's theory," Marcel confirmed. "She believed Michael found evidence of money laundering and was silenced before he could report it."

"Did you know him? Michael Landry?"

Marcel's expression grew distant. "Not well. I had only been at the dairy a few months when he disappeared. He was... dedicated to his craft. Particular about the cheeses he created. He noticed details others missed."

"Like what?"

"Inconsistencies. Shipments that arrived without proper documentation. Specialty cultures ordered but never used in production. Wheels of cheese that were moved through the aging process too quickly." Marcel shook his head. "Things that would seem minor to most, but significant to someone who understood the art of cheesemaking."

Mari thought of Victoria's untouched cheese plate, the second unused glass in her hotel room. "The night Victoria died, she ordered a cheese plate but didn't eat it. I think she was expecting someone."

"Not me," Marcel said quickly. "I have not spoken with Victoria since your book signing. But..." he hesitated, "I was planning to. After our meeting today. I had information for her."

"What information?"

Marcel moved to a seemingly solid stone wall and pressed a section of it. To Mari's astonishment, a small door swung open, revealing a hidden cavity. From within, he removed an aged leather portfolio.

"This," he said, handing it to her with surprising gentleness. "I found it years ago, when I was renovating this chamber. Hidden behind one of the old drying racks."

Mari opened the portfolio carefully. Inside were brittle, yellowed papers—ledger sheets filled with columns of numbers, dates, and cryptic notations. Some entries were circled in faded red ink, with question marks and exclamation points in the margins.

"Michael Landry's handwriting," Marcel explained. "I recognized it from the production notes he used to keep. He was documenting discrepancies in the dairy's financial records. Proof of what Victoria suspected—that Blackwood Dairy was processing far more money than their legitimate cheese production could explain."

"And you kept this hidden all these years?" Mari asked, disbelief coloring her voice. "Why not go to the police?"

Marcel's laugh was bitter. "With what evidence? Ancient ledgers that I, a foreigner with limited English, claimed proved a prominent local family was engaging in criminal activity? The Blackwoods owned half the town then—including the police department."

"And now?"

"Now they own the other half as well," Marcel said grimly. "Through their real estate development company. They converted their dairying fortune into property, hotels, commercial buildings. They sit on every board, donate to every charity, sponsor every festival. They are Inkwell Cove's royalty."

Mari carefully reexamined the ledgers, noting dates and the largest transactions. "These are from thirty-seven years ago. Why would Victoria think this was still relevant today?"

"Because she believed the operation never stopped," Marcel said, taking back the portfolio and returning it to its hiding place. "It merely transformed, like a cheese culture adapting to new conditions. Different business, same underlying process."

"Money laundering through real estate development?" Mari suggested.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps through other artisanal food businesses. The craft cheese industry has exploded in the past decade. So many small producers, so little regulation of authenticity claims." Marcel's expression darkened. "It would be simple for someone with knowledge of both worlds to create a new version of the old scheme."

A disquieting thought occurred to Mari. "Is that why you opened a cheese shop? To investigate this yourself?"

Marcel's smile was enigmatic. "I opened The Aged Page because I love cheese, Ms. Paige. The fact that it positioned me to continue watching the Blackwoods was... a fortunate alignment of interests."

"And Victoria knew about your suspicions?"

"Not until recently. We crossed paths years ago at cheese industry events. I avoided her, afraid her persistent questioning might draw attention. But when I saw her here in Inkwell Cove, I realized it was time to share what I knew." His expression turned regretful. "I waited too long."

Mari thought of Victoria's warning about layers of truth, about secrets hidden in plain sight. "Did Victoria mention receiving threatening letters?"

Marcel nodded. "In her last message to me. She believed someone had discovered her research into the Blackwood case."

"Why not just tell me all this at the bookstore?" Mari asked. "Why the secrecy, the mysterious text?"

"Because walls have ears, Ms. Paige." Marcel gestured to the stone surrounding them. "Especially in Inkwell Cove. These caves may be the only truly private place in town."

As if to contradict his statement, a bell chimed faintly from above—the shop's door opening despite the locked entrance. Marcel tensed, signaling Mari to remain silent as he moved swiftly toward the stairs. Mari's heart hammered against her ribs, her "prose-ac vision" shifting into hyperawareness of every sound, every shadow.

Marcel returned moments later, his expression tight. "Elizabeth Blackwood," he said in a whisper. "Come to select cheeses for her charity wine tasting this weekend."

Mari's eyes widened. "The matriarch herself? Now?"

"She often comes early, before regular opening hours," Marcel explained. "Prefers to avoid the 'common shoppers,' as she puts it."

"What do we do?"

Marcel considered for a moment. "You will meet her. It is better than trying to explain why you are hiding in my cheese cave."

He led Mari back up the stairs, pausing at the top to straighten his apron and compose his features into a polite shopkeeper's expression. Mari followed, trying to calm her racing thoughts. She was about to meet the woman whose family might be at the center of everything Victoria had been investigating—the woman who might, if their



suspicions were correct, have had something to do with Victoria's death.

"Ah, Marcel, there you are," came a cultured voice as they emerged from the back room. "I was beginning to think you'd forgotten our standing appointment."

Elizabeth Blackwood stood at the cheese counter, elegant in a cashmere sweater and tailored slacks that spoke of old money and careful maintenance. In her mid-sixties, she wore her silver hair in a sleek bob that framed a face that must have been beautiful in youth and remained striking in age. Her posture was impeccable, her movements deliberate, and her gaze—now fixed on Mari with undisguised curiosity—was sharp as aged cheddar.

"Never, Madame Blackwood," Marcel replied with practiced deference. "I was just showing Ms. Paige my aging cave. She has a most discerning palate for someone so new to the world of artisanal cheese."

"Ms. Paige," Elizabeth repeated, studying Mari with new interest. "The bookstore owner. I've been meaning to visit your establishment. I understand you hosted Victoria Sterling recently."

The casual mention of Victoria sent a jolt through Mari. "Yes," she managed. "She did a signing and joined our book club before her... unfortunate passing."

"Tragic," Elizabeth said, though her tone suggested moderate inconvenience rather than tragedy. "I had invited her to my estate for an interview about her research. She was quite interested in local history."

"Any particular aspect of local history?" Mari asked, trying to keep her voice neutral.

Something flickered in Elizabeth's eyes—caution, perhaps, or calculation. "The development of Inkwell Cove from fishing village to vacation destination. My family has been instrumental in that transformation."

"Indeed they have," Marcel interjected smoothly. "Now, about your selection for the tasting..."

As Marcel guided Elizabeth through a sampling of cheeses, Mari observed the interaction with heightened attention. The dynamic between them was fascinating—Marcel's carefully calibrated deference masking what she now knew was decades of suspicion, Elizabeth's gracious condescension suggesting someone accustomed to deference as her natural due.

"This Valencay is particularly fine," Elizabeth noted, sampling a small triangle of ash-covered goat cheese. "The mineral notes complement the Sancerre I've selected for the first course."

"An excellent pairing," Marcel agreed. "Though if I might suggest the Bucheron instead? Its creamy texture develops more complexity as it comes to room temperature, creating an evolving tasting experience."

Elizabeth considered this with a small nod. "You may be right. Include both, I think. The contrast will give my guests something to discuss besides local gossip."

Her gaze shifted back to Mari. "Will you be attending the festival tasting, Ms. Paige? As a local business owner, you should be represented."

The invitation caught Mari off guard. "The Cheese & Wine Festival? I hadn't planned to..."

"You must," Elizabeth insisted with the casual authority of someone unused to refusal. "Your bookstore is becoming quite the cultural

cornerstone of our little community. I'll have my assistant send you a VIP pass."

"That's very kind," Mari said, wondering if this unexpected overture was simple community-building or something more calculated.

"Not at all. We Blackwoods have always supported local enterprises." Elizabeth's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Especially those that bring the right sort of attention to Inkwell Cove."

The implied distinction—right sort versus wrong sort—hung in the air between them.

"I imagine Victoria Sterling's death will bring quite a different sort of attention," Mari ventured, watching carefully for Elizabeth's reaction.

The older woman's expression didn't change, but Mari noticed her hand tighten slightly on her purse. "A sad coincidence that she passed while visiting our town. Though I understand it was related to her medication. A cautionary tale about mixing prescriptions with alcohol."

The precision of her information—details that hadn't been publicly released—was striking. Before Mari could formulate a response, Elizabeth turned back to Marcel.

"I'll expect the selections delivered to the estate tomorrow afternoon. The usual invoice arrangement." She extended her hand to Mari with regal grace. "A pleasure to meet you properly, Ms. Paige. I look forward to seeing you at the festival."

The command masquerading as invitation was clear. As Elizabeth swept out of the shop, the bell tinkling with her departure, Marcel let out a long breath.

"You see?" he said quietly. "The queen of Inkwell Cove. Nothing happens in this town without her knowledge."

"She seems very well-informed about Victoria's death," Mari noted.  
"The medication detail wasn't in the paper."

"Elizabeth Blackwood has always had excellent sources of information," Marcel replied. "But you handled yourself well. You did not reveal what you know."

"Which is still very little," Mari pointed out. "Ledgers from thirty-seven years ago and theories about counterfeit cheese don't exactly solve Victoria's murder."

"No," Marcel agreed. "But they provide context. And in investigations, context is everything." He hesitated before adding, "Victoria believed your book club friends could help uncover the truth. She said you each had access to different pieces of the puzzle."

"The Novel Sippers are meeting tonight," Mari said. "To discuss what we know and plan next steps."

"Be careful," Marcel warned. "If Victoria was right, someone in Inkwell Cove has been maintaining this secret for decades. They would not hesitate to eliminate new threats."

Mari thought of Victoria's body in the hotel bed, made to look like an accidental overdose. "I'm beginning to understand that."

As she left The Aged Page, nodding to Denise who still watched from her parked car, Mari felt the weight of Victoria's notebook in her tote bag. The photographer in her had captured the scene at Victoria's death—the peaceful arrangement, the book on her lap, the empty wine bottle.

But it was the cheese plate that kept returning to Mari's thoughts. The untouched arrangement of local varieties, each labeled with a small card. Someone Victoria had been expecting, someone who never

arrived—or who arrived and left without sampling the offering prepared for them.

Someone comfortable enough with cheese to be expected to appreciate such a gesture.

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"Counterfeit cheese?" Trish repeated incredulously. "That's what Victoria was investigating? Not exactly the dramatic revelation I was expecting."

The Novel Sippers had gathered at Liv's home that evening, converting her elegant dining room into what Denise referred to as their "incident room." The table was covered with papers—photocopies from Victoria's notebook, printouts of old newspaper articles about Michael Landry's disappearance, and maps of Inkwell Cove marking significant locations.

"It sounds absurd until you understand the economics," Liv said, uncorking a bottle of wine with practiced ease. "The luxury food market is worth billions. I've encountered counterfeit wines that sell for thousands per bottle—perfect reproductions of labels and capsules, but containing cheap bulk wine inside."

"Exactly," Mari agreed. "And according to Marcel, it's the perfect vehicle for money laundering. Hard to trace, difficult to prove fraud, and operating in a market where cash transactions are common."

"And this connects to Victoria's death how, exactly?" Ellie asked, arranging a plate of stress-baked cheese scones in the center of the table.

"That's what we need to figure out," Mari said. "Marcel believes the original operation at Blackwood Dairy never really ended—it just transformed into something else."

"Real estate development, perhaps," Denise suggested, pinning a photo of Elizabeth Blackwood to the corkboard they'd set up. "The family converted their dairy fortune into a property empire. Perfect for washing money."

"Or continued through other artisanal food businesses," Trish added, consulting her notes from the library archives. "The Blackwoods maintain financial interests in several specialty food producers around the region."

Mari filled them in on her encounter with Elizabeth Blackwood, describing the woman's composure, her specific knowledge of Victoria's death, and her unexpected invitation to the Cheese & Wine Festival.

"She's sizing you up," Denise concluded. "Trying to determine how much you know."

"Or establishing an alibi by being seen engaging normally with people connected to Victoria," Ellie suggested. "It's a classic psychological maneuver—hiding in plain sight."

Liv moved to her wine refrigerator, selecting bottles with thoughtful consideration. "I've prepared something special for tonight," she announced. "A tasting flight designed to match each of our potential suspects."

She set three bottles on the table, along with five crystal glasses. "For our first suspect, Marcel Fontaine, I've selected a Châteauneuf-du-Pape—complex, layered, with a history dating back centuries but reinvented for modern tastes. Much like Marcel himself, it reveals different notes as it opens up."

As Liv poured small measures for each of them, Denise arranged three cheese varieties on a wooden board. "And I've created what I'm calling

our 'cheese board of suspects,'" she explained with uncharacteristic playfulness. "Each cheese represents a potential person of interest."

She pointed to a crumbly blue cheese. "Marcel Fontaine—French origin, complex, aged in caves, with distinctive blue veins running throughout like secrets waiting to be discovered."

"I've been going through the library's microfiche archives," Trish said, accepting her wine glass. "The reporting on Michael Landry's disappearance was strangely limited. Three articles in the first week, then nothing. As if the story was deliberately allowed to fade away."

"Was there an official cause listed?" Ellie asked.

"Eventually ruled an accident," Trish replied. "The theory was that he fell into one of the processing vats and his body was... disposed of before anyone realized."

"Convenient," Denise muttered. "And unlikely. Modern dairy operations have significant safety protocols."

"Not so modern in 1988," Liv pointed out. "And especially not in family operations that might cut corners."

Mari removed Victoria's notebook from her tote bag, placing it carefully on the table. "I've been through this cover to cover. Victoria was methodical in her research, connecting the dairy operation to current businesses and tracking financial discrepancies."

"Did she identify any specific suspects?" Denise asked.

Mari nodded. "Three main ones. Marcel Fontaine, whom she initially suspected because of his presence at the dairy when Landry disappeared and his subsequent career in fine cheeses."

"But she apparently revised that assessment," Ellie noted. "Since she was planning to meet with him."

"Yes," Mari agreed. "Her notes suggest she came to believe Marcel was a witness, not a perpetrator. The second suspect was her literary agent, Marcus Reed."

"Her agent?" Trish asked, surprised. "What connection would he have to Inkwell Cove?"

"According to Victoria's notes, Reed has family ties to the region, though he doesn't advertise them. And he stands to gain significantly from her death—posthumous publications, film rights, the marketing potential of a famous author's final work."

"And the third suspect?" Liv prompted.

"Elizabeth Blackwood," Mari said, tapping a newspaper photo of the elegant matriarch at a charity function. "The obvious connection—her family owned the dairy where Landry disappeared. And if the dairy was laundering money, she would have had every reason to silence him."

Liv uncorked the second bottle. "For Marcus Reed, a California Cabernet—bold, aggressive, commercially successful but with subtle manipulative undertones. The kind of wine that convinces you to spend more than you intended."

She poured, then gestured to Denise, who placed a sharp cheddar on their plates. "Marcus Reed—aged but with a sharp bite, commercially successful, with a texture that becomes more crumbly under pressure."

"Victoria's notes mention Reed visited Inkwell Cove the day before her death," Mari continued. "Despite claiming to be in New York when the police called him."



"That's significant," Denise said, making a note in her detective's notebook. "Did she say why he was here?"

"Supposedly to discuss her next book contract, but she seemed suspicious of his timing." Mari flipped through the notebook to a specific page. "She writes, 'M.R. appeared unexpectedly today, claiming contract concerns that could have been handled by phone. His interest in my research was excessive, particularly regarding the Blackwood connection. Must be cautious about what I reveal.'"

"And the final suspect?" Ellie prompted.

Liv uncorked the third bottle with a flourish. "For Elizabeth Blackwood, a vintage Bordeaux—aristocratic, expensive, complex with notes of leather and old libraries. A wine that assumes its superiority without needing to prove it."

She poured as Denise placed the final cheese on their plates—a pale, creamy Brie with a bloomy white rind. "Elizabeth Blackwood—smooth and cultured on the surface, but with an interior that becomes increasingly runny and unstable as it ages. The outer rind maintains the appearance of structure while the inside transforms completely."

"These cheese metaphors are getting rather pointed," Ellie observed with a small smile.

"Appropriate for a case centered around a dairy," Liv replied, raising her glass. "To Victoria Sterling—may we find the truth she was seeking."

As they sipped their wines and sampled the cheeses, Mari spread out photocopies from Victoria's notebook. "There's something else. Hidden in the back flap, I found pages from what appears to be Victoria's manuscript—the novel she was researching here in Inkwell Cove."

"*The Curdled Truth*," Trish recalled from their book club meeting. "She mentioned that was her working title."

"Yes, but this isn't just fiction," Mari explained. "I think she embedded her actual research findings in the novel format—a way of documenting what she'd discovered while maintaining plausible deniability."

She handed out copies of the manuscript pages. "In the story, Isabel Greene investigates a cold case involving a small-town dairy operation that was a front for money laundering. She discovers the operation continued long after the dairy closed, transforming into a sophisticated counterfeiting operation for artisanal food products."

"Art imitating life," Ellie murmured, scanning the pages. "Or rather, disguising it."

"The victim in Victoria's novel discovered the counterfeit operation by analyzing the aging process," Mari continued. "He noticed that certain products were being artificially accelerated through what should have been a months-long maturation period."

"Just like Michael Landry," Trish said. "According to Marcel, he noticed cheeses being moved through aging too quickly."

"Exactly," Mari nodded. "And in the novel, the modern operation involves a network of specialty food businesses that appear legitimate but serve as fronts for processing illicit funds."

"Follow the cheese," Denise said thoughtfully. "Or rather, follow the money disguised as cheese."

"But here's the most interesting part," Mari said, turning to the final manuscript page. "In Victoria's novel, the killer is eventually exposed at the town's annual food festival, when Isabel uses both the manuscript that documents the fraud and a special tasting event as bait."

The five women exchanged glances, the parallel unmistakable.

"The Cheese & Wine Festival," Liv said slowly. "This weekend."

"And Elizabeth Blackwood just personally invited Mari to attend," Ellie added.

"As a VIP," Mari confirmed. "With special access to the private tasting events."

"This is either an incredible opportunity or a trap," Denise warned. "Possibly both."

Trish leaned forward eagerly. "Are we actually considering setting a trap at the festival? Using ourselves as bait?"

"It would be dangerous," Ellie cautioned. "If we're right about Victoria's death, we're dealing with someone who's already killed once to protect this secret."

"But we have what Victoria didn't," Mari pointed out. "We have each other. Five women with different skills and perspectives, working together. And we have her research, which the killer thinks died with her."

"Plus, no one suspects a book club," Liv added with a small smile.

"Middle-aged women discussing literature over wine—we're practically invisible."

"Victoria believed that was our strength," Mari said quietly. "That we could see what others missed precisely because no one was watching us."

Denise raised her glass. "Then I propose a toast. To the Novel Sippers' first official investigation. May we be as clever as the detectives we've read about all these years."

"And significantly luckier than the victims," Trish added wryly.

As their glasses clinked together, Mari felt a strange mixture of emotions—fear at the danger they might be facing, grief for Victoria, but also a sense of purpose and connection with these women who had transformed from casual friends to co-conspirators in pursuit of justice.

Outside Liv's dining room windows, night had fallen completely over Inkwell Cove. Somewhere in the darkness, a killer moved freely, believing their secret safe. But five women now stood between them and immunity, armed with books, cheese, wine, and the most dangerous weapon of all—underestimated intelligence.

The aging process had begun. Like the cheeses in Marcel's cave, the truth was ripening, developing complexity and sharpness that would eventually be impossible to contain.

# Chapter 8: Sharp Notes



"We need to be strategic," Denise said, pacing in front of the corkboard they'd set up in Mari's back office at Bound Together. Two days had passed since their wine and cheese pairing of suspects, and the Novel Sippers had reconvened for what they were now calling their "Plot Committee Meeting."

The bookstore had closed an hour earlier, but soft lamplight still illuminated the cozy space. Victoria's notebook and manuscript pages were spread across Mari's desk, alongside local maps, business directories, and a fresh cheese board that Liv had assembled—this one categorized by investigation themes rather than suspects.

"If we're doing this properly," Denise continued, tapping her detective's notebook, "we should divide tasks according to our strengths and existing connections."

"Like in *Murder at the Manor*," Trish said excitedly. "When Isabel Greene assigns each witness a different interview subject based on their social standing."

"Exactly," Denise nodded approvingly. "Each of us has access to different aspects of Inkwell Cove society. We should leverage those connections."

Mari studied the corkboard where they'd pinned photos of their three main suspects: Marcel Fontaine, Marcus Reed, and Elizabeth Blackwood. String connected them to relevant locations and dates, creating a visual web of potential motives and opportunities.

"I can visit local businesses under the pretense of ordering cheese for a book club event," Mari offered. "Shop owners talk to me about everything. I'll see what they know about the Blackwoods and the old dairy."

"Perfect," Denise agreed. "Gather gossip, observe reactions when you mention Victoria or the festival."

"The charity wine tasting at Blackwood Estate is tomorrow evening," Liv said, consulting her phone calendar. "I'm already on the guest list as a local wine expert. I can observe Elizabeth on her home turf, maybe get a look at parts of the mansion not open to regular visitors."

"Be careful," Ellie cautioned. "Elizabeth strikes me as highly perceptive. Don't give her any reason to suspect you're investigating."

"I'll be the soul of discretion," Liv promised. "Just another wine snob admiring her vintage collection while secretly judging her pairings."

"I'll dive deeper into the library archives," Trish said, eyes gleaming with research fervor. "There must be more about the original investigation into Landry's disappearance. Newspaper reports might have been limited, but police records, town council minutes, property transfers—those leave paper trails."

"And I have a few former colleagues in law enforcement who owe me favors," Denise added. "I'm particularly interested in watching Detective Armstrong's investigation. His interest in the case strikes me as... personal."

They all turned to Ellie, who had been quieter than usual.

"I have a patient connected to the Blackwood family," she said carefully. "Patient confidentiality prevents me from sharing specifics, but I can listen for relevant patterns in our sessions. This individual has mentioned family pressures that might be illuminating in context."

"That's perfect," Mari said. "Five angles of investigation, five Novel Sippers on the case."

"We should establish a check-in protocol," Denise suggested, her police training evident. "Daily text updates, code words if we encounter trouble."

"Cheese names," Trish proposed immediately. "Different varieties for different situations. 'Gouda' means all clear, 'Blue' means trouble, and 'Limburger' means immediate danger."

"Of course you'd suggest cheese-based codes," Liv laughed, pouring more wine into their glasses. "But I like it. Appropriately on-theme."

"And we'll reconvene at The Wine Plot's private room on Friday evening," Mari added. "Before the festival on Saturday."

As the Novel Sippers finalized their plans, Mari felt that strange mixture of anxiety and exhilaration again—the flutter in her chest that signaled both warning and anticipation. Her "prose-ac vision," as she called it, seemed particularly sharp tonight, noticing the determined set of Denise's jaw, the slight tremor in Ellie's hands as she wrote notes, the uncharacteristic intensity in Trish's usually cheerful expression.

They were crossing a line, transforming from women who discussed fictional crimes into amateur detectives investigating a real murder. The thought should have terrified her, but instead, Mari felt an unexpected clarity. Victoria had trusted them with her suspicions, had seen in this book club the perfect team to uncover the truth that had gotten her killed.

And as she looked around at her friends—these remarkable middle-aged women whom the world too often overlooked—Mari understood why.

The following morning, Mari stood at the counter of Harbor Grounds, the coffee shop next to her bookstore, watching owner Greta Thompson prepare her usual order. Though technically a competitor—Harbor Grounds sold a small selection of bestsellers alongside their coffee—Greta had been one of Mari's earliest supporters when Bound Together opened.

"Extra shot today?" Greta asked, noting Mari's tired eyes.

"Please," Mari nodded. "I was up late with book club business."

"I heard about Victoria Sterling," Greta said, lowering her voice despite the empty café. "Such a shock. Were you close?"

Mari considered her answer carefully. "We'd only just met, but we connected over some shared experiences. I'm still processing it, to be honest."

"The whole town is talking," Greta continued, steaming milk with practiced efficiency. "First a famous author visits Inkwell Cove, then dies mysteriously in our best hotel. It's like something out of one of her books."

"Mysteriously?" Mari echoed, keeping her tone casual. "I thought it was ruled an accident. Medication interaction."

Greta glanced around before leaning closer. "That's the official story. But my cousin works at the Harborview as a bellhop. He says the police were asking all kinds of questions that went beyond a simple accident. And there was a cheese plate."

"A cheese plate?" Mari repeated, as if this detail was new to her.

"Ordered from room service but never touched," Greta confirmed, clearly relishing having information to share. "And Victoria Sterling was



lactose intolerant, according to my cousin. Why order cheese you can't eat? Unless—"

"She was expecting company," Mari finished.

"Exactly!" Greta tapped her nose. "The question is, who? And did they ever arrive?"

As Greta handed over the completed latte, Mari decided to probe further. "I heard Marcus Reed—her literary agent—was in town that day. Have you seen him around? Distinguished-looking man, early sixties, very New York in his style?"

"Oh, him," Greta nodded vigorously. "He's been coming in every morning for an Americano, extra shot. Not very friendly. Kept checking his watch yesterday like he had somewhere important to be."

"He's still in town?" Mari asked, genuine surprise in her voice. According to what Denise had learned, Reed had told police he was returning to New York immediately after identifying Victoria's body.

"Saw him not thirty minutes ago," Greta confirmed. "Heading toward The Aged Page, actually. Seemed in quite a hurry for someone who ordered his coffee 'to go' and then stood around reading emails for fifteen minutes."

The cheese shop. Marcus Reed was visiting Marcel's shop after claiming to have left town. The two main suspects in Victoria's death, connecting in a way Victoria's notes hadn't indicated.

"Thanks, Greta," Mari said, adding an extra dollar to the tip jar. "You're a fountain of useful information, as always."

"That's what happens when you pour coffee for half the town," Greta replied with a wink. "You hear things. Say, are you planning to attend the Cheese & Wine Festival this weekend? I heard it's going to be extra

special this year—Elizabeth Blackwood's really pulled out all the stops."

"Actually, yes," Mari confirmed. "Elizabeth personally invited me as a VIP."

Greta's eyebrows shot up. "Well, look at you, moving in high circles! The Blackwoods don't extend those invitations lightly. Elizabeth must see something special in you or your bookstore."

"Or she's keeping her friends close and her enemies closer," Mari thought but didn't say.

"It should be interesting," she said instead. "I'm especially looking forward to the artisanal cheese competition. Speaking of which, I should place some special orders for a book club event we're planning. See you tomorrow, Greta."

Outside, Mari pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to the Novel Sippers group: *Marcus Reed still in town. Heading to The Aged Page now. Following. Gouda so far.*

She received immediate thumbs-up reactions from Denise and Trish, along with a brief response from Liv: *On recon at Blackwood Estate tonight. Will check wine cellar for secret passages. Very Gothic.*

Mari smiled at Liv's humor despite the seriousness of their investigation. She tucked her phone away and headed down Harbor Street toward Marcel's cheese shop, maintaining a careful distance that would allow her to observe without being obvious.

The Aged Page's distinctive blue shutters came into view, but before Mari could get closer, she spotted Marcus Reed emerging from the shop. He was exactly as Victoria had described in her notes—tall, distinguished, with the sleek polish of a successful New York literary

agent. He carried a small paper bag bearing The Aged Page's logo, checking his watch with the air of a man with important appointments.

Mari ducked into a nearby doorway, pretending to examine a display of tourist souvenirs while watching Reed from the corner of her eye. He headed not toward the Harborview Hotel as she might have expected, but in the direction of the harbor docks where fishing boats and pleasure craft bobbed in the morning sunlight.

Should she follow him further or speak with Marcel about their interaction? The decision was made for her when Reed turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Continuing on to The Aged Page, Mari composed her expression into one of casual interest—just a bookstore owner looking to order cheese for an event, not a amateur detective tracking potential murder suspects.

The shop bell chimed as she entered. Marcel looked up from behind the counter, his expression shifting from professional courtesy to cautious recognition when he saw her.

"Ms. Paige," he greeted her. "Another unusual breakfast hour visit. Are we making this a habit?"

"Good morning, Marcel," Mari replied, approaching the counter. "I was just at Harbor Grounds and thought I'd stop by to order some cheese for a book club event we're planning."

"How convenient," Marcel said, his tone suggesting he didn't believe in such coincidences. "You just missed another customer who might interest you."

So Marcel wasn't going to pretend Reed hadn't been there. Interesting.

"Oh?" Mari kept her voice light. "Anyone I know?"

"Marcus Reed. Victoria Sterling's literary agent." Marcel busied himself rearranging a display of specialty crackers. "He's been in Inkwell Cove since her death, handling her affairs, he says."

"What kind of cheese does a New York literary agent buy?" Mari asked, gesturing to where Reed had clearly made a purchase.

A ghost of a smile crossed Marcel's face. "Observant as always, Ms. Paige. Actually, he didn't buy cheese at all, despite visiting a cheese shop. He purchased truffle honey and artisanal crackers."

"No cheese in a cheese shop?" Mari raised an eyebrow. "That seems odd."

"Not if you're lactose intolerant," Marcel replied, watching her reaction carefully. "Which Mr. Reed claims to be. Rather severely, in fact."

The significance hit Mari immediately. Victoria's untouched cheese plate, the second glass... she had been expecting someone who couldn't eat cheese but might have pretended interest in it. Someone like her lactose intolerant literary agent.

"That's... illuminating," Mari said slowly.

"Isn't it?" Marcel agreed. "Particularly when one considers that Mr. Reed also purchased an expensive bottle of wine from me yesterday. A Bordeaux from the same vineyard referenced in Victoria's novel *The Camembert Conspiracy*."

"You sell wine too?" Mari asked, surprised.

"A small, curated selection to pair with my cheeses," Marcel explained. "For those special customers who appreciate the... connection."

"Did Reed say why he wanted that specific wine if he couldn't enjoy it with cheese?"

"He claimed it was a tribute to Victoria. That he intended to open it while reviewing her final manuscript notes." Marcel's expression grew somber. "Though he seemed unusually interested in whether I stocked that particular vintage before Victoria's death, or obtained it after."

"As if he was checking whether Victoria might have purchased it," Mari realized aloud.

"Precisely," Marcel nodded. "My impression was of a man constructing an alibi rather than mourning his client."

Mari filed this information away to share with the others. "I should get back to my shop," she said. "But first, I'd like to order several varieties for a special book club meeting. Something... memorable."

As Marcel guided her through various options, Mari noticed a newspaper on the counter, folded open to a small article about Victoria Sterling's death. The headline read: *Bestselling Author's Death Ruled Accidental*.

"The official story," Marcel said, noting her attention. "Very tidy."

"Too tidy," Mari agreed. "Have you spoken with Detective Armstrong?"

"Briefly," Marcel replied. "He asked about my interaction with Victoria at your bookstore. Most interested in whether she mentioned her research to me."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth, edited for brevity," Marcel said with a slight smile. "That we had professional acquaintance through cheese industry events but were not close."

"But not about the ledgers you found," Mari guessed.

"Some cheeses require perfect conditions to properly age," Marcel replied cryptically. "Some truths are the same."

As Mari left The Aged Page with her order placed, she sent another update to the Novel Sippers: *Reed bought wine specific to Victoria's book but no cheese. Claims severe lactose intolerance. Meeting at Wine Plot tomorrow crucial. Still Gouda.*

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The next two days passed in a blur of careful investigation. Each Novel Sipper pursued her assigned tasks with meticulous attention to detail, maintaining their normal routines while gathering information wherever possible.

Liv returned from the Blackwood Estate wine tasting with fascinating observations about Elizabeth's behavior and the mansion's layout. "The wine cellar is extraordinary," she reported over coffee at Bound Together. "And conveniently located near what Elizabeth called 'the old tunnel entrance'—supposedly part of the original property from dairy days, now sealed off."

Trish discovered old newspaper clippings suggesting a cover-up of the original investigation. "The reporter who covered Landry's disappearance was reassigned suddenly," she told them. "His replacement wrote exactly one article concluding it was an accident, then the story disappeared completely from the paper."

Denise had been shadowing Detective Armstrong, noting his unusual interest in the case despite initial reluctance to investigate deeply. "He's requested toxicology screens not typically ordered for accidental deaths," she revealed. "And he's been asking questions about the Blackwood family history that go beyond Victoria's death."

Ellie, bound by patient confidentiality, could only share general impressions from her counseling sessions. "There's significant

pressure within that family to maintain appearances," she noted carefully. "Long-standing patterns of control and secret-keeping that extend beyond normal family dynamics."

And Mari, moving between local businesses with her cover story of ordering supplies for a special book club event, gathered bits of gossip and observation that, taken individually, meant little, but together formed a pattern that supported their suspicions.

By Friday evening, the Novel Sippers were ready to connect their findings. They gathered in The Wine Plot's private room, which Garrett had reserved for them with a knowing wink about "book club business." The space was perfect for their needs—intimate enough for private conversation, with a large table where they could spread out their notes and a door that closed securely against eavesdroppers.

"Ladies," Denise said once they were settled with wine glasses and Ellie's latest stress-baked creation (cheese straws with rosemary and black pepper), "I think we've made remarkable progress. Let's consolidate what we know."

Mari placed Victoria's notebook in the center of the table. "Based on everything we've gathered, Victoria was investigating three key suspects before her death."

"Starting with Marcel Fontaine," Trish said, tapping the relevant page. "Initially suspicious because of his presence at the dairy when Landry disappeared, but later seen as a potential ally."

"I'm still not entirely convinced of his innocence," Denise cautioned. "He has extensive knowledge of cheese production, international connections for distribution, and a literal underground operation beneath his shop."

"But no clear motive for killing Victoria if she was about to meet with him," Liv pointed out. "In fact, he seems genuinely committed to exposing whatever happened at the dairy."

"Let's move to suspect number two," Mari suggested. "Marcus Reed. Victoria's agent who stands to gain from her posthumous publications."

"And who lied about leaving town," Ellie added. "That's significant deception."

"Plus, I confirmed he visited Inkwell Cove the night before Victoria's death," Trish said, pulling out a printout from the Harborview Hotel's guest log that she'd somehow obtained. "He checked in under his own name but told the desk clerk he was there for a 'quick meeting' and wouldn't be staying the night."

"Yet he was seen leaving the hotel after midnight," Denise noted, consulting her detective's notebook. "According to the night manager, who recognized him from previous visits with Victoria."

"And most damning of all," Mari continued, "he's severely lactose intolerant yet purchased expensive wine the night of Victoria's death—the same night she ordered a cheese plate she wouldn't eat herself."

"As if she was expecting someone who might pretend interest in cheese but couldn't actually consume it," Liv concluded. "A literary agent managing a cheese-loving detective series would certainly fit that profile."

"But would Reed kill over a potential exposé of cheese-related money laundering?" Ellie questioned. "It seems tenuous as a motive."

"Unless he has connections to the operation himself," Denise suggested. "Victoria's notes mention he has family ties to the region that he doesn't advertise."



"Which brings us to our third suspect," Mari said, turning to the final section of Victoria's notes. "Elizabeth Blackwood."

"The obvious connection," Trish nodded. "Her family owned the dairy where Landry disappeared. If the dairy was laundering money, she would have had every reason to silence him—and decades later, to silence Victoria for investigating."

"I did some digging into the Blackwood family finances," Liv said, unfolding a sheet of papers. "They made an incredibly smooth transition from dairy production to real estate development in the late 1980s, right after Landry's disappearance and the dairy closure. No loans, no outside investors, just a seamless pivot into an entirely different industry."

"With remarkable success," Denise added. "Their initial developments sold at premium prices despite a regional real estate downturn."

"Perfect for laundering money," Mari concluded. "Artificially inflated property values, cash transactions, construction costs that could be padded with phantom expenses."

"And it continues to this day," Trish said. "Elizabeth Blackwood controls half the commercial property in Inkwell Cove. Including, interestingly enough, the building that houses The Aged Page."

This revelation caused a moment of surprised silence.

"Marcel never mentioned that," Mari said finally.

"Perhaps because it complicates the narrative of him versus the Blackwoods," Denise suggested. "If he's operating his business on property she owns, their relationship must be more complex than simple adversaries."

"Or he's keeping his enemies closer," Ellie offered. "Positioning himself to watch their operations."

The conversation continued as they worked through the evidence, connecting dots between Victoria's notes and their own discoveries. As the evening progressed, a clearer picture began to emerge—one of a sophisticated operation that had evolved over decades, washing money first through dairy products and later through real estate, with tentacles extending into various aspects of Inkwell Cove's economy.

"The festival tomorrow is our best opportunity," Mari said as they prepared to leave. "All three suspects will be there, plus most of the town. If we're going to uncover definitive proof, that's where we'll find it."

"We should synchronize our watches," Trish suggested with undisguised enthusiasm.

"This isn't a spy movie," Liv laughed. "But we should coordinate our movements. Each of us needs to focus on specific areas and suspects."

"And maintain regular check-ins," Denise added seriously. "Remember our cheese code words. This isn't a game."

As they gathered their materials, Mari felt that familiar flutter of anxiety mixed with determination. Tomorrow they would put their theories to the test at the Cheese & Wine Festival. Tomorrow they would attempt to uncover a killer who had successfully maintained their secret for decades.

The shop bell chimed as they exited into the night, each Novel Sipper heading to her car with a head full of theories and a heart steeled for what might come next. None of them noticed the figure watching from the shadows across the street, or heard the soft click of a camera capturing their departure.

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Mari returned to Bound Together after dropping Ellie at her apartment. Though it was well past closing time, she wanted to secure Victoria's notes in her office safe before heading home. The street was quiet, most businesses closed for the night, only the distant sound of the harbor's warning buoys breaking the silence.

She unlocked the bookstore's front door and stepped into the darkness, reaching for the light switch by memory. Before her fingers found it, something made her pause—an almost imperceptible shift in the air, a feeling of space disturbed.

Someone had been here. Or still was.

Slowly, Mari backed toward the door, her hand finding her phone in her pocket. Before she could retreat completely, the lights suddenly blazed on, temporarily blinding her.

When her vision cleared, she saw what had triggered her intuition. Her normally immaculate shop was in disarray—not ransacked exactly, but thoroughly searched. Books had been removed from shelves and replaced at slightly wrong angles. Display tables showed evidence of being moved and reset.

But it was her office door, hanging slightly ajar at the back of the store, that confirmed her suspicions. Mari never left that door open, not even during business hours.

Pulling up the Novel Sippers group text, she typed with shaking fingers: *Bound Together searched. Office targeted. Blue.*

The response was immediate—Denise: *On my way. Don't touch anything.*

Heart pounding, Mari forced herself to remain in the main shop area, not approaching her office until help arrived. Five minutes that felt like hours later, Denise's car pulled up outside, followed shortly by Liv's.

"I was closest," Liv explained as they entered, her usual composure shaken. "Trish and Ellie are on their way."

Denise immediately took charge, her detective training evident as she surveyed the scene. "Don't touch anything yet. Let's observe first."

They moved carefully through the shop, noting the methodical nature of the search. "This wasn't random vandalism," Denise said. "Whoever did this knew what they were looking for."

"Victoria's notebook," Mari said, the realization hitting her with sickening clarity. "They think I have it here."

"Do you?" Liv asked.

Mari shook her head. "Not the original. After our first meeting, I made copies and returned it to my home safe. But I kept the manuscript pages here."

When they finally entered the office, the evidence of searching was more pronounced. Desk drawers stood open, files had been rifled through, and the small safe in the corner showed scratch marks around its keypad.

"They couldn't get in," Denise observed, examining the safe. "Amateur work on the lock."

"But professional enough work on your door," Liv noted. "No sign of forced entry to the shop itself."

That detail sent a fresh chill through Mari. "Someone with a key? Or lock-picking skills?"

"We should call Detective Armstrong," Denise said, pulling out her phone.

"Wait," Mari stopped her. "Let me check something first."

She went to her desk and pressed a hidden latch beneath the right-hand drawer—a modification she'd made years ago, inspired by mystery novels. A small compartment popped open, revealing a folder containing the pages from Victoria's manuscript.

"It's still here," she breathed. "They didn't find it."

"Which means they'll try again," Denise said grimly. "Now we definitely need to call the police."

As they waited for Armstrong to arrive, Trish and Ellie joined them, their expressions shifting from concern to determination as they assessed the situation.

"This confirms we're on the right track," Trish said, straightening a row of mysteries that had been disturbed in the search. "Someone is worried enough about what we might know to risk breaking in."

"And they specifically targeted Mari's office, where Victoria's notes might logically be kept," Ellie added.

Detective Armstrong arrived with surprising speed, his silver hair slightly disheveled as if he'd been called from bed. His gray eyes took in the scene with professional efficiency, lingering briefly on the five women gathered in the bookstore after hours.

"Book club meeting run late?" he asked, a hint of skepticism in his tone.

"Novel Sippers emergency session," Mari explained, deciding that partial truth was safest. "We were discussing Victoria Sterling's work when I discovered the break-in."

Armstrong nodded, making notes in a small book remarkably similar to Denise's. "Any idea what they were looking for, Ms. Paige?"

Mari hesitated, exchanging glances with her friends. How much should they reveal? Before she could decide, Denise stepped forward.

"Detective Armstrong," she said, professional addressing professional, "we believe this break-in is connected to Victoria Sterling's death. We have reason to think it wasn't an accidental medication interaction."

Armstrong's expression remained neutral, but Mari noticed a slight sharpening of his attention. "That's a serious allegation, Ms.—?"

"Detective Sergeant Denise Sharma, retired, Boston Homicide," Denise replied. "And yes, it is serious. Serious enough that someone broke into a bookstore looking for material Victoria left behind."

For a long moment, Armstrong studied each of them in turn, his expression unreadable. Then, to Mari's surprise, he closed his notebook.

"Ladies," he said quietly, "I think we need to have a conversation that isn't going into my official report. Not yet, anyway."

He gestured toward the reading nook at the back of the store. "Perhaps over there? And Ms. Winters, if you happened to bring any of that excellent Pinot Noir you were discussing at The Wine Plot the other night, now might be an appropriate time for it."

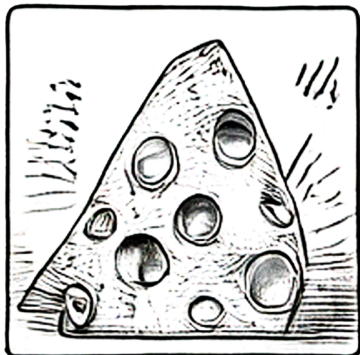
Liv blinked in surprise. "You were at The Wine Plot? I didn't see you."

"That's rather the point of surveillance," Armstrong replied with the ghost of a smile. "But I find it works better when all parties with aligned interests coordinate their efforts."

As the Novel Sippers exchanged stunned glances, Mari felt something shift in their investigation—a new alliance forming, unexpected but potentially crucial. With a nod to Liv, who retrieved an emergency bottle from her car, Mari led the way to the reading nook.

Chapter 9 would have to wait. Tonight, it seemed, the Plot Committee was gaining an unexpected new member.

# Chapter 9: Suspicious Cultures



Detective Ryan Armstrong lowered himself into one of the oversized reading chairs in Bound Together's cozy nook, looking surprisingly at home amid the bookshelves. The Novel Sippers arranged themselves in a loose semicircle around him, an unconscious interrogation formation that made Mari smile despite the tension of the moment.

"So," Armstrong began, accepting a glass of Pinot Noir from Liv, "let's discuss why five women from a book club are investigating Victoria Sterling's death, and why someone might break into a bookstore because of it."

"We could ask why a detective is conducting surveillance on that same book club," Denise countered, her professional instincts clearly engaged.

Armstrong's mouth quirked in what might have been respect. "Fair point, Detective Sharma. Perhaps we should both lay our cards on the table."

"You first," Mari suggested, taking a sip of wine to steady her nerves.

Armstrong studied her for a moment, then nodded. "Victoria Sterling wasn't the first author to die in Inkwell Cove under suspicious circumstances."

The statement landed like a stone in still water, sending ripples of surprise through the group.



"What do you mean?" Trish asked, leaning forward with the eagerness of a librarian scenting a previously undiscovered mystery.

"Twenty years ago, a writer named Caroline Walsh came to town researching a book about traditional New England industries. She spent several weeks interviewing locals about the old Blackwood Dairy operation before she was found dead in her rental cabin. Carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heater. Ruled accidental."

"But you don't think it was," Ellie said, her quiet voice carrying easily in the hushed shop.

"No," Armstrong confirmed. "I was a rookie cop then, just joined the force. I noticed inconsistencies in the scene, but my concerns were... discouraged by my superiors."

"The Blackwood influence," Liv murmured.

"Precisely." Armstrong took a deliberate sip of wine. "When Victoria Sterling died in a similarly convenient 'accident' while researching the same dairy operation, it seemed like history repeating itself."

"Is that why you've been investigating on your own?" Mari asked. "Because your department is still under Blackwood influence?"

"Let's just say I've learned to be discreet about certain inquiries," Armstrong replied diplomatically. "Now, your turn. What got a book club involved in all this?"

The Novel Sippers exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them.

"Victoria came to us," Mari explained. "She believed our book club—our different perspectives and positions in the community—made us uniquely suited to help her investigation."

"She left her research materials with Mari," Denise added. "And confided her suspicions about money laundering operations connected to the dairy."

"Specifically, counterfeit cheese as a vehicle for washing funds," Trish clarified, unable to suppress a small smile at the absurdity of the phrase.

Armstrong's eyebrows rose slightly. "Counterfeit cheese?"

"It makes more sense than you might think," Liv interjected. "The luxury food market operates on subjective quality assessments, cash transactions, and international distribution networks with variable regulatory oversight."

"Perfect for laundering money," Armstrong concluded, nodding slowly. "And you believe this operation continued after the dairy closed? Into the present day?"

"Transformed rather than ended," Mari said, echoing Marcel's words. "Like a cheese culture adapting to new conditions."

"Into real estate, perhaps," Armstrong suggested. "The Blackwood transition from dairy to development was suspiciously smooth."

The detective's immediate grasp of their theory confirmed Mari's instinct that he had been pursuing similar lines of investigation.

"What was taken in the break-in?" he asked, gesturing toward Mari's office.

"Nothing," she replied. "They were looking for Victoria's notebook, but I had moved it to a more secure location. The manuscript pages were hidden in a secret compartment they didn't find."

"Manuscript pages?"

"Victoria embedded her actual research findings in her novel draft," Ellie explained. "A way of documenting what she'd discovered while maintaining plausible deniability."

"Clever," Armstrong said with genuine appreciation. "Mind if I take a look?"

Mari hesitated only briefly before retrieving the folder from her desk's hidden compartment. She handed the pages to Armstrong, who scanned them with the focused attention of a professional reader.

"This parallels my own findings," he said finally, looking up. "Right down to the suspicion that the operation involves a network of specialty food businesses as fronts."

"We've identified three primary suspects," Denise said, slipping easily into her former detective role. "Marcel Fontaine, who worked at the dairy when Landry disappeared and now runs The Aged Page cheese shop."

"Marcus Reed, Victoria's literary agent," Trish continued. "Who stood to gain from her death and was in Inkwell Cove the night she died, despite claiming to be in New York."

"And Elizabeth Blackwood," Liv concluded. "The obvious connection as the dairy owner's daughter and current matriarch of Inkwell Cove's most powerful family."

Armstrong leaned back, swirling his wine thoughtfully. "A cheesemonger, a literary agent, and a real estate tycoon. Quite the diverse suspect pool."

"We've been investigating each," Mari said. "Gathering information before the Cheese & Wine Festival tomorrow."

"The festival?" Armstrong's expression sharpened. "Why is that significant?"

"In Victoria's manuscript," Ellie explained, "her detective exposes the killer at the town's annual food festival, using both the evidence documenting the fraud and a special tasting event as bait."

"And Elizabeth Blackwood personally invited Mari as a VIP," Denise added.

Armstrong set down his glass, suddenly all business. "That's either an incredible opportunity or an extremely dangerous situation."

"We've been assuming both," Mari admitted.

For a long moment, Armstrong studied each of them in turn, his expression unreadable. Then he reached into his jacket and removed his own notebook, opening it to reveal pages of meticulous notes and diagrams that mirrored their own investigation board.

"I think," he said carefully, "it's time we combined our resources. Five observant women plus one detective will cover more ground than either working alone."

"A partnership?" Denise asked, professional to professional.

"An unofficial one," Armstrong clarified. "Until we have concrete evidence, this remains outside official channels."

The Novel Sippers exchanged glances again, their silent communication more complex this time. Finally, Mari nodded.

"We accept," she said. "On one condition."

"Which is?"

"Complete transparency. We share everything we know, everything we discover. No holding back because we're 'just' a book club."

Armstrong's expression softened slightly. "Ms. Paige, having observed your group's investigation methods for the past week, 'just' is the last word I'd use to describe this book club."

The tension in the room eased, the unexpected alliance already beginning to feel natural. For the next hour, they compared notes, filled in gaps in each other's knowledge, and developed a coordinated strategy for the festival.

"I'll have officers on site for the event," Armstrong explained. "Standard security detail, but they'll be briefed to be extra observant without knowing exactly what they're watching for."

"And we'll each focus on our assigned areas," Denise confirmed. "Mari using her VIP access, Liv monitoring the wine tastings, Trish observing the broader festival, Ellie watching for psychological tells, and me coordinating with your officers as a 'security consultant.'"

"While I maintain official presence without revealing our suspicions," Armstrong concluded. "It's a solid plan."

As they finalized details, Mari felt that familiar mixture of anxiety and determination. The break-in had confirmed they were on the right track, and Armstrong's involvement legitimized their amateur investigation. But it also heightened the stakes—whoever had searched her store would likely be watching them at the festival.

"One last thing," Armstrong said as they prepared to leave. "I'll have an officer stationed outside tonight, Ms. Paige, but I'd advise against staying here alone."

"She can stay with me," Ellie offered immediately. "I'm just two blocks away, and I could use the company after all this excitement."

Mari nodded gratefully. "Let me grab some essentials from my office."

As she collected an overnight bag she kept for emergencies, Mari noticed something she'd missed in their initial assessment of the break-in—her cheese order form from Marcel's shop had been moved on her desk, the corner turned down to mark a specific selection. She quickly photographed it before returning to the others.

Outside, Armstrong supervised an officer taking official statements about the break-in for the record, while maintenance arrived to change the locks. As the Novel Sippers prepared to disperse for the night, a young officer approached Mari with an envelope.

"This was left for you at the station this afternoon, ma'am," he explained. "Desk sergeant said it seemed important."

Mari thanked him, tucking the envelope into her bag without opening it in front of the officer. Only once she and Ellie were safely in Ellie's apartment, doors locked and curtains drawn, did she carefully slit it open.

Inside was a single card, blank except for a typed message:

*Some questions are best left unasked. Curiosity aged the cat.*

"Well," Ellie said after a moment of stunned silence, "I think we can officially upgrade from 'Gouda' to 'Blue' in our cheese code system."

Mari couldn't help the nervous laugh that escaped her. "Definitely Blue," she agreed. "And getting closer to Limburger by the minute."

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The following morning brought more surprises. Mari and Ellie arrived at Bound Together to find the new locks installed and a discreet police presence maintained across the street. Inside, the shop had been

meticulously restored to order—books properly shelved, displays straightened, even the reading nook's pillows fluffed and arranged.

"Armstrong's people must have cleaned up," Ellie suggested.

"Actually, that was me," came Trish's voice from behind the mystery section. She emerged carrying a stack of books, her librarian's precision evident in their perfect alignment. "I couldn't sleep after last night, so I came in early. Armstrong's officer let me in."

"You reorganized my entire shop?" Mari asked, touched by the gesture.

"Just applying the Dewey Decimal System with some cozy mystery modifications," Trish replied with a smile. "Besides, I found something interesting."

She led them to the register counter, where a small business card lay. "This was stuck inside one of the books that had been pulled from the shelf—*The Stilton Stalker*, specifically."

Mari picked up the card. It was plain white with a simple embossed logo: MR Literary Management, with Marcus Reed's contact information.

"Reed's card," she said. "He's been in my shop? When?"

"More importantly, why leave his card in that specific book?" Ellie wondered. "It can't be coincidence it was Victoria's most cheese-centric novel."

The bell above the door chimed as Liv and Denise arrived together.

"Emergency Plot Committee meeting?" Liv asked, noting their serious expressions.

"We've had some developments," Mari confirmed, showing them the card and the threatening note. "And I noticed something else last

night—my cheese order form from Marcel's shop was marked at a specific selection."

"Which one?" Denise asked.

"Valencay," Mari said. "The pyramid-shaped goat cheese with an ash coating."

"The one that resembles a truncated pyramid," Trish noted. "In cheese lore, it was supposedly reshaped from a perfect pyramid to its flat-topped form because Napoleon, returning defeated from Egypt, couldn't bear to be reminded of the pyramids."

"A cheese with historical deception built into its very shape," Liv mused. "On-theme for our investigation."

"Or a message about something hidden or altered," Ellie suggested.

The bell chimed again, and they all turned, expecting Armstrong. Instead, Marcel Fontaine stood in the doorway, his expression grave.

"Ms. Paige," he said, glancing at the gathered women. "I heard about the break-in. Are you all right?"

"News travels fast," Denise observed neutrally.

"Inkwell Cove is small, and I make it my business to know what happens here," Marcel replied, unperturbed by her suspicion. "Especially when it involves my... friends."

The slight hesitation before "friends" wasn't lost on any of them.

"I'm fine, Marcel," Mari assured him. "Nothing was taken."

"But something was sought," he said knowingly. "Victoria's research, I presume?"



The direct acknowledgment caught them off guard. Marcel noticed their surprise and sighed.

"I am not your enemy in this," he said, his accent thickening slightly with emotion. "I have watched the Blackwood operation for decades, waiting for someone brave enough to expose it."

"Then why not expose it yourself?" Denise challenged.

"And who would believe me?" Marcel countered. "The foreign cheesemonger accusing Inkwell Cove's first family of criminal enterprise? I would be ruined before the accusation left my lips."

"Yet you operate your shop on property Elizabeth Blackwood owns," Mari noted, watching his reaction. "That seems an unusual arrangement for adversaries."

If Marcel was surprised by their knowledge, he didn't show it. "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, Ms. Paige. I pay my rent to Elizabeth Blackwood precisely to maintain a position within her orbit."

"And what position is that, exactly?" Liv asked, her tone carefully conversational. "Observer? Competitor? Accomplice?"

Marcel's expression hardened. "I came to warn you, not to be interrogated. The festival today will be dangerous for anyone investigating Victoria's death. Elizabeth has arranged special security—security answerable only to her."

"Why tell us this?" Ellie asked, her psychiatrist's insight engaging. "What do you gain?"

"Perhaps I wish to prevent another death," Marcel said simply. "Or perhaps I simply believe that after thirty-seven years, it is time for the truth about Michael Landry to emerge."

He reached into his pocket and removed a small package wrapped in waxed paper. "The Valencay you ordered, Ms. Paige. I thought you might want it before the festival."

Mari accepted the package, noting its unexpected weight. "Thank you."

"Enjoy it with someone who appreciates its complexity," Marcel advised. "Someone who understands that the surface of a cheese reveals only part of its character. What lies beneath the rind tells the true story."

With a slight bow, he turned and left, the bell chiming his departure.

"Well, that was cryptic," Trish remarked when he was gone.

"But potentially helpful," Mari said, carefully unwrapping the cheese. Beneath the waxed paper lay not only the ash-covered pyramid of Valencay, but a small USB drive taped to the bottom of the container.

"I think Marcel just picked a side," Denise said, eyeing the drive. "Question is, which one?"

Before they could examine the drive's contents, Mari's phone rang—Detective Armstrong.

"Ms. Paige," he said without preamble when she answered. "We have a situation. Marcus Reed checked out of his hotel abruptly this morning. Left without paying his bill."

"He's running?" Mari asked, putting the call on speaker for the others.

"Not exactly," Armstrong replied, his voice tight. "He's at the festival grounds right now, having what appears to be a heated conversation with Elizabeth Blackwood. My officer reports they moved their discussion to a private tent."

"The festival doesn't open to the public for three more hours," Liv noted, checking her watch.

"Exactly," Armstrong confirmed. "Whatever they're discussing, they want privacy. I'm heading there now. Meet me at the south entrance in twenty minutes?"

"We'll be there," Mari promised.

As she ended the call, Denise was already gathering their investigation materials. "Looks like our timeline just accelerated."

"Should we check the USB first?" Trish asked, eyeing the drive.

"No time," Denise decided. "Bring it with us. We'll check it on location if necessary."

As the Novel Sippers prepared to leave, Mari carefully wrapped the Valencay and placed it in her tote bag alongside the USB drive. Whatever Marcel's true role in this mystery, he had just given them potentially crucial evidence—evidence someone had broken into her store to find.

"Remember our objectives," she said at the door. "We're just shop owners and professionals attending the festival setup. Nothing suspicious."

"Just a book club out for cheese and wine," Liv agreed with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Who happen to be investigating money laundering, counterfeit cheese, and murder," Ellie added dryly.

"So, a typical Tuesday for the Novel Sippers," Trish quipped, her enthusiasm barely contained.

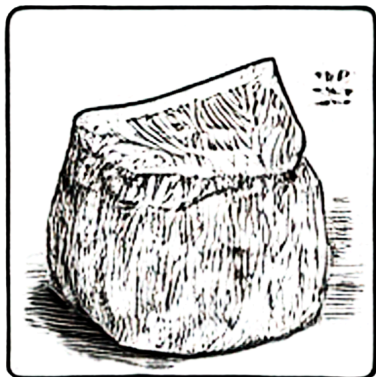
Denise shook her head, but Mari caught the hint of a smile on the former detective's face. "Let's go catch a killer."

As they stepped out into the bright morning sunlight, Mari felt that now-familiar mixture of anxiety and determination. The break-in, the warning note, Marcel's cryptic gift—all confirmed they were getting closer to the truth. But like the Valencay cheese with its truncated pyramid shape, the truth they sought had been deliberately altered, its perfect form damaged to satisfy powerful interests.

Today, at the Cheese & Wine Festival, they would discover what lay beneath the carefully cultivated rind of Inkwell Cove's respectable surface.

The aging process was complete. Time for the tasting.

# Chapter 10: Cream Rising



The morning of the Cheese & Wine Festival dawned with a sky as clean and bright as a fresh cheese cloth, but Mari Paige's mind was anything but clear. She sat on the edge of her bed, staring at the small white pill in her palm—her daily dose of Lexapro—while her other hand clutched her phone, still displaying the threatening note she'd photographed the night before.

*Some questions are best left unasked. Curiosity aged the cat.*

The flutter in her chest had evolved into something more persistent, a humming tension that vibrated along her nerves like a tuning fork struck against bone. She recognized the feeling—anxiety pushing against the medication's chemical boundaries, finding its way through like water seeking cracks in a dam.

"Breathe," she whispered to herself, echoing the technique Ellie had taught her years ago. She swallowed the pill with a sip of water, knowing it wasn't an immediate fix but taking comfort in the ritual itself.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Denise: *Festival security meeting in 30 min. Armstrong wants us there early. Gouda?*

Mari tapped back: *Gouda-ish. Be there soon.*

The "ish" qualification wasn't lost on Denise, who called immediately.

"What's wrong?" her friend asked without preamble.

"Just the usual pre-murder-investigation jitters," Mari attempted humor, but her voice cracked slightly.

"I'll be at your place in ten minutes," Denise said decisively. "And I'm calling Ellie."

Before Mari could protest, the call ended. She moved to her closet, selecting an outfit that struck the balance they'd discussed—casual enough for a festival, professional enough for a business owner, with pockets deep enough to carry her phone, a small notebook, and the USB drive Marcel had provided. Normal on the outside, detective work within—much like the Novel Sippers themselves.

True to her word, Denise arrived nine minutes later, with Ellie in tow. The psychiatrist took one look at Mari and reached into her bag, producing a small container.

"Emergency comfort cheddar," she announced, opening it to reveal perfect cubes of sharp white cheese. "Protein helps stabilize blood sugar, which helps manage anxiety symptoms. Also, it's delicious."

Mari accepted a piece with a grateful smile. "Is prescribing cheese within your professional scope of practice?"

"Absolutely," Ellie replied seriously. "Medication, therapy, and proper nutrition are the three pillars of anxiety management. The fact that I stress-baked cheese straws at 3 AM is purely coincidental."

"She brought those too," Denise added, holding up a paper bag that emanated a warm, savory aroma.

As Mari nibbled the cheese, feeling its sharpness clear her foggy thoughts, Ellie sat beside her on the edge of the bed.

"Talk to me," she said gently. "Professional hat on."

Mari sighed. "It's not just the danger. It's... the responsibility. Victoria trusted us with her research, with her suspicions. She died because of what she discovered. What if we're wrong? What if we're right but can't prove it? What if someone else gets hurt?"

"Valid concerns," Ellie acknowledged. "But remember something crucial about anxiety—it tries to make you responsible for outcomes you can't control. Your responsibility is to do your best with the information you have. That's all anyone can do."

"And you're not doing it alone," Denise added, her former detective's confidence steadying. "You have us, you have Armstrong, you have evidence Victoria never had access to."

"Besides," Ellie continued, "your anxiety is also your superpower, remember? What did you call it—"

"Prose-ac vision," Mari finished with a small smile. "The ability to notice details others miss because my brain is always scanning for threats."

"Exactly," Ellie nodded. "In this situation, that's not a bug, it's a feature."

As they talked, Mari felt her breathing slow, the tight band around her chest loosening incrementally. By the time they'd finished the emergency cheddar and two cheese straws each, she felt steady enough to face the day.

"Ready to catch a killer?" Denise asked, offering a hand to pull her up.

"Ready to try," Mari replied, more honestly than bravely, but it was enough.

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The Inkwell Cove Town Green had transformed overnight into a festival wonderland. White tents dotted the grassy expanse, connected by

paths lined with wine barrel planters overflowing with autumn flowers. A large stage dominated one end, where musical acts would perform throughout the day. The other end featured an elegant pavilion bearing the Blackwood Development Company logo, clearly the VIP area Mari had been invited to access.

Security was indeed heightened, as Marcel had warned. Uniformed guards checked credentials at every entrance, and Mari noticed several plainclothes individuals with earpieces patrolling the grounds. She wondered how many reported to Elizabeth Blackwood rather than to official law enforcement.

Detective Armstrong waited for them near the south entrance, his silver hair and weathered face making him look every inch the respected local lawman. Only the tension around his eyes betrayed his awareness of the day's true stakes.

"Ladies," he greeted them, maintaining their cover as festival participants rather than investigation partners. "Thank you for coming early to discuss the local business owners' security concerns."

He guided them to a small tent labeled "FESTIVAL OPERATIONS," where Liv and Trish already waited with maps of the grounds spread across a folding table. Once the tent flap was closed, Armstrong's demeanor shifted subtly from public servant to detective.

"Reed and Blackwood had what my officer described as a 'financially heated' conversation earlier," he reported without preamble. "Specific phrases overheard included 'contractual obligation,' 'family interests,' and most interestingly, 'quality control failures.'"

"Could refer to publishing," Trish suggested. "Reed is a literary agent, after all."

"Or to counterfeit cheese operations," Liv countered. "Quality control would be essential to avoid detection."



"Either way, they're clearly connected beyond Reed simply being in town for Victoria's death," Denise noted.

"What about Marcel?" Mari asked. "Any sign of him?"

"Arrived an hour ago to set up his vendor booth," Armstrong confirmed. "He's brought an impressive selection for the competition judging."

Mari described Marcel's cryptic visit to the bookstore and the USB drive he'd provided. Armstrong's eyebrows rose.

"Have you checked its contents?"

"Not yet," Mari admitted. "We came straight here after your call."

Armstrong considered this, then nodded toward his laptop on the table. "Let's see what Fontaine thought was important enough to hide in cheese."

The USB drive contained a single video file, recorded with what appeared to be a hidden camera in Marcel's shop. The timestamp showed it was from three days ago—the day after Victoria's death. The footage showed Marcus Reed entering The Aged Page, glancing around furtively before approaching the counter where Marcel waited.

*"I understand you were acquainted with Victoria Sterling," Reed's voice was clipped, professional.*

*"As were you," Marcel replied coolly. "Her agent, yes? A terrible loss."*

*"Indeed." Reed's expression remained neutral. "I'm handling her affairs, including research materials she may have left behind. I believe she visited your establishment?"*

*"She did," Marcel acknowledged. "For the book signing at Bound Together. We exchanged brief pleasantries."*

*"Nothing more? No... discussions about her current project?"*

*Marcel's expression revealed nothing. "Ms. Sterling purchased some cheese. We spoke of varieties featured in her detective series. Professional courtesy only."*

*Reed studied him for a long moment. "Her new manuscript featured a cheese counterfeiting operation, Mr. Fontaine. One connected to money laundering through artisanal food businesses. She mentioned interviewing a former dairy worker who had become a respected cheesemonger. One can't help but wonder if art imitated life."*

*"Fiction often draws from reality," Marcel replied evenly. "But Victoria Sterling was a novelist, not an investigative journalist. Perhaps you're reading too much into her creative process."*

*Reed's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Perhaps. Still, as her agent, I'm obligated to collect any research materials she might have left with... consultants. Family interests are at stake."*

*"Family interests?" Marcel repeated, his eyebrow raising slightly.*

*"Literary family," Reed clarified smoothly. "Her publisher considers her their family. Very protective of her legacy."*

*"I have nothing of hers," Marcel said. "Though if you're interested in cheese, I recommend the Valencay. It has a fascinating history of deception—Napoleon demanded the perfect pyramid shape be truncated because it reminded him too much of his failures in Egypt."*

*Reed's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. "I'm lactose intolerant, unfortunately. But I appreciate the history lesson."*

*As Reed turned to leave, Marcel called after him. "Mr. Reed? One wonders why Victoria's literary agent would come to Inkwell Cove so*

*quickly after her death. Surely such matters could be handled remotely?"*

*Reed paused at the door. "One might wonder the same about a French cheesemonger setting up shop in a small coastal town with a notorious dairy history." He smiled thinly. "Good day, Mr. Fontaine."*

The video ended, leaving the Novel Sippers and Armstrong in thoughtful silence.

"Family interests," Denise repeated. "That's suggestive."

"And the way Reed reacted to the Valencay reference," Mari added. "He clearly recognized the significance."

Armstrong rewound to that moment, studying Reed's expression. "Good catch. His body language shifted completely."

"Marcel was testing him," Ellie observed. "Using the cheese with the truncated truth as a probe. And Reed responded defensively."

"The question is, what's Reed's connection to the Blackwoods?" Liv wondered. "Victoria's notes mentioned family ties to the region he doesn't advertise."

"We need to find that connection," Armstrong decided. "Ms. Martinez, you've been researching local family histories?"

Trish nodded eagerly. "I've been cross-referencing town records with business filings. Reed's literary agency, MR Literary Management, was established twenty years ago, but he has an earlier business history under different names."

"Including?" Denise prompted.

"Reed International Imports," Trish revealed with librarian precision. "Primarily dealing in specialty foods from Europe, particularly dairy products. And his mother's maiden name? Blackwood."

This revelation landed with the impact of a wheel of aged Parmesan dropped from height.

"He's related to Elizabeth?" Mari asked, pieces shifting in her mental map of connections.

"Second cousin," Trish clarified. "His mother was Elizabeth's father's niece. Family, but distant enough that the connection wouldn't be obvious without digging."

"Perfect for maintaining business separation while still keeping operations in the family," Denise noted. "The literary agency could easily serve as another laundering front—inflated advances, fictional authors, foreign rights deals with convenient overseas partners."

"So Reed had motive to silence Victoria if she discovered his connection to the Blackwoods and the counterfeit cheese operation," Mari summarized. "And he was in Inkwell Cove the night she died."

"It fits the pattern," Armstrong agreed, "but we still need concrete proof connecting him to her death. And to the larger operation."

"The festival competition," Liv suggested suddenly. "All specialty food vendors must submit their entries for judging within the hour. It's the perfect opportunity to examine the products up close, including Marcel's."

"And Elizabeth always serves as head judge," Trish added. "With Reed now on the grounds, all three suspects will be in one location."

"Which could be exactly what we want," Armstrong said thoughtfully, "or exactly what they want. Either way, we need to proceed carefully."

He unfolded a detailed map of the festival grounds, marking key positions. "I'll have officers stationed here, here, and here," he indicated. "Ms. Sharma, with your experience, I'd like you positioned near the judges' tent, observing the interactions during the competition."

"Understood," Denise nodded, professional to professional.

"Ms. Martinez, your knowledge of local history makes you valuable at the heritage display. Keep an eye on who shows interest in the dairy industry exhibits."

"Absolutely," Trish agreed. "I've already volunteered to help staff it."

"Dr. Chen, your psychological insights would be most useful observing the general crowd reactions, particularly during the award announcements. People reveal themselves in moments of triumph or disappointment."

"I'll watch for behavioral anomalies," Ellie confirmed.

"Ms. Winters, your wine expertise gives you natural access to the tasting areas and VIP sections."

"Where I can keep an eye on Elizabeth in her natural habitat," Liv smiled, though her eyes remained serious.

"And Ms. Paige," Armstrong turned to Mari, "with your VIP invitation from Elizabeth herself, you're our best connection to the inner circle. Your bookstore owner persona—"

"Is the perfect cover for someone collecting town gossip and observing without being observed," Mari finished. "The invisible middle-aged woman with the anxiety disorder. Nobody's idea of a threat."

"Precisely why Victoria came to your book club in the first place," Armstrong noted. "She recognized what I'm seeing now—a formidable team hiding in plain sight."

As they finalized their positions and communication protocols, a festival worker stuck his head into the tent. "Detective Armstrong? There's someone looking for you at the main entrance. Says it's urgent."

Armstrong excused himself, leaving the Novel Sippers to add final notes to their plans.

"I don't like how exposed we'll be," Denise worried. "We should stay in pairs."

"Too conspicuous," Liv countered. "Five women moving together would draw attention."

"But we'll maintain visual contact," Mari suggested as compromise. "And remember our cheese code words. 'Gouda' is all clear, 'Blue' means trouble, and 'Limburger'—"

"Means run for your lives," Trish finished with nervous humor.

Armstrong returned, his expression tight. "Change of plans," he announced. "We have a new complication."

"What is it?" Mari asked, anxiety fluttering anew.

"Elizabeth Blackwood just requested your presence at the VIP pavilion," he said. "Immediately. And she specifically mentioned she hopes you can share insights about Victoria Sterling's research methods."

The implications were clear—their investigation was not as covert as they'd hoped.

"Should I decline?" Mari asked, though she already knew the answer.

"No," Armstrong shook his head. "This might be our best opportunity to gauge how much they know. But be extremely careful. Say nothing about our suspicions or the evidence we've gathered."

"I'll come with you," Ellie offered quickly. "As your friend who's also a psychiatrist with an interest in literary psychological profiles."

Denise nodded approvingly. "Good thinking. Mari shouldn't go alone."

"The rest of us will take our positions as planned," Liv decided. "If Elizabeth is making moves, the others might be as well."

As Mari and Ellie prepared to head to the VIP pavilion, Armstrong pulled Mari aside briefly.

"I know this is difficult," he said quietly. "Anxiety can be debilitating in high-pressure situations."

Mari was surprised by his insight. "How did you—"

"Victoria's favorite book," he reminded her with a small smile. "*The Stilton Stalker*, where Isabel Greene's anxiety becomes her investigative superpower. I recognized the pattern in your observations. The 'prose-ac vision,' as you call it."

Mari felt a strange mix of embarrassment and validation. "It's not always reliable."

"But when it is, it's remarkable," Armstrong countered. "Trust it, Ms. Paige. And know that we'll be watching. You're not alone in this."

His reassurance steadied her more than she expected. With a nod of thanks, she joined Ellie, and together they headed toward the elegant Blackwood pavilion.

The morning crowd was beginning to fill the festival grounds, a mix of locals and tourists eager for the renowned Cheese & Wine Festival

experience. Vendors called out samples, musicians tuned instruments, and the air filled with the competing aromas of dozens of artisanal products. In any other circumstance, it would have been a perfect small-town celebration.

Today, it felt like walking into an elaborate trap.

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The Blackwood pavilion was a study in tasteful ostentation—canvas walls in cream and gold, furniture that looked antique but had clearly been selected for the event, and staff in matching vests serving champagne in crystal flutes. Elizabeth Blackwood held court in the center, resplendent in a silk pantsuit the color of aged goat cheese, her silver bob gleaming in the morning light.

"Ms. Paige," she called, spotting Mari and Ellie at the entrance. "And Dr. Chen! How delightful. Please, join us."

Mari felt numerous sets of eyes turn toward them as they crossed the pavilion—festival organizers, local dignitaries, and, most notably, Marcus Reed standing slightly behind Elizabeth, watching their approach with calculation in his gaze.

"Mrs. Blackwood," Mari greeted her with practiced calm. "Thank you for the invitation. The festival looks spectacular."

"Elizabeth, please," the older woman insisted with practiced warmth. "And yes, we pride ourselves on elevating the experience each year. Inkwell Cove deserves nothing less."

She turned to Ellie with a knowing smile. "Dr. Chen, I understand you've taken a particular interest in Victoria Sterling's work recently. The psychological aspects of her detective series, I believe?"



The reference to their investigation was thinly veiled, but Ellie didn't flinch.

"Isabel Greene is a fascinating character from a mental health perspective," she replied smoothly. "The way Sterling portrayed anxiety as an investigative asset rather than a liability was revolutionary in detective fiction."

"Indeed," Elizabeth nodded. "So much more interesting than the traditional damaged detective drowning their trauma in whiskey."

"Though her cheese appreciation was a bit more... aspirational than autobiographical," came Marcus Reed's voice as he stepped forward. "Victoria barely knew Camembert from cheddar when we first met. She built that expertise through research."

"Mr. Reed," Mari acknowledged him. "I'm surprised to see you still in Inkwell Cove. I understood you'd returned to New York after... identifying Victoria's body."

Reed's expression revealed nothing, but Mari noticed his hand tighten slightly on his champagne flute. "Literary estates require personal attention, Ms. Paige. Particularly when the author dies unexpectedly with an unfinished manuscript."

"*The Curdled Truth*," Mari said, watching both Reed and Elizabeth for reactions. "She mentioned she was researching it while in town."

"A working title only," Reed dismissed with a wave. "The manuscript was barely started. Mostly research notes and character sketches."

"About a counterfeiting operation involving artisanal foods," Ellie added casually, as if merely making conversation. "Quite a departure from her usual themes."

Elizabeth's smile remained fixed, but her eyes sharpened. "How fascinating. And what inspired this... new direction, Mr. Reed?"

"Victoria was always interested in economic crimes," Reed replied. "The ways money could be laundered through legitimate-appearing businesses. Purely fictional, of course."

"Of course," Elizabeth echoed. "Though sometimes fiction draws inspiration from reality. Your cousin Thomas's import business faced similar accusations a few years ago, didn't it? Something about mislabeled products from Europe?"

The reference to Reed's family connection was delivered with precision—a warning, Mari realized, reminding Reed of Elizabeth's knowledge of his past.

Reed's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. "A regulatory misunderstanding, nothing more. Thoroughly resolved."

"Much like our own dairy's closure decades ago," Elizabeth continued smoothly. "Regulatory changes made small operations like ours increasingly difficult to maintain. Fortunately, we found real estate development more... rewarding."

The subtext crackled between them like static electricity, confirming what the Novel Sippers had suspected—Reed and Elizabeth were connected through both family and business interests, but tension existed in their relationship.

"I understand Marcel Fontaine worked at your family's dairy before opening The Aged Page," Mari said, watching Elizabeth's reaction. "That must create an interesting dynamic, having a former employee become a local business owner on property you now own."

Elizabeth's smile didn't waver, but something flickered in her eyes. "Marcel has always been ambitious. An excellent employee, but

eventually one must follow one's own path. His cheese shop adds a certain European cachet to our commercial district."

"His Valencay is particularly renowned," Ellie noted. "Though the story of its altered shape—Napoleon demanding the perfect pyramid be truncated—always struck me as symbolic of how truth can be modified to suit powerful interests."

Reed set down his champagne glass with a sharp click. "Speaking of the competition, Elizabeth, shouldn't we be heading to the judges' tent? The entries will be arriving soon."

"Always so punctual, Marcus," Elizabeth chided gently, though Mari sensed relief in her acquiescence. "Ms. Paige, Dr. Chen, you must join us for the judging. As VIP guests, you're welcome to observe the process."

The invitation felt more like a command—Elizabeth wanted to keep them close, where she could monitor their movements and conversations.

"We'd be delighted," Mari replied, matching Elizabeth's tone of insincere warmth.

As they prepared to move toward the competition area, Mari's phone buzzed with a text. Checking it discreetly, she saw Denise's message: *Marcel asking for you at his booth. Says it's urgent. Blue.*

"Actually," Mari said, feigning apology, "I need to stop by The Aged Page booth first. I ordered special cheese for a book club event, and Marcel mentioned he'd have it ready during the festival."

"I'll accompany Elizabeth to the judging," Ellie offered smoothly. "Mari can join us after her errand."

Elizabeth's expression suggested she didn't appreciate this deviation, but social convention prevented her from objecting. "Of course. We'll expect you shortly, Ms. Paige."

As Mari moved away, she felt Reed's gaze following her through the crowd. Whatever game Elizabeth and Reed were playing, they clearly viewed the Novel Sippers as potential complications. The question was whether they saw them as minor annoyances or serious threats.

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Marcel's booth stood near the center of the vendor area, elegantly appointed with The Aged Page's distinctive blue and silver color scheme. A display case showcased his competition entries—each cheese accompanied by a detailed description of its origin, aging process, and flavor notes. But Marcel himself was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, Denise waited beside the booth, her casual posture belied by the tension in her eyes. "He was here five minutes ago," she said in a low voice as Mari approached. "Said he needed to speak with you urgently about Victoria's research, then received a text and disappeared toward the storage tents."

"Did he seem anxious? Threatened?" Mari asked, scanning the crowd.

"Determined," Denise replied. "And he left this for you."

She handed Mari a small, heavily waxed package labeled simply "For the Novel Sippers." Inside was a cheese knife with an ornate handle, wrapped in a note written in Marcel's distinctive hand: *Some cuts reveal the truth beneath the surface. Check the core.*

"What does that mean?" Denise wondered.

Mari studied the knife, noting its unusual design—the blade slightly curved with a sharp point, the handle inlaid with mother-of-pearl. "It's a

specialized tool for testing aged cheeses," she explained. "You insert it to extract a small core sample that reveals the interior without cutting the entire wheel."

Understanding dawned in Denise's eyes. "His competition entries. He wants us to check inside them."

They turned to the display case, where Marcel's competition submissions waited for judging. Five varieties arranged in ascending order of age, each more complex than the last. But it was the final entry that caught Mari's attention—a large wheel of what the label described as "Heritage Alpine Style, aged 24 months in limestone caves."

"That one," Mari said with certainty. "It's the oldest, the most complex, and the label mentions it's made using 'traditional techniques predating modern dairy practices.'"

"How do we get to it without attracting attention?" Denise asked. "The judging starts in twenty minutes."

Mari considered their options, aware of Armstrong watching from a discreet distance and Liv moving through the wine tasting area adjacent to them. Trish manned the heritage display as planned, occasionally directing festival-goers toward Marcel's booth with enthusiasm that didn't quite mask her surveillance of the area. Ellie had successfully attached herself to Elizabeth's group, engaging Reed in what appeared to be an animated discussion of literary psychology.

"We need a distraction," Mari decided. "And I think I know just who to ask."

She texted Liv: *Need commotion at wine tasting. Cheese emergency. Code Blue.*

Liv's response came immediately: *One wine disaster coming up. 3 minutes.*

True to her word, exactly three minutes later, a cry of distress rose from the wine tasting area, followed by gasps and the crash of breaking glass. Liv's voice carried clearly: "Oh my goodness, I'm so terribly sorry! That was a limited vintage Bordeaux! Please, let me help clean that up!"

The commotion drew security and curious onlookers, providing the window they needed. With swift efficiency, Denise created a visual shield while Mari unlocked the display case with the key Marcel had left attached to the knife. She removed the large Alpine cheese wheel, carried it to the booth's back table, and inserted the specialized knife precisely as she'd seen Marcel demonstrate at a tasting event months earlier.

The blade slid in smoothly, and when Mari extracted it, instead of the expected core sample of cheese, a small metallic cylinder emerged—a USB drive encased in protective coating.

"Another drive," Denise whispered. "Let's go. Armstrong has a laptop in the operations tent."

They carefully replaced the cheese, relocked the display case, and slipped away as Liv's theatrical apologies continued to occupy the festival staff's attention. In the operations tent, Armstrong waited with Trish, who had excused herself from the heritage display at Mari's text alert.

"What did you find?" Armstrong asked as Mari produced the USB drive.

"Marcel's message in a cheese wheel," she explained. "Literally."

The drive contained a single folder labeled "BLACKWOOD LEDGERS - ORIGINAL AND CURRENT." Inside were hundreds of scanned documents—the yellowed ledger pages Mari had seen in Marcel's cheese cave alongside more recent financial records bearing the letterhead of Blackwood Development Company.

"These are fraudulent accounting documents," Armstrong said as they scrolled through the files. "Showing how funds move through shell companies, inflated property values, phantom construction costs..."

"And look at this," Trish pointed to a recurring entry. "Reed International Imports appears repeatedly as a 'consultant' receiving substantial payments."

"The cheese counterfeiting operation transformed into real estate fraud," Mari realized. "Same technique, different vehicle."

"But the most damning evidence is here," Armstrong said, opening a subfolder labeled "LANDRY." Inside were photographs of what appeared to be the limestone caves beneath Marcel's shop, but extending much further, connecting to what looked like a hidden room beneath the old Blackwood Dairy property.

"Marcel found where they kept their real financial records," Denise breathed. "The secret ledger room Victoria's manuscript mentioned."

"And potentially where Michael Landry was killed," Armstrong added grimly, enlarging a photo that showed what appeared to be decades-old bloodstains on a stone floor.

"But why give us this now?" Trish wondered. "Why not when Victoria was investigating?"

"Because he didn't trust her completely," Mari suggested. "Or because her death convinced him the operation was still dangerous enough to kill for. Either way, he's chosen sides now."

Armstrong was already sending the files to his secure email. "This is enough for a warrant. Combined with Victoria's research and Marcel's testimony—"

A frantic knocking interrupted him as Liv burst into the tent, her usual composure shattered. "Elizabeth and Reed are gone," she reported breathlessly. "They left the judging tent abruptly after receiving texts. And Ellie says Reed was asking pointed questions about a USB drive just before they departed."

"They know," Denise said, alarm evident in her voice. "Somehow they know Marcel gave us evidence."

"Where's Marcel now?" Armstrong demanded, already reaching for his service weapon.

"No one's seen him since he left his booth," Liv replied. "And his competition entries have been removed from the display case. The festival staff said Elizabeth ordered them taken to the judges' private tasting area."

Armstrong was already moving toward the tent exit. "Stay here," he ordered the Novel Sippers. "I'm calling for backup."

But Mari was struck by sudden certainty—her "prose-ac vision" connecting disparate details into a coherent pattern. "The cheese cave," she said. "That's where they'll take him. The evidence is stored there, and it connects to the old dairy property through the tunnels Elizabeth mentioned at her wine tasting."

"You can't know that," Armstrong argued.

"I do," Mari insisted. "Elizabeth specifically mentioned 'the old tunnel entrance' near her wine cellar to Liv. Marcel's shop sits on property she owns. The cave system extends beneath both properties. It's the perfect place to eliminate a threat and destroy evidence simultaneously."



Armstrong studied her for a brief moment, recognizing the same focused clarity Victoria had described in her detective Isabel Greene—anxiety channeled into hyperaware observation.

"I'll take a team to the cave entrance at The Aged Page," he decided. "Ms. Sharma, your experience makes you valuable backup. The rest of you stay—"

"Marcel trusted us," Mari interrupted. "All of us. The Novel Sippers. That's why he labeled the package for us specifically. We should go together."

"It's too dangerous," Armstrong protested. "These people have already killed once."

"We'll stay behind you," Denise negotiated. "But Mari's right—we have insights into this case no one else does. Victoria saw that. Marcel sees it too."

After a brief internal struggle, Armstrong nodded reluctantly. "Stay behind me and follow instructions exactly. No heroics."

As they hurried from the festival grounds toward their cars, Mari's phone buzzed with a text from an unknown number: *The aging process is complete. Truth ripens in darkness but requires light to be fully appreciated. East tunnel entrance. —M*

"Marcel," she told the others. "He's directing us to a specific entrance."

"Or someone has his phone and is setting a trap," Armstrong cautioned.

"Either way, we need to hurry," Denise urged.

They piled into Armstrong's unmarked car and Liv's SUV, racing through Inkwell Cove's quiet streets toward The Aged Page. Festival

attendance had drawn most of the town away, leaving the commercial district eerily empty.

As they approached the cheese shop, Armstrong received confirmation that backup was en route but still minutes away. "We can't wait," he decided after a moment's consideration. "If Marcel is in danger, every second counts."

The shop was locked but showed no signs of forced entry. Armstrong used the key Marcel had provided with his evidence to access the back entrance, leading them through the storage area to the heavy wooden door Mari remembered from her previous visit.

"The east tunnel would be this direction," Mari indicated, recalling the layout of the cave system Marcel had described.

With Armstrong and Denise in the lead, weapons drawn, they descended the stone stairs into the cool darkness of the cheese cave. The complex aromas of aging milk products filled the air, but now carried an ominous quality rather than the artisanal charm Mari had noted during her tour.

The main chamber stood empty, wheels of cheese still arranged on their wooden shelves, undisturbed. Armstrong gestured toward a narrow passage branching eastward, previously hidden behind one of the larger storage racks.

"Stay close," he whispered. "And be ready to retreat if I give the signal."

The passage twisted through the living rock, occasionally widening into small chambers before narrowing again. After several minutes of careful progress, they heard voices echoing from ahead—Elizabeth Blackwood's cultured tones and Marcus Reed's clipped responses, interspersed with a third voice Mari recognized as Marcel's, strained but defiant.

"...should have known better than to preserve evidence against us," Elizabeth was saying. "Thirty-seven years we've maintained this operation, weathering every investigation, every nosy writer who thought they'd found a story."

"Victoria Sterling was cleverer than most," Reed's voice added. "Embedding her discoveries in fiction to protect herself. But she made the mistake of trusting these small-town amateurs—her precious Novel Sippers."

"They are more formidable than you realize," Marcel replied, his accent thickening with what sounded like pain. "They have already connected the evidence, already understand how your counterfeit cheese operation transformed into real estate fraud."

"A theory without proof," Elizabeth dismissed. "The ledgers are gone, the tunnel entrance will be permanently sealed after today, and you, Marcel, will have suffered an unfortunate accident in your aging cave. Carbon monoxide from your new aging system, perhaps. So tragic, just like that writer twenty years ago."

Armstrong signaled for them to hold position while he assessed the situation. The voices came from a larger chamber ahead, where the passage opened into what appeared to be an older section of the cave system—the original storage area beneath the Blackwood Dairy property.

"We need to draw them out," he whispered. "Separate them from Marcel."

"I have an idea," Mari said quietly, reaching into her bag for the Valencay cheese Marcel had given her the day before. "A specific distraction that might give us an advantage."

She quickly explained her plan, and though Armstrong looked skeptical, he nodded. "It's unorthodox, but it might work. We'll be ready to move the moment they're distracted."

Mari took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. Her anxiety still hummed beneath her skin, but now it focused her rather than paralyzed her. With a nod to her friends, she stepped forward and called out in a clear voice.

"Elizabeth! The festival judges are looking for you. The cheese competition can't proceed without the head judge."

Silence fell in the chamber ahead, followed by Elizabeth's response, tight with surprise. "Ms. Paige? How unexpected. And how foolish of you to come here alone."

"Who said I was alone?" Mari replied, advancing slowly toward the chamber entrance. "The Novel Sippers stick together. And we've already found what Marcel hid in the competition cheese."

A harsh laugh from Reed echoed through the cave. "Another amateur detective who's read too many mysteries. This isn't fiction, Ms. Paige. There are no convenient last-minute rescues in real life."

"No," Mari agreed, now visible in the entrance to the larger chamber. "But there are observant middle-aged women whom everyone underestimates."

The scene before her confirmed her worst fears. Marcel sat bound to a chair in the center of the chamber, a cut on his forehead trickling blood down his face. Elizabeth stood nearby, elegant even in this subterranean setting, while Reed paced impatiently, a gun held casually at his side.

Most disturbingly, the chamber was clearly the secret accounting room from Marcel's photographs—stone shelves lined the walls, old ledger

books still visible on some, while a table in the center held more recent documents and a laptop. The Blackwoods had maintained their secret financial headquarters beneath the town for decades, hidden in plain sight within the cheese caves.

"Detective Armstrong has the USB drive," Mari continued, drawing their attention fully to her. "The ledgers, the photographs, the blood evidence from Landry's murder. It's over, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's composure wavered only slightly. "Allegations without context, Ms. Paige. Ancient business records that could be interpreted many ways. And as for poor Michael Landry—accidents happen in dairy operations. Always have."

"Just like accidents happen to writers who ask too many questions?" Mari challenged. "Like Victoria Sterling? Like Caroline Walsh twenty years ago?"

This time, Elizabeth couldn't hide her shock. "You know about Walsh?"

"We know everything," Mari bluffed, slowly reaching into her bag. "Victoria left us her research. Marcel provided the financial evidence. And I brought something special for the occasion."

She withdrew the Valencay cheese, still in its distinctive pyramid shape with the truncated top. "The cheese that symbolizes how truth gets altered to accommodate power. Napoleon couldn't bear to be reminded of his failures, so he demanded reality itself be changed."

Reed's patience visibly snapped. "Enough with the cheese metaphors," he snarled, raising his gun. "This ends now."

"I couldn't agree more," came Armstrong's voice from behind Mari as he stepped into view, his service weapon trained steadily on Reed. "Marcus Reed, Elizabeth Blackwood, you're under arrest for the murder of Victoria Sterling and financial crimes spanning four decades."

Elizabeth's aristocratic features hardened into something cold and calculating. "Detective Armstrong. Always so interested in old cases. I warned my father about you years ago, when you started asking questions about the Walsh woman."

"I was a rookie then," Armstrong replied evenly. "Easily intimidated by the Blackwood name. Not anymore."

"Look around you," Elizabeth gestured to the cave. "Decades of operation, millions in transactions, connections to officials far above your pay grade. Do you really think this ends with one small-town detective and a book club?"

"Actually," Denise said, stepping into view beside Armstrong, her own weapon raised with professional precision, "it ends with evidence already transmitted to the FBI financial crimes unit, state police, and three separate news organizations. The Novel Sippers believe in redundancy."

The rest of the group appeared behind them—Liv, Trish, and Ellie forming a determined phalanx of middle-aged literary justice.

Reed's eyes darted between them, calculating odds and exits. "This is absurd. We're being threatened by a book club?"

"The Novel Sippers," Marcel corrected from his chair, a hint of satisfaction in his pained voice. "They understand what Victoria discovered—that middle-aged women become invisible to people like you, which makes them the perfect observers. The perfect detectives."

"Perfect annoyances," Elizabeth snapped, her cultivated facade crumbling as she reached into her designer jacket.

Armstrong reacted instantly. "Hands where I can see them!"

Instead of complying, Elizabeth pulled out a small remote device. "This cave system has been wired for demolition for years—our insurance against discovery. One press, and the tunnels collapse, burying all evidence... and all witnesses."

The threat hung in the air like aged Stilton—pungent and impossible to ignore.

"You'd sacrifice yourself?" Armstrong asked incredulously.

"Of course not," Elizabeth scoffed. "The east tunnel remains open for precisely three minutes after detonation—enough time for Marcus and me to escape. This was always our contingency plan."

Mari felt her anxiety surge, but surprisingly, it brought clarity rather than panic. Her "prose-ac vision" noticed details others might miss—the way Elizabeth's finger hovered over the button, the calculation in Reed's eyes as he measured the distance to the exit, the subtle tension in Marcel's bound form as he prepared for whatever came next.

"I don't think so," Mari said calmly, stepping forward with the Valencay cheese held out like an offering. "Because there's one thing neither of you considered."

"And what's that?" Reed asked derisively.

"During her book research, Victoria discovered an interesting property of certain aged cheeses," Mari explained, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "The enzymes that develop during proper aging can react with specific chemical compounds—like those in certain detonators. It's why traditional explosives manufacturers avoided dairy storage facilities."

It was a complete fabrication, but delivered with such conviction that doubt flickered across Elizabeth's face.

"Nonsense," she declared, though her finger eased slightly from the remote.

"Test it," Mari challenged. "Or did you never wonder why Marcel specifically chose a limestone cave for his shop? The mineral composition, combined with the cheese cultures he cultivates, neutralizes the compounds in your explosives. They've been degrading for years."

Elizabeth's confidence visibly wavered. Science had never been her strong suit, and the specific, technical nature of Mari's bluff targeted that weakness.

In that moment of hesitation, everything happened at once.

Marcel suddenly lunged forward in his chair, toppling himself toward Elizabeth's legs. Denise and Armstrong moved in perfect coordination, Armstrong covering Reed while Denise targeted Elizabeth. Liv, Trish, and Ellie spread out to block the eastern tunnel exit.

Reed made his choice, abandoning Elizabeth to dive for the escape tunnel. Before he could reach it, however, Liv stepped smoothly into his path, swinging her designer handbag with devastating precision. The heavy bag—which Mari knew contained two bottles of emergency festival wine—connected with Reed's temple, sending him crashing to the ground.

"2015 Bordeaux," Liv explained with grim satisfaction. "Excellent vintage. Tremendous body."

Elizabeth, momentarily distracted by Marcel's collision with her legs, looked up to find Denise's weapon inches from her face.

"I wouldn't," the former detective advised as Elizabeth's finger tensed on the detonator button. "Even if that remote works, you're not making it to the tunnel."



For a long, breathless moment, Elizabeth Blackwood—matriarch of Inkwell Cove's first family, architect of a multi-generational financial fraud, murderer—calculated her options with the same cold precision that had built her empire.

Then, with the dignified resignation of old money facing inevitable downfall, she dropped the remote.

"Thirty-seven years," she said softly as Armstrong secured her wrists with handcuffs. "My father would be disappointed."

"Your father killed Michael Landry," Marcel said, now being helped upright by Ellie. "And you killed Victoria Sterling. I think disappointment is the least of your concerns."

As backup officers flooded the chamber, securing the scene and the evidence, the Novel Sippers gathered around Marcel, checking his injuries and sharing relieved glances. The tension that had built over days released in nervous laughter and overlapping conversation.

"I can't believe you knocked out a murderer with wine," Trish said admiringly to Liv.

"I always said a good Bordeaux has knockout potential," Liv replied with a grin.

"And that cheese bluff," Ellie turned to Mari. "Enzymatic neutralization of explosives? That was inspired."

Mari shrugged, feeling the familiar post-anxiety exhaustion beginning to set in. "Isabel Greene always says to use what you know. I know cheese metaphors."

"And people," Armstrong added, joining them after handing Elizabeth and Reed to his officers. "You read their weaknesses perfectly. Elizabeth's scientific insecurity, Reed's self-preservation instinct."

"Victoria would have loved it," Denise said, holstering her weapon. "The cheese-obsessed detective being saved by actual cheese knowledge."

"Speaking of which," Mari said, looking down at the Valencay still clutched in her hand, somewhat worse for wear after the confrontation. "I think we're going to need a new cheese board for our next meeting."

Marcel laughed despite his injuries. "I will prepare the most magnificent selection the Novel Sippers have ever seen," he promised. "After I give my statement, of course."

As they made their way back through the tunnel toward daylight, Mari found herself walking beside Detective Armstrong.

"Thank you for trusting us," she said quietly. "Most law enforcement would have dismissed a book club's investigation."

"Most book clubs wouldn't have uncovered a forty-year fraud and solved two murders," Armstrong replied. "Besides, I've always been a fan of Isabel Greene. Victoria Sterling got something fundamental right in those books."

"What's that?"

"That the people society overlooks are often the ones who see the most," he said. "And that anxiety, properly channeled, can be a remarkable tool for observation."

Mari felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the festival sunshine as they emerged from the cheese cave. "Isabel would say that every good mystery, like every good cheese, has layers that reveal themselves slowly to those patient enough to wait."

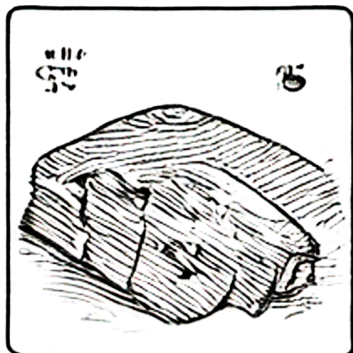
"And persistent enough to dig," Armstrong added with a small smile that transformed his weathered face. "I have a feeling the Novel Sippers will find more mysteries to solve in Inkwell Cove."

"Perhaps," Mari agreed. "But first, I think we need wine, cheese, and a very long book club discussion to process everything that's happened."

Behind them, evidence was being cataloged, statements taken, a decades-old criminal enterprise dismantled. But ahead, Mari could see her friends waiting—these remarkable middle-aged women who had transformed from casual book club members to amateur detectives and back again, their friendship strengthened by shared danger and triumph.

Like cream rising to the top, the truth had finally emerged in Inkwell Cove. And the Novel Sippers had been the perfect catalysts for the process—women of substance, complexity, and unexpected sharpness. Women who, like the finest aged cheeses, had only grown more interesting, more distinctive, and more powerful with time.

# Chapter 11: Suspect Stilton



"If we're going to investigate properly, we need to be organized," Denise declared, standing before the corkboard they'd mounted on Mari's office wall at Bound Together.

The Novel Sippers had gathered early on Sunday morning, the day after their revelations in Marcel's cheese cave and Armstrong's unexpected alliance. Outside, Inkwell Cove was just beginning to stir,

church bells ringing in the distance while early dog-walkers passed by the bookstore's darkened windows.

"Agreed," Mari said, arranging her desk for their impromptu war room. "We have three main suspects and a lot of scattered evidence. We need to consolidate what we know."

Trish had arrived with her arms full of file folders, color-coded and labeled with meticulous librarian precision. "I've transcribed everything from Victoria's notebook and organized it by suspect, timeline, and evidential strength."

"Of course you have," Liv said with affectionate exasperation, setting a cardboard tray of coffee cups on the desk. "Meanwhile, I've brought caffeine and croissants, which are equally vital to detective work."

"And I've brought these," Ellie added, producing a package of multi-colored sticky notes and fine-point markers. "For identifying emotional patterns and psychological connections in the evidence."

Mari surveyed her friends with a mixture of pride and amazement. Less than a week ago, they had been a simple book club discussing fictional

mysteries over wine and cheese. Now they were plotting out a real murder investigation with the tacit approval of local law enforcement.

"Let's start with the suspect board," Denise said, pinning three large photographs to the corkboard. "Our three primary persons of interest: Marcus Reed, Marcel Fontaine, and Elizabeth Blackwood."

"With Reed as the most immediate concern," Mari suggested. "He's still in town, he lied about returning to New York, and he was at the Harborview the night Victoria died."

"Plus there's the lactose intolerance angle," Liv noted, distributing coffee cups labeled with each woman's preferred preparation. "Victoria ordered a cheese plate she wouldn't eat herself, suggesting she was expecting someone who might pretend interest in cheese but couldn't actually consume it."

"A literary agent managing a cheese-loving detective series would certainly need to feign interest in cheese," Trish agreed, opening her Reed file folder. "Here's what we know about Marcus Reed so far."

She began pinning index cards beneath his photograph, creating a visual profile of their prime suspect. "Sixty-two years old, founder of MR Literary Management, Victoria's agent for fifteen years. Stands to gain significantly from her death through posthumous publications, film rights, and increased interest in her backlist."

"The financial motive is clear," Denise noted, "but it feels thin for murder. Literary agents benefit more from living authors who keep producing."

"Unless there's more to their relationship than business," Ellie suggested, sipping her coffee. "Or unless Victoria discovered something about Reed that threatened him beyond their professional connection."

Mari retrieved Victoria's notebook from her safe, carefully turning to the pages detailing Reed. "Victoria notes here that Reed has family ties to the region that he doesn't advertise. She found the connection while researching the Blackwood Dairy case but doesn't specify what it is."

"That's our first priority then," Denise decided. "Establishing Reed's connection to Inkwel Cove and potentially to the Blackwoods."

"The Harborview might have information," Trish suggested. "If he's stayed there before while visiting Victoria, they'd have registration records."

"And he's currently staying there now," Mari added. "We could approach from the angle of festival organizers seeking information about Victoria's preferences for a memorial display."

"Perfect cover," Denise approved. "Mari and Trish should handle that inquiry—the bookstore owner and librarian would naturally be involved in a literary memorial."

"Meanwhile," Liv said, "I can begin researching Reed's business affairs. As a wine distributor, I have access to import/export databases that might reveal connections to specialty food businesses."

"And I'll analyze Victoria's notes about Reed's behavior," Ellie offered. "Looking for psychological patterns that might indicate deception or hidden motives."

As they continued planning, arranging evidence and assigning tasks, Mari felt that familiar mixture of anxiety and exhilaration. This wasn't like discussing fictional murders in the safety of their book club. This was real, with real consequences and potentially real danger.

"We should establish communication protocols," Denise said, her police training evident. "Check-ins every three hours, and no one investigates alone."

"Our cheese code words still stand," Trish reminded them. "'Gouda' means all clear, 'Blue' means trouble, and 'Limburger'—"

"Means run for your lives," Liv finished with a grim smile. "Though I still say we should have used wine varietals instead."

By mid-morning, their strategy was set. The corkboard displayed three distinct suspect profiles, with Reed's the most developed. Red string connected evidence points, creating a web of suspicious circumstances and potential motives. Beneath the board, a timeline tracked events from Michael Landry's disappearance in 1988 through Victoria's arrival in Inkwel Cove and her subsequent death.

"It's like something out of one of our books," Trish observed, stepping back to survey their work.

"Except the stakes are real," Mari reminded her. "Victoria died because of what she discovered. We need to be careful."

"Careful, but persistent," Denise added. "Justice for Victoria means finding concrete proof of who killed her and why."

"And we start with Marcus Reed," Mari nodded, gathering her bag. "Trish, ready for a visit to the Harborview?"

"Operation Literary Memorial is go," Trish replied with enthusiasm that belied the seriousness of their mission.

As they prepared to leave, Mari checked her phone—a text from Detective Armstrong: *Reed making inquiries about property records at town hall. Blackwood connection likely. Proceed with caution.*

"Looks like we're on the right track," she told the others, showing them the message. "Reed is digging into property records."

"Covering his tracks, perhaps," Denise suggested.

"Or looking for something Victoria found," Ellie countered.

"Either way," Liv said, reaching for her coat, "the game is afoot."

"Did you really just quote Sherlock Holmes?" Trish laughed.

"In a cheese-themed investigation?" Liv winked. "I thought about going with 'the cheese stands alone,' but it felt too obvious."

Despite the tension, Mari found herself smiling. However this investigation ended, she was grateful for these women—their intelligence, their humor, their determination. Together, they made a formidable team.

Just as Victoria had recognized when she chose them.

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The Harborview Hotel maintained its Victorian elegance under the bright October sunshine, white gingerbread trim standing out against sky-blue clapboards. Mari and Trish approached the reception desk with their story prepared—festival organizers seeking information for a memorial display honoring Victoria Sterling.

"Oh, how lovely," the receptionist said, genuine enthusiasm in her voice. "Ms. Sterling was such a distinguished guest. The hotel would be honored to contribute to a memorial."

"We're focusing on her research process," Mari explained. "Her connection to Inkwell Cove that brought her here."

"And specifically her history with the hotel," Trish added. "We understand she may have stayed here during previous visits?"

The receptionist—Bethany, according to her name tag—glanced at her computer. "I'd have to check our records. We did renovate our



reservation system last year, so older stays might not be readily accessible."

"Anything you could find would be helpful," Mari encouraged. "Even confirmation that she'd stayed previously."

While Bethany searched the hotel records, Mari and Trish examined the lobby, noting security cameras and staff positions. If Reed returned unexpectedly, they wanted to be aware of possible exits.

"Here we are," Bethany said finally. "Ms. Sterling stayed with us three times in the past two years. Always in our Elizabeth Blackwood Suite."

Mari and Trish exchanged glances at this detail—Victoria had repeatedly chosen a suite named after one of her primary suspects.

"That's helpful," Mari said. "Was she always alone, or did she have regular visitors?"

Bethany hesitated, professional discretion warring with her desire to assist the memorial project. "Well, her literary agent often joined her for meetings. Mr. Reed. In fact, he's staying with us now—handling her affairs after her passing, I understand."

"How thoughtful of him to remain in town," Trish remarked innocently. "I imagine he must have been close to his client."

"I believe so," Bethany nodded. "Though it's a bit odd—" She stopped herself, clearly reconsidering sharing gossip.

"What's odd?" Mari prompted gently.

"Well," Bethany lowered her voice, "the night Ms. Sterling... passed away, Mr. Reed was also staying here. He checked in late, told me he had a brief meeting and wouldn't need the room overnight. But Hector—our night manager—saw him leaving well after midnight."

This confirmation of Reed's presence at the Harborview the night of Victoria's death sent a small thrill of validation through Mari. Their suspicions about his movements were proving correct.

"That is unusual," Mari agreed, keeping her tone conversational. "I don't suppose you know if Mr. Reed has other connections to Inkwell Cove? Besides representing Ms. Sterling, I mean."

"I couldn't say for certain," Bethany replied. "Though he does seem familiar with the town for someone supposedly based in New York. Last night he was asking about local delivery services for specialty items."

"Specialty items?" Trish inquired.

"Yes, specifically whether we could recommend services that handle temperature-sensitive deliveries. For cheese, I assumed, though he mentioned he's lactose intolerant. Perhaps it was for Ms. Sterling's estate?"

Another piece clicking into place—Reed continuing to show interest in cheese despite his supposed intolerance.

"One more question," Mari said. "Does Mr. Reed have a regular room preference? For the memorial, we're trying to capture details about Victoria's literary circle."

Bethany checked her computer again. "He typically books our Harbor View Junior Suite. Third floor, eastern corner. It's one of our quieter rooms—he's mentioned being a light sleeper."

"Perfect, thank you," Mari smiled warmly. "This has been incredibly helpful for our memorial planning."

As they turned to leave, a familiar voice froze them in place.

"Planning a memorial, are we?" Marcus Reed stood near the entrance to the hotel restaurant, watching them with undisguised suspicion. "How thoughtful."

Reed matched Victoria's description perfectly—tall, distinguished, with the sleek polish of a successful New York literary agent. His silver hair was impeccably styled, his casual weekend attire still managing to look expensive and deliberate. But it was his eyes that caught Mari's attention—sharp, assessing, missing nothing.

"Mr. Reed," Mari recovered quickly, extending her hand. "Marianne Paige, owner of Bound Together bookstore. This is Patricia Martinez from the Inkwell Cove Library. We're coordinating a memorial display for Victoria as part of the Cheese & Wine Festival."

Reed shook her hand, his grip firm but brief. "I'm aware of who you are, Ms. Paige. Victoria mentioned your book club quite specifically in our last conversation."

Something in his tone suggested this wasn't a positive mention.

"We were honored she joined us," Mari said carefully. "Her death has affected us deeply."

"Indeed." Reed's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Affected you so deeply that you've been asking questions all over town about her research, her movements, and her supposedly suspicious death."

The direct confrontation caught Mari off guard, but Trish stepped smoothly into the gap.

"As literary professionals, we're naturally interested in Victoria's final project," she said, her librarian's voice projecting calm authority. "Understanding her research process would be a meaningful aspect of any memorial."

"Her research process," Reed repeated, studying them both. "Yes, Victoria was quite... thorough in her investigations. Perhaps too thorough for her own good."

The implied threat hung in the air between them.

"We should let you get to your breakfast," Mari said, maintaining her bookstore owner persona despite the chill running down her spine. "I'm sure managing Victoria's literary estate keeps you quite busy."

"Extraordinarily," Reed agreed. "Especially securing her unfinished manuscript. *The Curdled Truth* had such... local relevance. It would be a shame if unauthorized portions were to circulate."

"That would indeed be unfortunate," Mari acknowledged, holding his gaze steadily despite her racing heart.

"Well, good day, ladies," Reed said finally. "Enjoy your memorial planning. Though I might suggest a word of caution."

"Oh?" Trish prompted when he paused for effect.

"Victoria's detective Isabel Greene often observed that amateur sleuths rarely recognize the dangers they stumble into until it's too late." Reed's smile turned cold. "In fiction, they usually survive their mistakes. Reality can be less... accommodating."

With a slight nod, he turned and entered the restaurant, leaving Mari and Trish standing in the lobby with the distinct impression that their cover story had failed completely.

"Well," Trish whispered as they exited the hotel, "that was subtle as a brick Gouda."

"He knows we're investigating," Mari agreed, checking over her shoulder to ensure they weren't followed. "And he just threatened us while maintaining plausible deniability."

"Do we tell the others?"

"Immediately," Mari nodded, pulling out her phone to text Denise. "And we need to accelerate our research into Reed's background. The Blackwood connection is key—I'm sure of it."

As they hurried back toward Bound Together, Mari felt that familiar flutter of anxiety in her chest—her body's warning system activating in response to genuine threat. But alongside it came the focusing clarity of her "prose-ac vision," sharpening her observations and helping her connect details others might miss.

Marcus Reed had just confirmed his involvement in Victoria's death more clearly than any evidence they'd yet uncovered. The question now was proving it before he silenced them too.

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"He said what?" Denise demanded when they reconvened at the bookstore an hour later.

"Reality can be less accommodating," Trish repeated. "While smiling like a shark in a suit."

"That's a clear threat," Liv said, pacing between the bookshelves. "He's not even bothering to hide his involvement anymore."

"Which suggests he feels protected," Ellie noted, her professional analysis kicking in. "His confidence indicates either powerful connections or an escape strategy already in place."

"Or both," Mari added. "Have we made progress on his background?"

Denise nodded, pulling out her laptop. "Significant progress. I called in a favor from a former colleague in Boston PD with access to better databases than we have. Reed's mother's maiden name was Blackwood—Catherine Blackwood, specifically. She was Elizabeth's first cousin."

"So Reed is Elizabeth's first cousin once removed," Trish clarified.

"Exactly," Denise confirmed. "The family connection is distant enough to keep their business relationship seeming coincidental, but close enough for trust in sensitive operations."

"And there's more," Liv added, placing printouts on the desk. "Before founding MR Literary Management, Reed ran an import business specializing in European specialty foods—primarily dairy products."

"Reed International Imports," Mari read from the document. "Established 1992, dissolved 2003 after multiple FDA citations for labeling irregularities."

"Labeling irregularities?" Ellie asked.

"A euphemism for counterfeit products," Liv explained. "Claiming one origin or quality while actually providing another. Classic food fraud—and perfect for money laundering."

"So the pattern Victoria discovered goes back decades," Trish mused. "The Blackwood Dairy operation transforms into real estate development and specialty food import businesses, all while maintaining the same underlying money laundering structure."

"With family members in key positions," Denise added. "Elizabeth handling the local side, Reed managing international connections and eventually expanding into publishing—another cash-heavy industry with subjective pricing."

"The literary agency gives him legitimacy and access to research that might threaten the operation," Mari realized. "He'd know immediately if authors were investigating topics that might uncover his family's activities."

"Like Victoria with her cheese-obsessed detective and interest in financial crimes," Ellie nodded.

"So why represent her in the first place?" Trish wondered. "If her detective series focused on areas related to his illegal operations, wouldn't that be risky?"

"Control," Denise said immediately. "By becoming her agent, he could monitor her research, influence her narrative, and ensure any too-accurate details were edited out before publication."

"Until she started researching the Blackwood Dairy case specifically," Mari concluded. "That would have crossed the line from general risk to direct threat."

"And Victoria started behaving suspiciously," Ellie added. "Making connections Reed couldn't control, speaking with Marcel, meeting with us. From a psychological perspective, his perceived betrayal by a longtime client would intensify his reaction."

As they processed these revelations, Mari's phone buzzed with a text from Detective Armstrong: *Reed checking out of Harborview. Surveillance in place. Update on your findings?*

"Reed's on the move," she told the others. "Armstrong has him under surveillance, but we should share what we've found."

She quickly summarized their discoveries in a reply text, explaining Reed's family connection to the Blackwoods and his history in specialty food imports.

The response came almost immediately: *Connection confirmed through property records. Reed listed as minority owner on three Blackwood Development projects. Keep distance from him. Appears agitated.*

"Armstrong confirms the connection through property records," Mari reported. "And advises keeping our distance—apparently Reed is agitated."

"After threatening you and Trish, that's concerning," Denise frowned. "We should implement buddy protocols. No one goes anywhere alone until this is resolved."

"Agreed," Liv said firmly. "Reed clearly knows we're investigating, which means we've lost the element of surprise."

"But gained confirmation that we're on the right track," Trish pointed out. "His reaction proves he has something to hide."

They were discussing next steps when Ellie's phone rang. Her expression changed as she checked the caller ID.

"It's my office assistant," she explained, answering. "Hello? Yes, I—what? When?" Her face paled. "No, don't touch anything. I'll be right there."

"What's wrong?" Mari asked as Ellie ended the call.

"Someone left an envelope in my office mailbox," Ellie said, her voice tight. "My assistant opened it, thinking it was from a patient. It contained a single white pill that looks exactly like Lexapro and a note saying 'Some prescriptions are fatal when filled incorrectly.'"

The implication was unmistakable—a direct reference to how Victoria died and a threat to Ellie using the same method.



"I need to go," Ellie said, grabbing her coat. "My assistant is terrified, and if that pill is evidence—"

"I'll come with you," Mari said immediately. "Buddy protocol, remember?"

"And I'll notify Armstrong," Denise added, already pulling out her phone. "This escalates everything."

Twenty minutes later, Mari and Ellie stood in Ellie's small professional office, watching as a police technician carefully bagged the threatening note and pill for evidence. Detective Armstrong was speaking with Ellie's assistant in the waiting room, taking her statement about when and how she'd discovered the envelope.

"This is definitely Lexapro," the technician confirmed, examining the pill through its evidence bag. "Or at least it looks identical. We'll need to test it to determine if it's been tampered with like the ones in Ms. Sterling's room."

Mari observed Ellie's reaction, noting the rapid breathing and slight tremor in her hands that signaled rising anxiety. As a fellow Lexapro user, she recognized the signs of panic building beneath Ellie's professional exterior.

"Let's step outside for a minute," she suggested gently, guiding Ellie toward the small courtyard behind the office building.

Once outside, Ellie's composure cracked. "I can't—" she gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. "Can't catch my breath."

"Panic attack," Mari nodded, recognition immediate. "Focus on me, Ellie. We've got this."

She guided Ellie to a bench, sitting beside her and demonstrating slow, deliberate breathing. "In for four, hold for seven, out for eight. Just like you taught me."

For several minutes, they breathed together, Mari maintaining steady eye contact and calm reassurance while Ellie fought through the wave of panic. Gradually, the psychiatrist's breathing steadied, her clinical training helping her regain control despite the personal nature of the threat.

"Thank you," Ellie said finally, her voice steadier. "Irony, isn't it? The therapist having a panic attack."

"Therapists are human too," Mari replied with a small smile. "And this threat was deliberately personal—targeting your medication."

"Just like Victoria," Ellie nodded. "Reed knows I take Lexapro too. But how?"

Mari considered the question. "Your patient records?"

"Possibly," Ellie admitted. "Though that would require hacking or inside access. More likely he observed something during our interactions. When we met at the Blackwood pavilion, I took my morning dose with coffee. He might have noticed."

"Reed's making this personal," Mari said, anger building beneath her concern. "Using intimidation to shut down our investigation."

"Which proves we're getting close to something important," Ellie noted, her analytical mind reasserting itself despite her lingering anxiety. "This is reactive, not strategic. He's worried."

Mari squeezed her friend's hand. "Are you okay to continue? No one would blame you for stepping back after this."

Ellie's expression hardened with determination. "Absolutely not. If anything, this makes me more committed. Victoria didn't deserve to die for her investigation, and we don't deserve to be threatened for seeking justice."

"That's the spirit," Mari approved. "The Novel Sippers don't scare easily."

"Though we do scare appropriately," Ellie added with a wry smile. "Healthy fear is adaptive. It's what we do with it that matters."

As they returned inside, Armstrong met them in the hallway, his expression grave.

"We're taking this threat very seriously," he assured them. "I've assigned an officer to patrol near Dr. Chen's office and home. I'd advise the same for all of you until we resolve this."

"Any update on Reed?" Mari asked.

"He's checked out of the Harborview but hasn't left town," Armstrong reported. "My officer observed him meeting with Elizabeth Blackwood at her estate an hour ago."

"So they're coordinating," Ellie concluded.

"It appears so," Armstrong agreed. "But this threatening note gives us grounds to accelerate our investigation. I can now obtain warrants that were previously out of reach."

"In the meantime," Mari said, "we need to focus on building our case against Reed. If he's escalating to direct threats, we must be close to something crucial."

As they discussed next steps, Mari's phone buzzed with a text from Liv: *You need to see this. Harbor Grounds café, now. Reed and Elizabeth in deep conversation. Gouda so far but getting interesting.*

"Liv has eyes on Reed and Elizabeth at Harbor Grounds," Mari reported. "They're meeting publicly now, not even trying to hide their connection."

"That's significant," Armstrong observed. "Either they're confident enough to operate in the open, or they're planning something that requires immediate coordination."

"Either way, we should observe," Mari decided. "Ellie, are you up for a coffee run?"

Despite the lingering effects of her panic attack, Ellie nodded firmly. "Absolutely. Witnessing their interaction could provide valuable psychological insights."

"I'll meet you there separately," Armstrong said. "Better if they don't connect us too obviously."

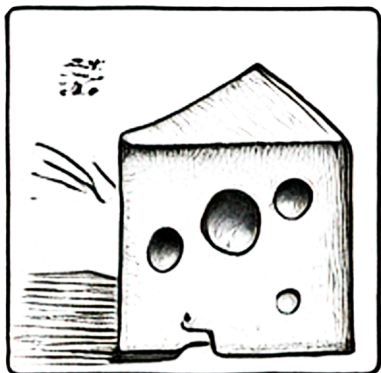
As they left the office, Mari felt that familiar mixture of fear and determination. Reed had escalated from veiled threats to direct intimidation, specifically targeting Ellie's medication in an echo of Victoria's murder. Their amateur investigation had become decidedly more dangerous.

But like the Stilton cheese Denise had used to represent Reed on their suspect board—sharp, crumbly under pressure, with blue veins running throughout like secrets—their prime suspect was beginning to reveal his true nature. The aging process was exposing what had been hidden beneath the surface.

The Novel Sippers just needed to ensure they weren't cut down before the full flavor of truth could develop.



# Chapter 12: The Grating Truth



"I'm still not convinced Marcel is an ally," Denise said, carefully examining the profile they'd created on their suspect board. "His history with the Blackwoods is too complex, and his knowledge too detailed to be merely an observer."

The Novel Sippers had reconvened at Bound Together the morning after their confrontation with Marcus Reed. The

threatening note left for Ellie had accelerated their investigation timeline, creating a new sense of urgency that permeated their normally lighthearted gatherings.

"But why would he help us if he's involved?" Mari countered, arranging a new set of Post-it notes under Marcel's photograph. "He provided Victoria's research materials and has shared information consistently."

"Classic misdirection," Denise suggested, her detective experience showing. "What better way to deflect suspicion than to position yourself as an ally? Remember, he worked at Blackwood Dairy when Michael Landry disappeared."

"Proximity doesn't equal guilt," Trish noted, scanning the meticulous timeline she'd created. "And the photograph we found only proves he was employed there, not that he was involved in whatever happened to Landry."

Liv, who had been unusually quiet, finally spoke up. "There's a simple way to test Marcel's credibility," she said. "We visit his shop under the pretense of ordering cheese for a wine pairing event and observe his reactions when we probe into specific areas."

"A field interview disguised as a business consultation," Denise nodded approvingly. "That could work."

"And it plays to your strengths, Liv," Ellie added. "Your wine expertise gives you natural cover for asking detailed questions about aging processes and specialty varieties."

"I'll go with Liv," Denise decided. "My law enforcement background might help spot deception indicators."

"Perfect," Mari agreed. "Meanwhile, Trish and I will dig deeper into the historical connection between Marcel and the Blackwoods. There must be property records or business filings that explain why he set up shop on Blackwood-owned land."

"And I'll analyze the psychological patterns in Victoria's notes about Marcel," Ellie offered. "She clearly revised her assessment of him over time. Understanding why might reveal something important."

As they finalized their plan, Mari noticed shadows beneath Ellie's eyes—evidence of a restless night after yesterday's threatening note. They were all feeling the weight of this investigation, but Ellie had been directly targeted in a way that echoed Victoria's murder.

"Everyone remembers our cheese code words?" Mari confirmed. "And no one investigates alone—buddy system at all times."

"Gouda means all clear, Blue means trouble, Limburger means run," Trish recited. "And I'm still lobbying for wine-based codes next time."

The small joke lifted the tension momentarily, though it settled back as they dispersed to their assigned tasks. This was no longer just an intellectual exercise in amateur detection. Someone had died, and someone was willing to threaten them to keep secrets buried.

The Aged Page was enjoying a mid-morning lull when Liv and Denise arrived. Marcel was alone behind the counter, carefully arranging a display of alpine cheeses with the precision of an artist installing a gallery exhibition.

"Ladies," he greeted them, his accent more pronounced than usual. "Twice in one week—I am honored. What brings members of the Novel Sippers to my humble establishment today?"

"Business rather than investigation," Liv replied smoothly, setting her leather portfolio on the counter. "I'm hosting a wine pairing event for some industry contacts, and I need a cheese selection that will impress even the most discerning palates."

Marcel's expression remained professional, though Denise noted the slight tensing around his eyes at the mention of "investigation"—an acknowledgment of their real purpose that went unspoken.

"Of course," he said, wiping his hands on his apron. "What wines will you be showcasing? The pairing must be harmonious."

As Liv launched into a detailed description of her fictional wine selection, Denise wandered the shop, noting security camera placements and exit points with the habitual awareness of her police training. The Aged Page was meticulously organized, with glass-fronted refrigerated cases displaying cheeses by region, age, and milk type. Hand-lettered signs provided tasting notes and suggested wine pairings for each variety.

"For your Barolo, I would recommend this aged Parmigiano-Reggiano," Marcel was saying, offering Liv a small sample. "Thirty-six months in aging, with protein crystals that create a pleasant textural contrast to the wine's tannic structure."



"Perfect," Liv nodded appreciatively after tasting. "And what about something more adventurous for the natural wine portion? Something with a story behind it."

Marcel's eyes lit up—the enthusiast rather than the shopkeeper emerging. "Ah, for that I have something special. A washed-rind cheese aged in our limestone cave below, using techniques my grandfather taught me in France."

"You age cheese on-site?" Denise asked, rejoining the conversation. "I'd love to see that process. My nephew is considering artisanal food production as a career."

It was a fabrication, but one that opened the door to their real investigation. Marcel hesitated, just long enough for Denise to register his calculation.

"The aging cave is not typically part of the customer experience," he said carefully. "Health department regulations, you understand."

"Of course," Liv nodded. "Though I imagine it adds wonderful authenticity to your products. Similar to how the Blackwood Dairy used to age their specialty cheeses, from what I've read about local history."

The mention of Blackwood Dairy landed precisely as intended. Marcel's expression shifted subtly—recognition, wariness, and something that might have been old pain.

"You've researched our local dairy history?" he asked, his tone deliberately casual.

"For my wine business," Liv explained. "Understanding the agricultural heritage of a region informs its wine culture as well. The Blackwoods were quite innovative for their time, weren't they?"

"Innovation can take many forms," Marcel replied cryptically. "Not all of them beneficial to the consumer."

He turned to retrieve a cloth-wrapped bundle from a drawer behind the counter, unwrapping it to reveal a small, ash-covered round of cheese with a distinctive grayish bloom. "This," he said, returning to professional enthusiasm, "would pair extraordinarily with your natural wines. Saint-Maure de Touraine, made in the traditional method with a straw through the center to allow proper aeration during aging."

Denise watched this pivot with interest. Marcel had deflected from the Blackwood reference smoothly but not completely—his cryptic comment suggested willingness to discuss with the right approach.

"Speaking of traditional methods," she said, accepting a small sample of the offered cheese, "I've always been fascinated by how techniques evolve over time. Did your experience at Blackwood Dairy influence your current production methods?"

The directness of the question hung in the air between them. Marcel's eyes darted to the door—checking for other customers, Denise noted—before he made a decision.

"Perhaps," he said finally, "this discussion would benefit from visual demonstration. The cave is not open to the public, but for friends of Victoria Sterling... exceptions can be made."

The shift from commercial transaction to conspiracy was immediate and unmistakable. Liv caught Denise's eye with a small nod—progress.

"We would appreciate that," Liv said simply.

Marcel flipped the sign on his door to "Back in 30 Minutes" and locked the entrance before leading them through the swinging door marked "Employees Only" into the store's back room. The transition from retail space to working environment was stark—stainless steel tables for

cutting and packaging, industrial refrigerators humming steadily, and the tools of the cheesemonger's trade arranged with military precision.

"I purchased this building twenty years ago," Marcel explained as he led them toward the heavy wooden door Mari had described from her previous visit. "The limestone caves beneath were a primary selling point, though their full extent was... not included in the official documentation."

He produced an old-fashioned iron key, turning it in the lock with a satisfying click. The door swung open to reveal the stone staircase descending into the cool darkness below. Marcel flipped a switch, and vintage-style bulbs illuminated the passage with a warm amber glow.

"Watch your step," he cautioned. "These stairs have witnessed three centuries of commerce, not all of it legitimate."

The temperature dropped noticeably as they descended, the air growing thicker with the complex aromas of aging cheese. At the bottom, Marcel paused to let them absorb the sight of his aging cave—rows of wooden shelves laden with wheels and wedges in various stages of maturation, some covered in bloomy white rinds, others wrapped in leaves or cloth, still others naked and glistening with moisture.

"Magnificent," Liv breathed, genuine appreciation in her voice. "The terroir is palpable down here."

"Exactly so," Marcel nodded, pleased by her understanding. "The microbiome of this cave creates flavors impossible to replicate elsewhere. The same cheese recipe aged elsewhere would become an entirely different product."

"Like wine in different cellars," Liv agreed.

"Or evidence in different hands," Denise added pointedly.

Marcel's expression shifted, the artisan receding as the conspirator emerged. "You came about Victoria's death, not cheese for a wine pairing," he stated rather than asked.

"Yes," Denise confirmed, dropping the pretense. "We need to understand your role in all this, Marcel. You worked at Blackwood Dairy when Michael Landry disappeared. Now you run a cheese shop on property Elizabeth Blackwood owns. Yet you provided Victoria with research materials that implicated the Blackwoods in criminal activity."

"These apparent contradictions trouble you," Marcel nodded. "As they should a good investigator."

He moved deeper into the cave, gesturing for them to follow. The main chamber branched into smaller alcoves, each maintaining slightly different conditions for specific cheese varieties. In one such alcove, Marcel stopped before a section of seemingly solid stone wall and pressed a particular protrusion.

To Denise's astonishment, a small door swung open, revealing a hidden cavity. From within, Marcel removed a metal box, the kind used for fireproof document storage.

"Victoria was not the first to investigate the Blackwood operation," he said, placing the box on a nearby cutting table. "Merely the most recent to die for it."

He opened the box, removing a folder of old photographs. The top image showed a group of workers posed in front of milk cans, dated 1988—the Blackwood Dairy staff, including a much younger Marcel and a man Denise recognized from their case files as Michael Landry.

"You and Landry worked together," Liv observed, studying the photograph.

"More than that," Marcel corrected. "We were friends. Both outsiders—Michael from upstate New York, myself from France—both passionate about traditional cheese-making methods in an increasingly industrialized industry."

"What happened to him?" Denise asked directly.

Marcel's expression darkened. "He discovered irregularities in the production line. Cheese moving through the aging process too quickly, inconsistent documentation, shipments that arrived and departed in the night without proper records."

"The counterfeit cheese operation Victoria was investigating," Liv realized.

"Precisely," Marcel nodded. "Though in 1988, it was more primitive than what it later became. The Blackwoods were using their legitimate dairy as cover for washing money from less reputable ventures. They purchased inferior milk and cheese cultures but labeled and sold them as premium products, with the price difference laundered back into their accounts."

"And Landry discovered this," Denise prompted.

"Michael was... meticulous," Marcel said, a hint of old grief in his voice. "He kept detailed notes on aging times, temperature variations, culture development. He noticed when wheels were moved or relabeled. At first, he believed it was simple mismanagement. Until he found the hidden ledger room."

He removed another photograph from the folder—this one showing a stone chamber deeper in the cave system, with ledger books arranged on shelves carved directly from the rock walls.

"The real financial records were kept separate from the dairy's official books," Marcel explained. "Michael discovered them by accident while examining a section of the cave for potential aging expansion."

"And then he disappeared," Liv said quietly.

"He told me of his discovery the day before," Marcel confirmed. "We agreed to document everything before going to authorities. The next morning, he never arrived for his shift. Three days later, the Blackwoods announced he had quit without notice and returned to New York."

"But you knew better," Denise guessed.

Marcel's laugh held no humor. "I knew Michael would never abandon his cheeses mid-aging. It would be like a parent abandoning a child. And there was blood—a small amount, poorly cleaned in one of the remote cave chambers. Enough to suspect, not enough to prove."

"So you've been gathering evidence against the Blackwoods for decades," Liv said, understanding dawning in her eyes. "That's why you bought this building—it connects to the cave system under the old dairy property."

"Property Elizabeth Blackwood now owns," Denise added, pieces clicking into place. "Including the building that houses your shop. You positioned yourself deliberately—keeping watch on their operation from within."

Marcel inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the accuracy of their assessment. "After Michael's disappearance, the dairy closed quickly. The Blackwoods transitioned to real estate development, but the underlying operation continued—money laundering through inflated property values, phantom construction costs, manipulated appraisals. The same technique, different vehicle."

"And you've documented all of it," Denise said, gesturing to the metal box.

"As best I could from my limited position," Marcel confirmed. "Financial records, property transfers, shell company registrations. The evidence accumulated slowly, like a fine cheese aging—developing complexity and sharpness over time."

"Why not take this to the authorities years ago?" Liv asked the obvious question.

Marcel's expression turned bitter. "The foreign cheesemonger accusing Inkwell Cove's first family of fraud and murder? With circumstantial evidence decades old? The Blackwoods owned half the town then—including the police department. Even now, their influence extends to county officials and state legislators."

"Until Victoria Sterling arrived," Denise concluded. "A famous author with her own platform and credibility."

"Exactly," Marcel nodded. "When she began asking questions about the old dairy and Michael's disappearance, I saw an opportunity. Someone the Blackwoods couldn't simply dismiss or intimidate. Someone people would listen to."

"But they killed her instead," Liv said softly.

"A mistake I should have anticipated," Marcel admitted, regret evident in his voice. "I believed her fame would protect her. I was wrong."

He returned the photographs to the metal box, his movements deliberate and precise. "Now you must decide," he said, facing them directly. "Am I a suspect in your investigation, or an ally? A witness to history, or complicit in its making?"

Denise studied him with the careful assessment of her police training. His story aligned with the evidence they'd gathered—the timeline, Victoria's notes, the financial discrepancies. But something still troubled her.

"If the Blackwoods are as dangerous as you claim, why haven't they eliminated you? You've operated on their property for twenty years, gathering evidence against them."

Marcel's smile was grim. "Insurance policies take many forms, Detective Sharma. Mine is a comprehensive dossier on Blackwood operations distributed to multiple secure locations, with instructions for release upon my untimely death or disappearance."

"Smart," Denise acknowledged.

"Necessary," Marcel corrected. "The Blackwoods tolerate my presence precisely because removing me would trigger what they fear most—exposure."

"And Reed?" Liv asked. "How does Victoria's agent fit into this?"

"Marcus Reed is Elizabeth's cousin by marriage—family but distant enough to maintain plausible separation in business matters. His import company provided international connections for distributing counterfeit products and laundering funds through foreign accounts. When regulations tightened, he transitioned to literary management—another cash-heavy industry with subjective pricing and international rights deals."

"So he controlled which authors got too close to their operations," Denise realized. "Including Victoria's detective series with its cheese-loving protagonist."

"Until she began researching the Blackwood case specifically," Marcel nodded. "That crossed from general risk to direct threat."



He closed the metal box, returning it to its hidden compartment in the cave wall. "I've shown you this because Victoria trusted you—her Novel Sippers. She believed in your collective intelligence and your diverse connections throughout Inkwell Cove."

"She chose us deliberately," Liv mused. "Not just as friends, but as investigators."

"A bookstore owner with a finger on the community's pulse," Marcel agreed. "A librarian with access to historical records, a wine expert connected to social events, a psychiatrist trained in human behavior, and a former detective with investigative experience. Five middle-aged women whom no one would suspect of serious investigation."

"Our invisibility is our advantage," Denise acknowledged, echoing Mari's earlier assessment.

"Precisely," Marcel said. "Victoria recognized this. I do as well. The question remains—do you trust me enough to work together? To finish what Victoria started?"

Denise and Liv exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them. The evidence Marcel presented was compelling, his story consistent with what they'd uncovered independently. But years in law enforcement had taught Denise the value of healthy skepticism.

"We'll need to discuss this with the others," she said finally. "And verify key elements of your account."

"Of course," Marcel inclined his head. "Due diligence is essential in both cheese production and criminal investigation."

As they prepared to leave the aging cave, Marcel paused at one of the larger wheels resting on a wooden shelf. "This is a traditional Alpine-style cheese, aged twenty-four months using methods that predate modern dairy practices," he explained, his artisan's pride

momentarily reasserting itself. "Michael Landry taught me how to make it."

He removed a specialized tool from his pocket—a narrow, curved blade with a sharp point. "This cheese knife has been in my family for generations," he said, inserting it carefully into the wheel and extracting a small core sample. "It allows one to examine the interior of a cheese without cutting the entire wheel—to verify quality while preserving integrity."

The metaphor wasn't lost on Denise. "Like good investigation," she observed.

"Exactly so," Marcel nodded, offering them each a portion of the sample. "One must look beneath the surface to discover the truth, but do so with precision and care."

As they tasted the cheese—complex, nutty, with crystalline texture that spoke to its long aging—Marcel added, "I have one more item you should see."

From behind another wheel, he retrieved a small wrapped package that he handed to Denise. "This includes documentation on the more recent financial connections between Blackwood Development and Reed's literary agency. Transaction records, shell company registrations, property transfers where artificial values were created to launder funds."

"This would help establish current criminal activity," Denise realized, "not just historical patterns."

"Evidence that would interest your detective friend, Armstrong," Marcel suggested. "Though I would appreciate discretion regarding its source until we're certain of his independence from Blackwood influence."

The implication was clear—Marcel was willing to provide evidence but remained cautious about official channels that might be compromised.

"We'll handle it carefully," Liv promised, securing the package in her handbag.

As they ascended the stone stairs back to the shop, Denise couldn't shake the feeling that Marcel Fontaine, like the cheeses he cultivated, had layers that were still developing—complexity that continued to mature with time. Whether he was ultimately an ally or another suspect remained to be determined, but his evidence would significantly advance their investigation.

"One last question," she said as they reached the shop level. "The cheese knife you showed us—the specialized tool for examining a wheel's interior. Does it have a name?"

Marcel's smile suggested she'd asked exactly the right question. "In French, it is called a *sonde*," he replied. "In English, the closest translation would be 'probe' or 'investigator.' Fitting, yes?"

"Very," Denise agreed.

As they left The Aged Page, the bells above the door chiming their departure, Liv waited until they were safely in her car before speaking.

"So," she said, starting the engine, "do we trust him?"

Denise weighed the question carefully, years of detective work informing her assessment. "His evidence is compelling and aligns with what we've gathered independently. His motive for helping us—avenging his friend Landry—rings true."

"But?" Liv prompted, recognizing the hesitation in her tone.

"But he's operated within the Blackwood sphere for decades," Denise said. "That kind of proximity to corruption can be contaminating. And he clearly has his own agenda that may not align perfectly with ours."

"So we verify before trusting completely," Liv concluded.

"Exactly. As Marcel himself said—due diligence is essential." Denise patted the package of evidence now secure in her bag. "Meanwhile, this gives us concrete financial connections between Reed and the Blackwoods. Something Armstrong can potentially use for warrants."

As they drove back toward Bound Together to share their discoveries with the other Novel Sippers, Denise mentally updated their suspect board. Marcel Fontaine remained in the "person of interest" column, but with a significant notation: potential witness rather than perpetrator.

The grating truth was beginning to emerge from beneath the rind of secrecy the Blackwoods had cultivated for decades. Like a properly aged cheese, it had developed sharpness and complexity with time—flavor notes that couldn't be rushed or artificially accelerated.

The Novel Sippers just needed to ensure they weren't cut down before the full truth could be served.

# Chapter 13: Sharp Cheddar



The Blackwood Estate sprawled across five manicured acres on the north side of Inkwell Cove, its Georgian architecture and sweeping views of the water a testament to generations of accumulated wealth. Mari had driven past the wrought-iron gates countless times but had never ventured beyond them. Tonight, that would change.

"Everyone clear on their objectives?"

Denise asked, her voice crackling slightly through the earpiece Mari had reluctantly agreed to wear. The former detective had produced the communication devices from what she called her "retired but prepared" collection, insisting they maintain contact throughout the evening.

"Crystal clear," Mari confirmed, adjusting the small receiver hidden beneath her hair. "Maintain my bookstore owner persona while extracting information about Victoria from Elizabeth."

"I'll access as many restricted areas as possible," Liv added from the passenger seat of Mari's car. Her elegant black dress and expertly applied makeup made her look every inch the sophisticated wine expert she was. "The private study is my primary target."

"Trish and I are monitoring from the surveillance point," Ellie's voice came through. She and Trish had set up in Trish's car parked on a public overlook with a clear view of the estate's main entrance.

"Armstrong is positioned near the service entrance with two plainclothes officers."

"Remember, this is reconnaissance only," Denise cautioned. "We're gathering information, not confronting suspects. At the first sign of danger—"

"We use our cheese code words and extract immediately," Mari finished. "We've got it, Denise."

As they approached the imposing gates, Mari couldn't help but feel a flutter of anxiety in her chest. Elizabeth Blackwood's charity wine tasting was the perfect cover for their investigation, but it also meant walking directly into the home of their primary suspect—a woman they now believed had orchestrated Victoria Sterling's murder.

"Just breathe," Liv murmured, noticing Mari's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. "Remember what Ellie says—your anxiety is your superpower. Those observation skills might catch something the rest of us miss."

Mari nodded, consciously relaxing her hands as they pulled up to the security checkpoint. A uniformed guard checked their names against the guest list, nodded respectfully to Liv (whose reputation in wine circles apparently extended to estate security), and waved them through with directions to the visitor parking area.

"We're in," Mari whispered unnecessarily as they drove up the curved driveway lined with ancient oak trees. "Gouda so far."

The main house came into view—a three-story mansion of pale stone with columns flanking the entrance and floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated from within. Cars far more expensive than Mari's modest hybrid filled the circular drive, while catering staff in crisp uniforms moved efficiently between house and grounds, carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres and wine glasses.

"Impressive," Liv murmured, her expert eye taking in details Mari might have missed. "Landscaping alone must cost more than my annual wine budget. And that's saying something."

They handed Mari's keys to a valet and ascended the wide stone steps to the entrance, where Elizabeth Blackwood herself greeted select guests. Mari noted with interest that their hostess had positioned herself to personally approve each arrival—a power move masquerading as hospitality.

"Ms. Paige, Ms. Winters," Elizabeth nodded regally as they reached her. "How lovely that you could join us. The literary and wine communities of Inkwell Cove should be represented at our cultural events."

"We're honored to be included," Mari replied, mustering her best small-business-owner graciousness. "Your support of local charities is admirable."

"This year's beneficiary is particularly dear to me," Elizabeth said, gesturing toward an elegant display in the foyer highlighting regional education initiatives. "Ensuring the next generation appreciates our town's heritage."

"Speaking of heritage," Liv segued smoothly, "I understand this property has been in your family for generations. I'd love to hear more about its history, especially given my interest in regional agricultural development."

Elizabeth's smile remained fixed, but Mari caught the slight narrowing of her eyes—a momentary calculation before she responded. "The original parcel dates to my great-grandfather's time. The estate has... evolved alongside the family business interests."

"From dairy to development," Mari noted innocently. "A remarkable transition. Victoria was fascinated by that history."

The mention of Victoria Sterling's name dropped into the conversation like a stone into still water—creating ripples of tension that were almost palpable.

"Yes, poor Victoria," Elizabeth said, her expression shifting to practiced sympathy. "Such a tragedy. Were you close, Ms. Paige? I understand she visited your bookstore."

"She joined our book club briefly," Mari replied, watching Elizabeth's reaction carefully. "She mentioned researching local history for her next novel."

"Always the dedicated researcher," Elizabeth nodded. "Though I understand her dedication sometimes extended to her medication regimen as well. Such a shame she wasn't more careful about mixing prescriptions with alcohol."

The precision of her knowledge—details that hadn't been publicly released about Victoria's death—confirmed what they had suspected. Elizabeth knew exactly how Victoria had died because she had orchestrated it.

"It was her Lexapro, wasn't it?" Mari asked, maintaining an innocent expression while deliberately testing Elizabeth's knowledge. "I take the same medication. The warnings are quite explicit about alcohol interactions."

Elizabeth's smile didn't waver, but something flickered in her eyes—recognition, perhaps, or calculation. "I believe that was mentioned in the reports, yes. One must be so careful with these modern medications."

Before Mari could pursue this revealing thread, other guests arrived, providing Elizabeth with a graceful exit from their conversation.

"Please, enjoy the wine selection," she said, gesturing toward the main reception room. "Ms. Winters, you'll find some particularly interesting



vintages in the west salon. The 1982 Bordeaux might especially interest you given your expertise."

As they moved into the mansion's opulent interior, Liv whispered, "She just gave me the perfect excuse to wander toward the private wing. The west salon connects to the family quarters."

"Be careful," Mari cautioned. "That was deliberate—she knows exactly what she's doing."

"So do we," Liv replied with a confident smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Meet back here in forty-five minutes? That gives me time to 'get lost' looking for the ladies' room."

Mari nodded, watching as Liv seamlessly integrated herself into a group of wine enthusiasts, her expert commentary on a Cabernet Franc drawing appreciative nods. For her part, Mari circulated through the reception rooms, maintaining her bookstore owner persona while gathering impressions of the estate.

The Blackwood mansion revealed its history through carefully curated displays—photographs of dairy operations from the early 1900s, agricultural awards, and the gradual transition to real estate development documented in architectural renderings and ceremonial groundbreaking shovels. The family's evolution from agricultural pioneers to property moguls was presented as a natural progression, an American success story.

What these displays didn't show, Mari noted, was any hint of the counterfeit cheese operation Marcel had described, or the money laundering scheme Victoria had uncovered. The Blackwood narrative had been polished to a high shine, with all blemishes carefully removed.

"Admiring our family history?" came a voice behind her, causing Mari to startle slightly. She turned to find Elizabeth Blackwood watching her

with interest, a crystal wine glass held elegantly in one manicured hand.

"It's quite impressive," Mari replied, gesturing to a photograph of what must have been the original dairy. "The architecture of the old production facility is fascinating. Is any of it still standing?"

"Repurposed rather than demolished," Elizabeth said with evident pride. "We believe in preserving history while adapting to modern needs. The main barn was converted to office space for our development company, while some of the underground storage areas now house my wine collection."

"Underground storage?" Mari prompted, recalling Marcel's description of the cave system that once connected to his shop.

"Limestone caves," Elizabeth confirmed, taking a sip of her wine. "Ideal conditions for both cheese aging in my grandfather's day and wine storage now. The ambient temperature and humidity are naturally perfect—no expensive climate control needed."

"Victoria mentioned those caves in her notes," Mari said, watching Elizabeth's reaction. "She was quite interested in traditional aging methods for her detective's cheese obsession."

Elizabeth's expression remained pleasant, but Mari noticed her fingers tighten slightly around the wine glass stem. "Did she? I don't recall discussing the caves with her specifically. Though we did speak about the family business several times. She was particularly interested in our transition from agricultural production to real estate development."

"The timing of that transition must have been challenging," Mari observed. "Coming so soon after the disappearance of your dairy worker—Michael Landry, wasn't it? Trish found some old newspaper articles about the case."

The direct reference to Landry clearly caught Elizabeth off guard. For a brief moment, her cultivated poise faltered, revealing something harder and colder beneath. Then, like a master performer, she recovered.

"Ancient history," she said dismissively. "Industrial accidents were unfortunately common in agricultural operations before modern safety regulations. My father made the difficult but necessary decision to close the dairy afterward, recognizing that the future lay in development rather than production."

"Victoria seemed to think there might have been more to his disappearance," Mari pressed gently.

Elizabeth's laugh held no humor. "Victoria Sterling was a novelist, Ms. Paige. She saw mysteries and conspiracies everywhere because that's what she was trained to do. Fiction, not fact." She set down her wine glass with deliberate precision. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I should check on our other guests."

As Elizabeth moved away, Mari released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. The confrontation, though subtle, had revealed cracks in Elizabeth's carefully maintained facade. And most importantly, it had confirmed that Victoria's investigation into Michael Landry's disappearance had directly threatened the Blackwood family narrative.

"Did you get that?" Mari whispered to her concealed communicator.

"Every word," came Denise's voice in her ear. "Excellent work drawing her out on Landry. Her reaction was telling."

"Where's Liv?" Mari asked, scanning the crowded reception rooms for her friend.

"Still in the west wing," Denise replied. "She's gone quiet but activated her location beacon. She's moving toward what appears to be the private study."

Mari continued her circuit of the public rooms, pausing occasionally to examine photographs or accept canapes from passing servers. She was studying a particularly interesting aerial view of the Blackwood property from the 1980s when a familiar voice spoke beside her.

"Looking for escape routes already, Ms. Paige?"

Mari turned to find Marcus Reed holding a tumbler of amber liquid, his expression amused but his eyes watchful. Unlike their confrontation at the Harborview, he seemed relaxed, even confident—a predator secure in his territory.

"Mr. Reed," she acknowledged with a polite nod. "I was admiring the historical perspective. The property has changed significantly over the years."

"Evolution is necessary for survival," Reed replied, gesturing toward the photograph. "The Blackwoods understood that principle long before Darwin popularized it. Agricultural production, manufacturing, real estate—each generation adapts to changing markets."

"And publishing?" Mari suggested. "Is that your contribution to the family business evolution?"

Reed's eyes narrowed slightly at the direct reference to his connection to the Blackwoods. "My agency operates independently," he said after a moment. "Though I appreciate the values my mother's family instilled—particularly regarding the protection of assets."

The double meaning was unmistakable. Mari maintained her composure, though her pulse quickened. "Victoria certainly created valuable literary assets," she observed. "Her death must have significant implications for her estate."

"Indeed," Reed agreed, swirling his drink thoughtfully. "Posthumous publications often generate considerable interest. Isabel Greene will

continue solving crimes, though perhaps in slightly different settings than Inkwell Cove."

"So you're abandoning the cheese-themed mystery she was researching?" Mari asked innocently. "*The Curdled Truth*, I believe she called it?"

Reed's expression hardened momentarily before he regained his smooth demeanor. "Creative direction is ultimately my decision as her literary executor. Isabel's future adventures will focus on her established strengths—psychological insight, complex motivations. The... dairy industry subplot was an experimental tangent that never fully developed."

"That's a shame," Mari said. "The connection between counterfeit luxury products and money laundering had such potential as a mystery premise. Especially with Isabel's cheese expertise as the key to unraveling the fraud."

The tumbler in Reed's hand stilled, his knuckles whitening slightly around the glass. "You seem remarkably familiar with an unfinished manuscript, Ms. Paige."

"Victoria shared her research process with our book club," Mari replied, holding his gaze steadily despite her racing heart. "She was quite detailed about her plans for Isabel's next case."

"Plans change," Reed said coldly. "Especially when authors become... distracted by tangential research. Victoria's greatest strength was her character development, not her grasp of financial structures or agricultural production."

"Or pharmaceutical interactions?" Mari suggested, the words leaving her mouth before she could reconsider.

Reed's eyes flashed with genuine anger before his mask of professional courtesy slipped back into place. "A tragic accident," he said, his voice low and controlled. "One that reminds us all to be careful with prescription medications. Particularly those that explicitly warn against alcohol consumption."

The threat was thinly veiled, clearly referencing Mari's own Lexapro prescription—information he shouldn't have known unless he'd been investigating the Novel Sippers as thoroughly as they'd been investigating him.

Before Mari could respond, her earpiece crackled to life with Denise's urgent voice: "Mari, we've got movement. Liv's beacon is on the move, heading toward the wine cellar level. Elizabeth just left the main reception heading in the same direction. Situation potentially Blue."

"If you'll excuse me," Mari said to Reed, forcing a polite smile. "I should find my friend Liv. We're sharing a ride this evening."

"Of course," Reed nodded, his expression unreadable. "Do give Ms. Winters my regards. I understand she has a particular interest in vintage collections. The Blackwood cellar is... quite remarkable."

The knowledge that Reed was aware of Liv's movements sent a chill down Mari's spine. She moved away with measured steps, not wanting to betray her concern, while whispering to her communicator, "Reed knows Liv is exploring restricted areas. We need to extract now."

"On it," Denise replied tersely. "Armstrong is moving team to secondary positions. Where are you?"

"Main reception, heading toward the west salon," Mari reported, navigating through clusters of well-dressed guests with as much casual speed as she could manage. "Any visual on Liv?"

"Negative. Her beacon shows she's descended to the lower level—likely the wine cellar Elizabeth mentioned."

Mari remembered Elizabeth's earlier comment about the underground storage areas—the limestone caves that had once connected to the dairy operation and now housed her wine collection. The same cave system that, according to Marcel, contained evidence of both the original money laundering scheme and Michael Landry's murder.

If Liv had discovered something significant in Elizabeth's private study and was now exploring the caves, she could be in serious danger.

"I'm heading downstairs," Mari decided, spotting an unobtrusive door marked "Cellar Access" behind a decorative screen.

"Wait for backup," Denise urged. "Armstrong's team—"

"Is outside and will take too long," Mari interrupted, slipping behind the screen and testing the door handle. It opened silently, revealing a well-lit stone staircase descending into what must be the former cave system. "Liv could be in immediate danger if Elizabeth found her searching private areas."

Against Denise's continued objections, Mari began descending the stairs, moving as quietly as her sensible heels would allow. The temperature dropped noticeably with each step, the air growing cool and damp with mineral-rich humidity—perfect conditions for both cheese aging and wine storage, as Elizabeth had noted.

The staircase opened into a vast underground space that had been elegantly renovated into a state-of-the-art wine cellar.

Temperature-controlled racks filled with bottles stretched in all directions, while a central tasting area featured a massive oak table and leather chairs. The original limestone walls had been retained, their rugged texture contrasting with the sophisticated modern fixtures.

Mari paused, listening intently for any sound that might indicate Liv's presence. The cellar appeared deserted, the only noise the subtle hum of climate control systems.

"Liv?" she whispered, moving carefully between the towering wine racks. "Are you down here?"

No response came. Mari checked her phone, hoping to text directly, but found no signal in the underground space. Her earpiece had also gone silent—the thick stone walls blocking communication with Denise and the others outside.

She was on her own.

Moving deeper into the cellar, Mari noticed that the renovation became less polished toward the back, with sections of rough-hewn tunnel still visible beyond the wine storage area. This must be part of the original cave system Marcel had described—the network that once connected to The Aged Page and extended beneath much of the old dairy property.

A soft sound from one of these unfinished tunnels caught her attention—voices, too distant to distinguish words but clear enough to follow. Mari slipped into the passage, the dim emergency lighting providing just enough illumination to avoid obstacles as she moved toward the sound.

The tunnel curved and branched, creating a disorienting maze that Mari navigated by following the voices, which grew gradually louder. She paused at a junction where the passage split in three directions, listening carefully to determine which path to take.

"—absolutely unacceptable," came Elizabeth's voice, sharp with authority. "Guests do not wander into private areas of the estate, Ms. Winters. Particularly not my personal study."



"I was looking for the ladies' room," Liv's voice replied, the calm in her tone belying what must be a tense situation. "The house is quite labyrinthine. I do apologize for the intrusion."

"With a camera application open on your phone?" Elizabeth's voice dripped with skepticism. "Photographing private documents on my desk?"

Mari's heart sank. Liv had been caught in the act of gathering evidence—a far more serious situation than merely being found in a restricted area.

"A misunderstanding," Liv insisted. "I received a text about a potential vintage acquisition and was checking comparable prices. Your papers were simply in the background."

"A convenient explanation," came a third voice that Mari recognized as Marcus Reed's. "Though it doesn't address why you proceeded to the cellar level afterward, or why your friend Ms. Paige was asking such pointed questions about Victoria Sterling's research."

Mari froze. They knew she was involved too, which meant her presence in the tunnels wouldn't be interpreted as innocent wandering if she was discovered. She needed to locate Liv without revealing herself, then find a way to alert Armstrong's team outside.

Moving with exaggerated caution, Mari followed the voices to a partially open door set into the limestone wall. Through the narrow gap, she could see into what appeared to be a small office carved directly from the cave—a space that must date back to the original dairy operation. Elizabeth and Reed stood with their backs to the door, facing Liv, who was seated in a straight-backed wooden chair.

"Your book club's interest in Victoria's death has gone beyond literary appreciation," Elizabeth was saying, her aristocratic poise intact despite the clandestine setting. "First Marcel provides you with his

alleged evidence, then you infiltrate my charity event to search private areas. One might almost suspect a coordinated investigation."

"We're simply trying to understand what happened to someone we admired," Liv replied, maintaining remarkable composure. "Victoria joined our group shortly before her death. Her loss affected us deeply."

"Her loss was unfortunate but entirely of her own making," Reed said dismissively. "Mixing medication with alcohol despite explicit warnings—careless, but hardly suspicious."

"Unless someone tampered with her medication," Liv suggested, her eyes briefly flicking toward the partially open door where Mari stood concealed.

The momentary glance was both acknowledgment of Mari's presence and a warning not to reveal herself. Liv was buying time, keeping Elizabeth and Reed talking while—hopefully—Armstrong's team tracked their missing signals and converged on the cellar.

"A creative theory," Elizabeth said coldly. "Worthy of one of Victoria's novels, perhaps, but unsupported by evidence. The police investigation concluded with 'accidental death.' Case closed."

"Detective Armstrong seems less convinced," Liv noted, watching their reactions carefully. "He's been quite thorough in his follow-up investigation."

Mari saw Reed and Elizabeth exchange glances—a silent communication that confirmed Armstrong's suspicions about their involvement.

"Armstrong has always been... overzealous," Elizabeth said after a moment. "Still trying to prove himself after failing to properly investigate that writer's death years ago. What was her name? Walsh?"

"Caroline Walsh," Liv supplied, surprising both Elizabeth and Reed with her knowledge. "Found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning while researching traditional New England industries. Specifically, the Blackwood Dairy operation."

Elizabeth's composed facade cracked slightly, genuine anger flashing across her features. "You've been exceedingly thorough in your amateur detective work, Ms. Winters. Though connecting two unrelated accidents separated by decades requires considerable imaginative effort."

"The same imaginative effort Victoria Sterling applied to her research," Liv countered. "Before she died under circumstances remarkably similar to Walsh's."

Reed stepped forward, his professional demeanor giving way to something harder and more threatening. "You and your book club friends are playing a dangerous game," he said, voice low. "Victoria was a professional author who understood the boundaries between fiction and reality. You seem to have difficulty with that distinction."

"The reality," Elizabeth interjected, regaining her composure, "is that you've trespassed in my home and accessed private areas without permission. That alone justifies calling the police."

"Please do," Liv encouraged with surprising confidence. "I'm sure Detective Armstrong would be very interested in examining this hidden office. Particularly given its similarity to the secret ledger room described in Victoria's manuscript."

Mari held her breath, watching the calculated risk Liv was taking. By revealing how much they knew about the original money laundering operation, she was escalating the confrontation dramatically.

Elizabeth's laugh was cold and dismissive. "A manuscript that will never be published, according to Marcus. How unfortunate that

Victoria's final work was barely started when she died. Just research notes and character sketches, I believe you said, Marcus?"

"Indeed," Reed nodded, his expression grim. "Though Ms. Winters and her friends seem to have constructed elaborate theories based on fragments. Creative, but ultimately fiction."

"Unlike the documents I photographed in your study," Liv said quietly. "The ones showing payments from Blackwood Development to Reed International Imports dating back to the 1990s, and continuing to MR Literary Management through last quarter. Those seem decidedly non-fictional."

The revelation hung in the air like a challenge. Mari could see Elizabeth calculating her response, weighing threats against denials.

"Family businesses often maintain financial relationships," Elizabeth said finally. "There's nothing improper about consulting arrangements between related enterprises."

"Unless those arrangements facilitate money laundering," Liv replied. "As Victoria discovered and documented in her research."

Reed's patience visibly snapped. "Enough," he growled, reaching into his jacket. "This has gone beyond trespassing into active interference with legitimate business operations."

Mari's blood ran cold as she saw him withdraw a small pill bottle—identical to the one that had been sent to Ellie's office. The implied threat was unmistakable.

"A simple solution to an unfortunate situation," Elizabeth said, her voice now conversational, as if discussing a minor social faux pas. "Another tragic accident involving medication and alcohol. The Novel Sippers seem particularly vulnerable to such... mishaps."

Mari knew she needed to act. Liv was in immediate danger, and waiting for Armstrong's team was no longer an option. She reached into her purse, fingers closing around her phone. Without service, she couldn't call for help, but she could use another feature.

Activating the camera flash, she pointed it into the room and triggered a rapid series of blindingly bright flashes, momentarily disorienting Elizabeth and Reed.

"What the—" Reed sputtered, turning toward the door as Mari burst through.

"Limburger!" Mari shouted, the Novel Sippers' emergency code echoing off the stone walls. "Armstrong knows we're down here!"

Liv reacted instantly, using the distraction to knock the pill bottle from Reed's hand and lunge toward Mari. Elizabeth, recovering quickly, moved to block their escape, but the sound of multiple footsteps pounding down the tunnel behind them gave her pause.

"This way!" Mari urged, grabbing Liv's arm and pulling her toward the passage she'd entered through. They ran blindly, adrenaline overriding Mari's usual caution, the sounds of pursuit driving them deeper into the tunnel network.

"Left here," Liv gasped as they reached a junction. "I mapped part of the system when I first came down—there's an exit that leads to the grounds near the service entrance."

They turned, following Liv's directions through the disorienting maze, the sounds of pursuit growing fainter behind them. Finally, they reached a narrow staircase hewn from the stone, ascending steeply toward what appeared to be a trapdoor.

"Armstrong's team is positioned near here," Mari panted, her chest tight from exertion and anxiety. "If we can reach them—"

The trapdoor above them suddenly swung open, revealing Detective Ryan Armstrong's concerned face silhouetted against the night sky.

"Ladies," he said with evident relief, extending a hand to help them up. "I believe this concludes tonight's reconnaissance mission."

As they emerged onto the darkened grounds behind the Blackwood Estate, surrounded by Armstrong's tactical team preparing to enter the tunnel system, Mari caught Liv's eye.

"That was..." she began, still trying to catch her breath.

"Sharp," Liv finished with a grim smile. "Like a perfectly aged cheddar. And exactly as dangerous as Denise warned it would be."

Armstrong approached with two emergency blankets, which they gratefully accepted despite the mild evening. "I take it Elizabeth and Reed showed their true colors?" he asked, guiding them toward an unmarked police vehicle parked discreetly on the service road.

"That and more," Liv confirmed, pulling out her phone and checking its screen with satisfaction. "I got photographs of documents in Elizabeth's study connecting Blackwood Development to Reed's literary agency through a series of shell companies. And I recorded our entire conversation in the cave office."

"Including their explicit threat to replicate Victoria's murder with another 'medication accident,'" Mari added, the reality of their narrow escape finally hitting her. Her hands began to shake as delayed shock set in.

Armstrong noticed immediately, his expression softening. "You both took an extraordinary risk," he said, neither complimentary nor condemning. "But you've secured evidence we couldn't have obtained legally at this stage."

"Will it be enough?" Liv asked, glancing back toward the mansion where guests continued their charitable mingling, unaware of the drama unfolding on the grounds.

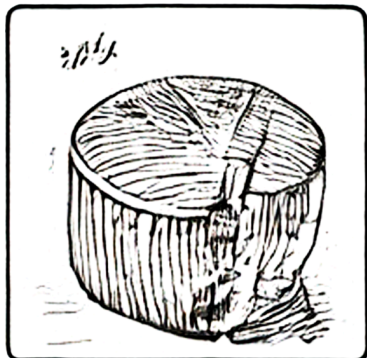
"Combined with Marcel's financial records and Victoria's research? It establishes a pattern spanning decades," Armstrong replied. "But more importantly, their response to your discovery confirms their willingness to eliminate threats—exactly as they did with Victoria Sterling."

As they reached the vehicle where Denise, Trish, and Ellie waited anxiously, Mari felt that familiar mixture of exhaustion and clarity that followed intense anxiety. Their investigation had entered a new phase—from gathering information to directly confronting killers.

The Novel Sippers had successfully infiltrated the Blackwood Estate and extracted crucial evidence, but in doing so, they had revealed themselves as a serious threat to the operation Victoria had died investigating.

Like the sharp cheddar of the chapter's title, the truth was finally cutting through decades of careful aging and refinement, exposing what lay beneath the Blackwoods' respectable rind. The question now was whether the Novel Sippers would survive to serve it to the world.

# Chapter 14: Pairing Conspiracy



"You could have been killed," Detective Ryan Armstrong said, his silver hair catching the golden light of Mari's table lamp. The Novel Sippers had reconvened at Bound Together after their harrowing escape from Blackwood Estate, transforming the cozy reading nook into an impromptu situation room. "Infiltrating a suspect's home without proper backup or training—"

"Was reckless but necessary," Denise finished for him, her former detective's confidence undiminished despite the evening's dangers. "And it provided concrete evidence connecting Reed and the Blackwoods to Victoria's murder."

Armstrong sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That's not the point, Detective Sharma. The point is that civilian investigators—"

"Sometimes see what official channels miss," Mari interjected gently, setting a mug of coffee in front of him. "Victoria knew that. That's why she came to us."

The detective studied her for a long moment, his weathered face revealing a complex mix of admiration and concern. "I understand your commitment to finding justice for Ms. Sterling," he said finally. "But as someone who's witnessed the aftermath of amateur detective work gone wrong, I have to insist on a more coordinated approach moving forward."

"You're not shutting us out," Trish stated rather than asked, her librarian's precision cutting through diplomatic phrasing.



To their surprise, Armstrong shook his head. "No. I'm suggesting we form an alliance." He reached into his jacket and removed a worn leather notebook remarkably similar to Denise's. "Because I've been investigating the Blackwoods for longer than you might imagine."

He flipped the notebook open, revealing pages of meticulous notes, photographs, and timeline diagrams that mirrored their own investigation board. The earliest entries were dated twenty years prior.

"Caroline Walsh," Ellie read, recognizing the name from their research. "The writer who died of carbon monoxide poisoning while researching the Blackwood Dairy."

"My first case as a rookie officer," Armstrong confirmed, his expression hardening with old regret. "I noticed inconsistencies in the scene—the heater had been recently serviced, Walsh had written notes about meeting a 'concerned insider' at the dairy, and most tellingly, her research materials vanished before I could properly document them."

"But your concerns were dismissed," Denise guessed, professional to professional.

"Discouraged would be more accurate," Armstrong corrected. "My supervising officer—who later became chief—explained that the Blackwoods were Inkwell Cove's first family and suggested my career would benefit from focusing on 'more promising cases.'"

"Blackwood influence in the police department," Liv concluded, sipping the restorative brandy Garrett had delivered from The Wine Plot after hearing of their ordeal.

"Pervasive but difficult to prove," Armstrong agreed. "I learned to be selective about what went into official reports. But I never stopped watching them."

"And when Victoria Sterling died under similar circumstances..." Mari prompted.

"I recognized the pattern immediately." Armstrong turned to a more recent page showing his notes on Victoria's death scene—the untouched cheese plate, the second unused glass, the opened medication bottle. "The parallels were unmistakable. Another writer investigating Blackwood history, another 'accidental' death that eliminated a threat."

"But you couldn't pursue it officially without evidence," Denise said, understanding dawning in her eyes.

"Not at first," Armstrong nodded. "The department accepted the accidental overdose theory without question. The Blackwood influence remains strong, though less overt than in Walsh's day. I needed independent confirmation of my suspicions."

"Which is why you've been monitoring us," Mari realized. "You saw in the Novel Sippers what Victoria did—a group positioned to investigate where official channels couldn't."

"Five observant women with different skills and connections throughout Inkwell Cove," Armstrong confirmed. "Operating beneath the radar of Blackwood surveillance. When I realized you were actively investigating Victoria's death, I began coordinating my movements with yours—discreetly."

"The surveillance at The Wine Plot," Liv recalled. "You were there the night we discussed our findings."

"Among other occasions," Armstrong admitted. "I needed to assess whether your amateur investigation might yield useful evidence—or simply put you in danger."

"And now?" Ellie asked, the psychiatrist in her noting the shift in Armstrong's demeanor from skeptical observer to potential ally.

"Now we have multiple pieces of evidence that, taken together, establish a pattern spanning decades," Armstrong replied, gesturing to Liv's phone containing the photographs and recording from Blackwood Estate. "Marcel's financial records documenting the transition from dairy fraud to real estate laundering. Victoria's research connecting Reed to the operation. And most damning, Elizabeth and Reed's explicit threats to replicate Victoria's murder with another 'medication accident.'"

"Enough for arrests?" Denise asked hopefully.

Armstrong's expression turned cautious. "Enough for warrants, certainly. But the Blackwoods have weathered investigations before. Their operation is sophisticated, their influence extensive. We need an airtight case that connects all the elements—the historical fraud, Victoria's murder, and their current criminal activities."

"A comprehensive timeline," Trish suggested, already reaching for her color-coded notepads.

"Exactly," Armstrong approved. "Let's combine our evidence and create a complete picture."

For the next hour, they worked systematically, merging Armstrong's decades of observations with the Novel Sippers' recent discoveries. Trish's librarian precision proved invaluable as she organized the evidence chronologically, creating a narrative that stretched from the Blackwood Dairy's original counterfeit cheese operation through its evolution into real estate fraud and literary manipulation.

"The pattern is remarkable," Ellie observed as their timeline took shape. "Each generation adapted the scheme to contemporary markets while maintaining the same underlying structure—using subjective

quality assessments to justify inflated prices, with the excess laundered through shell companies."

"From counterfeit cheese to phantom construction costs to manipulated publishing contracts," Liv agreed. "Different vehicles, same technique."

"And anyone who threatened to expose the operation was eliminated," Mari added grimly. "Michael Landry, Caroline Walsh, Victoria Sterling—each discovered a piece of the puzzle and paid with their lives."

Armstrong nodded, studying their completed timeline with professional approval. "This gives us the historical context. Now we need to establish exactly how Victoria was murdered."

"We know Reed is lactose intolerant yet was at the hotel the night Victoria died—presumably the person she ordered the untouched cheese plate for," Denise said, referring to her notes. "And Elizabeth's familiarity with the details of Victoria's death suggests insider knowledge."

"But the specific method remains unclear," Armstrong acknowledged. "The toxicology screen showed elevated levels of her medication, but nothing conclusively indicating tampering."

Mari's "prose-ac vision" activated, her anxiety-enhanced observation skills making connections others might miss. "In *The Stilton Stalker*, Isabel Greene realizes that the medication found in the victim's system wasn't Lexapro at all, but something that looked identical—a counterfeit pill that became lethal when combined with alcohol."

"Life imitating art," Ellie murmured. "Or rather, art predicting life."

"Victoria's own fiction provided the murder method," Armstrong realized. "A specialized knowledge of pharmaceutical properties

combined with her known medication regimen and regular wine consumption."

"Specialized knowledge that could come from Reed's import business," Liv suggested. "Counterfeit products weren't limited to cheese—his FDA citations mentioned mislabeled food supplements as well."

"And the timing fits," Trish added, consulting her timeline. "Reed visited Inkwell Cove the night before Victoria's death, checked into the Harborview but told the desk clerk he wouldn't be staying overnight. Yet the night manager saw him leaving after midnight."

"Time enough to visit Victoria's suite, tamper with her medication, and ensure she consumed alcohol," Denise concluded.

A thoughtful silence fell as they absorbed the implications of this scenario. Victoria Sterling, whose detective Isabel Greene had uncovered fictional pharmaceutical fraud, had herself been murdered using a method straight from her own novels.

"There's something elegant about it," Armstrong admitted reluctantly. "Using her own creation against her."

"But how do we prove it?" Mari asked the essential question. "The evidence is compelling but circumstantial. We can't exactly exhume Victoria's body for additional testing."

"Actually," Armstrong said slowly, "we might not need to. The pill bottle found in Victoria's room was entered into evidence. If the remaining pills were substituted rather than her entire prescription..."

"Forensic analysis could potentially identify the substitution," Denise finished, professional excitement in her voice. "Especially if the counterfeits contain trace elements not found in legitimate Lexapro."

"I'll request the analysis immediately," Armstrong nodded. "Though we'll need to be discreet—if the Blackwoods have contacts in the department..."

"Use outside resources," Denise suggested. "I still have connections at the Boston crime lab who could run the tests quietly."

As they discussed the logistics of testing Victoria's medication, Trish suddenly straightened in her chair, her expression troubled. "There's something I need to share," she said, her usual enthusiasm dampened by evident discomfort. "Something I should have mentioned earlier."

The others turned to her with varying degrees of concern.

"What is it, Trish?" Mari prompted gently.

"I... knew Victoria Sterling before she came to Inkwell Cove," Trish admitted, not meeting their eyes. "At least, I tried to know her. Three years ago, I submitted a manuscript to her literary agent—to Reed. A cozy mystery featuring a cheese-themed detective series."

This revelation landed with palpable surprise.

"You never mentioned this," Liv said, careful to keep accusation from her tone.

"Because it was humiliating," Trish replied, her cheeks flushing. "Reed rejected it personally with a note saying it was 'too cheesy, even for cozy mysteries.' When Victoria's Isabel Greene series became popular with its cheese-loving detective, I assumed it was just unfortunate timing."

"But now you're wondering if Reed used your concept," Ellie suggested, her therapist's insight engaging.

"Or if he rejected yours because it was too similar to what Victoria was already developing," Mari added, seeing the pattern form. "Either way, it created a connection you didn't know existed."

"And it gave Reed a potential scapegoat if questions ever arose about the series' origins," Denise concluded. "A rejected author with a similar concept who might harbor resentment."

Armstrong leaned forward, his detective's instincts clearly engaged. "Did you keep any documentation of your submission? The rejection letter, correspondence with Reed?"

"Everything," Trish confirmed. "I'm a librarian—we document obsessively. It's in my home files."

"This could be significant," Armstrong said thoughtfully. "Not for the case against the Blackwoods directly, but it establishes a pattern of manipulation by Reed. And potentially creates reasonable doubt about your involvement in this investigation."

"You think Reed might try to frame Trish for Victoria's death?" Mari asked, alarmed by the implication.

"If pressed, he might suggest she had motive," Armstrong acknowledged. "A rejected author seeking revenge against the writer she believed stole her concept. It's thin, but defense attorneys have built cases on less."

Trish's face had paled considerably. "I never... I wouldn't..."

"We know that," Ellie assured her immediately, reaching across to squeeze her hand. "This just underscores how thoroughly Reed has managed potential threats to his operation."

As they processed this new complication, Mari's phone chimed with an incoming text. She checked it, then looked up with renewed urgency.

"It's from Marcel," she reported. "He says Elizabeth and Reed have arrived at The Aged Page demanding to inspect the cave system. He thinks they're searching for evidence."

"Or removing it," Armstrong said grimly, already standing. "We need to move quickly. If they realize how much we know..."

"The Cheese & Wine Festival is tomorrow," Liv noted, checking her watch. "It will bring all our suspects together in one location, along with half the town as witnesses."

"Including the VIP tasting that Elizabeth personally invited Mari to attend," Trish added.

"The perfect opportunity to set a trap," Denise concluded, the former detective's strategic mind engaging. "Using both the evidence we've gathered and the festival as cover."

Armstrong considered this, weighing risks against potential benefits. "It's unorthodox," he admitted, "but it might be our best opportunity to catch them off guard. Elizabeth wouldn't expect a confrontation at her own event."

"Just like in Victoria's manuscript," Mari realized, the parallels suddenly clear. "In *The Curdled Truth*, Isabel Greene exposes the counterfeit cheese operation at a food festival, using both the manuscript documenting the fraud and a special tasting event as bait."

"Life imitating art once again," Ellie murmured.

"Or Victoria providing us with the perfect blueprint," Mari suggested. "She wrote that ending because she saw the festival as the ideal venue for exposure—all suspects present, public witnesses, maximum impact."



Armstrong nodded slowly, a plan clearly forming in his mind. "We'll need to coordinate carefully. Each of you would have a specific role, specific areas to monitor."

"The Novel Sippers go undercover at a cheese festival," Trish said, her enthusiasm returning despite the evening's revelations. "It's almost too on-brand."

"And potentially dangerous," Armstrong cautioned. "Elizabeth and Reed have already demonstrated their willingness to eliminate threats. After tonight's confrontation, they'll be on high alert."

"But they still don't know exactly what evidence we have," Liv pointed out. "My phone never left my possession, and they don't know about Marcel's documentation or Victoria's manuscript pages."

"Speaking of which," Mari remembered suddenly, "we should secure all our evidence. If they searched Marcel's shop, they might target Bound Together next."

As if summoned by her concern, a sharp crack echoed from the front of the store—the unmistakable sound of breaking glass. Armstrong immediately drew his service weapon, motioning for the women to stay back while he moved cautiously toward the source of the noise.

"Police! Identify yourself!" he called, advancing through the darkened bookstore with professional precision.

No response came. After a tense minute of silence, Armstrong reached the front window, now sporting a jagged hole just large enough to admit a human arm. On the floor beneath lay a brick with a note attached—old-fashioned but effective.

"Clear," he announced, holstering his weapon and retrieving the projectile. "But I think someone's sending us a message."

He returned to the reading nook, where the Novel Sippers waited with varying degrees of tension. The note, when unfolded, contained a single typed line:

*Amateurs should leave detection to professionals. Final warning.*

"Charming," Liv remarked with forced lightness. "Do they realize we have an actual detective working with us now?"

"They're escalating," Ellie observed, her clinical assessment cutting through the tension. "First threatening notes, then confrontation, now property damage. The pattern suggests increasing desperation."

"Which makes them more dangerous," Armstrong agreed. "But also more likely to make mistakes."

As they discussed immediate security measures—board up the window, notify patrol officers, implement buddy systems for the night—Mari found herself drawn to the bookshelf holding Victoria's novels. She pulled down *The Stilton Stalker*, flipping to the scene where Isabel Greene realizes the medication substitution.

"What is it?" Armstrong asked, noticing her focused expression.

"Something Victoria wrote that seems relevant," Mari replied, finding the passage she sought. "'The clue wasn't in what was present, but in what was missing,' Isabel told the detective. 'The counterfeit pills contained the active ingredient but lacked the distinctive enzyme marker the pharmaceutical company adds to prevent exactly this kind of substitution. That's why the screening showed the medication was present—technically it was. But it wasn't the branded product it appeared to be.'"

"She was describing the exact method used to kill her," Denise realized. "Either prophetically or..."

"Or because she'd already uncovered the operation's pharmaceutical connection and recognized the potential threat," Armstrong finished. "Which means the evidence might be in her manuscript—hidden in plain sight as fiction."

Mari nodded slowly. "Isabel's cases often reflected real investigations Victoria had researched. If she discovered a connection between Reed's import business and counterfeit pharmaceuticals..."

"She might have documented it in *The Curdled Truth* as a safeguard," Ellie suggested. "Knowing that if anything happened to her, the manuscript would eventually be published."

"Except Reed controls her literary estate now," Trish pointed out. "And he's made it clear that manuscript will never see publication."

"But we have Victoria's notes and partial manuscript pages," Mari reminded them. "If we could identify the specific enzyme marker her fictional detective discovered..."

"We could request targeted testing of the remaining pills in evidence," Armstrong concluded. "Making the analysis more likely to yield conclusive results."

A new energy infused their planning as this possibility took shape. Victoria Sterling, master of mystery plots, might have left them the perfect clue to solving her own murder—embedded in the fiction she created as Isabel Greene's final case.

"We need to review every page of Victoria's manuscript tonight," Mari decided, retrieving the folder from her office safe. "The enzyme marker she described could be the key evidence connecting the counterfeit pills to Reed's import business."

"And tomorrow at the festival," Armstrong added, "we'll have our opportunity to confront all suspects with the complete picture—the

historical fraud, the financial connections, and the pharmaceutical evidence linking them directly to Victoria's murder."

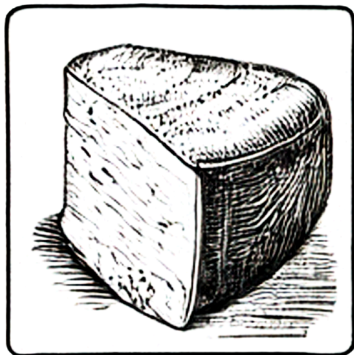
"The perfect pairing," Liv said with grim satisfaction. "Justice served with appropriate accompaniment."

As they settled into their respective tasks—Trish and Ellie analyzing Victoria's manuscript, Denise coordinating with Armstrong on festival security, Liv arranging for emergency boarding of the broken window—Mari found herself contemplating the brick that had crashed into her beloved bookstore.

The message had been clear: amateur detectives were unwelcome in this investigation. But what Elizabeth Blackwood and Marcus Reed failed to understand was that the Novel Sippers were no longer amateurs—they were a coordinated investigative team with professional backup, specialized knowledge, and most importantly, a personal commitment to justice that no threat could deter.

Tomorrow at the Cheese & Wine Festival, their carefully aged conspiracy would finally be served to the public. All that remained was to ensure the Novel Sippers survived to witness it.

# Chapter 15: The Big Cheese



The morning of the Cheese & Wine Festival dawned bright and clear, as if Inkwell Cove itself was conspiring to create the perfect backdrop for the Novel Sippers' most dangerous investigation. Mari stood at her bedroom window, the broken glass at Bound Together having been hastily boarded up in the early hours, and studied her reflection in the mirror. She looked exactly like what she

was supposed to be—a middle-aged bookstore owner preparing for a community event—but underneath that familiar exterior, her mind raced with their carefully constructed plan.

"Last chance to reconsider," she murmured to herself, picking up her daily Lexapro from the nightstand. The small white pill in her palm had taken on new significance since Victoria's death. Something that looked so innocent, yet could be manipulated into a murder weapon with the right knowledge.

Her phone buzzed with Denise's morning check-in: *All positions confirmed. Armstrong has teams in place. Gouda?*

Mari replied with their agreed code: *Gouda. Leaving in 30.*

She swallowed her medication, straightened her blouse—chosen specifically for its deep pockets that could conceal the small recording device Armstrong had provided—and picked up the VIP invitation Elizabeth had given her. Today, she would walk directly into the circle of people who had murdered Victoria Sterling and threatened the Novel Sippers. The thought should have terrified her, but instead, she felt that

familiar focusing clarity that her "prose-ac vision" provided—anxiety channeled into heightened observation.

"Game time," she whispered to her reflection.

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The festival grounds had transformed overnight into a wonderland of white tents, colorful banners, and the mingled aromas of dozens of artisanal cheeses. Local vendors had arranged their displays with competitive precision, each hoping to impress the judges in the afternoon's competition. A string quartet played near the central pavilion, creating an atmosphere of refined celebration that belied the tension humming beneath the surface.

Mari approached the VIP entrance, where a uniformed security guard checked her invitation with practiced efficiency.

"Ms. Paige," he nodded. "Mrs. Blackwood mentioned you'd be joining the early tasting. The judges are already assembling in the main pavilion."

"Thank you," Mari replied, noting the earpiece the guard wore—connected, she suspected, to Elizabeth's private security rather than festival staff. Armstrong had warned them that Elizabeth would have her own people positioned throughout the event.

Inside the VIP area, crystal glasses and silver cheese knives gleamed on linen-covered tables. A select group of Inkwell Cove's elite mingled with competition judges and major sponsors, all seemingly oblivious to the investigation unfolding around them. Mari spotted Elizabeth immediately, resplendent in a cream linen suit that perfectly complemented her silver bob, holding court among a group of admiring patrons.

"Right on time," came Liv's voice as she appeared at Mari's side, elegant in a wine-colored dress chosen specifically for her role. "Elizabeth's been watching the entrance for the past ten minutes."

"Reed?" Mari asked quietly, accepting a glass of sparkling water from a passing server.

"Near the judging table, reviewing the competition entries. And Marcel just arrived with his display. He looks surprisingly calm for someone who had his shop searched last night."

Mari glanced toward the judging area, where Marcus Reed stood examining labels with professional interest. His tailored jacket and precision-knotted tie projected literary authority, though Mari now recognized the calculating coldness behind his urbane exterior.

"Denise and Armstrong?" she asked, keeping her expression pleasant as she surveyed the room.

"In position. Trish is at the heritage display, and Ellie's circulating among the general attendees. Everyone's ready."

"Then let's begin," Mari nodded, setting down her glass and moving toward Elizabeth with practiced confidence.

Elizabeth spotted her approach, her smile tightening almost imperceptibly. "Ms. Paige," she greeted, excusing herself from her admirers. "I'm pleased you could join us despite the unfortunate incident at your bookstore last night. Vandalism is so distressing in our small community."

The direct reference to the brick through Mari's window was deliberate intimidation, confirming their suspicions that Elizabeth had orchestrated it.

"It takes more than broken glass to keep a good bookseller down," Mari replied evenly. "Besides, I wouldn't miss this festival. The cheese competition has such... historical significance for Inkwell Cove."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed slightly at the emphasis. "Indeed. Though traditions evolve, don't they? From dairy production to real estate development to cultural patronage. The Blackwood family has always adapted to changing markets."

"While maintaining certain consistent... practices," Mari suggested, watching Elizabeth's reaction carefully.

Before Elizabeth could respond, Marcus Reed joined them, his expression professionally pleasant though his eyes remained watchful.

"Ms. Paige," he nodded. "I understand your store suffered some damage last night. How unfortunate that incivility has found its way to our peaceful town."

"Small towns have their secrets," Mari replied, meeting his gaze steadily. "As Victoria Sterling was discovering before her death."

The reference to Victoria landed like a stone dropped in still water, creating tension that rippled outward despite their maintained smiles.

"Poor Victoria," Elizabeth sighed with performative sympathy. "So dedicated to her research that she neglected basic medication precautions. A cautionary tale for those who become... overly absorbed in their investigations."

The threat, thinly veiled behind social pleasantries, hung in the air between them.

"Speaking of investigations," Mari said, reaching into her pocket to activate the recording device, "I've been reviewing Victoria's manuscript notes for *The Curdled Truth*. Her detective Isabel discovers



something fascinating about counterfeit luxury products—they often lack specific markers that legitimate manufacturers include precisely to prevent fraud."

Reed's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. "Creative license, of course. Victoria was a novelist, not an investigative journalist."

"Though she was remarkably thorough in her research," Mari countered. "Particularly regarding pharmaceutical counterfeiting. Isabel identifies a specific enzyme marker absent in the fake medication that becomes the key evidence linking the counterfeit operation to international import businesses."

Elizabeth's social mask slipped momentarily, genuine alarm flashing across her features before she recovered. "How... inventive. Though I doubt police laboratories conduct such specific testing in routine investigations."

"They do when provided with exactly what to look for," Mari replied. "Detective Armstrong has been quite interested in Victoria's detailed descriptions of pharmaceutical markers. Almost as if she knew exactly how someone might tamper with her medication."

Reed set down his wine glass with controlled precision. "This festival hardly seems the appropriate venue for discussing such morbid topics, Ms. Paige. Perhaps your book club enthusiasm for mysteries has overshadowed your appreciation for social boundaries."

"On the contrary," came Liv's voice as she rejoined them, "the Novel Sippers find this the perfect venue. After all, it brings together all the key elements of Victoria's investigation—artisanal food judging, local heritage celebration, and the Blackwood family's cultural influence."

"Not to mention Marcel's competition entry," Mari added, gesturing toward where the cheesemonger was arranging his display with meticulous care. "I understand he's submitted a heritage Alpine-style

cheese aged twenty-four months using traditional techniques predating modern dairy practices."

"The same techniques once used at Blackwood Dairy," Liv noted innocently. "Before its rather abrupt closure following Michael Landry's disappearance."

Elizabeth's composure visibly frayed at the direct reference to Landry. "Ancient history," she said dismissively. "And irrelevant to today's festivities."

"History has a way of ripening with time," Mari observed. "Like a fine cheese developing complexity and sharpness as it ages."

"Enough," Reed interrupted, his urbane facade cracking to reveal genuine anger. "Your amateur detective games have gone beyond mere annoyance, Ms. Paige. You and your book club friends would be wise to remember that fiction should remain on the page, not in real-life accusations."

"Is that what happened to Victoria?" Mari asked directly. "She crossed the line between fiction and reality in her investigation?"

Elizabeth placed a restraining hand on Reed's arm, her aristocratic control reasserting itself. "I believe the judging is about to begin," she said, her voice lowered to ensure only their small circle could hear. "After which, Marcus and I would appreciate a private word with you and Ms. Winters. Perhaps in the storage area behind the main pavilion? To... clarify certain misunderstandings."

The invitation was clearly a trap, exactly as they had anticipated in their planning.

"We'd be delighted," Mari agreed, catching Liv's eye with a subtle nod. "After the heritage cheese category is judged, then?"

"Perfect," Elizabeth smiled, the expression not reaching her eyes.  
"Now, if you'll excuse me, my duties as head judge await."

As Elizabeth and Reed moved toward the judging table, Liv turned to Mari with a raised eyebrow. "That went exactly as expected," she murmured. "The enzyme marker reference definitely rattled them."

"Phase one complete," Mari agreed, discreetly touching her ear where Armstrong's miniature receiver was concealed. "The trap is set."

Ellie's voice came through clearly: "Armstrong confirms his team is in position. Denise is moving to the storage area to secure it before your 'meeting.'"

"And I've alerted Marcel," came Trish's update. "He's ready with the special competition entry."

Mari took a deep breath, steadying her nerves as they moved toward the judging area. The Novel Sippers had positioned themselves strategically throughout the festival: Liv at Mari's side as her direct backup, Ellie monitoring the crowd for psychological tells, Trish stationed at the heritage display where she could observe without being obvious, and Denise coordinating with Armstrong's team. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

The judging ceremony began with appropriate pomp, Elizabeth Blackwood presiding with the confident authority of someone accustomed to community leadership. Categories were announced, samples tasted, scores recorded with deliberate precision. To the gathered crowd, it appeared to be nothing more than the culmination of Inkwell Cove's annual celebration of artisanal food culture.

Only the Novel Sippers and Armstrong's team recognized it as the elaborate stage for exposing a decades-long criminal enterprise.

When the heritage cheese category was announced, Marcel Fontaine stepped forward with his submission. His expression betrayed nothing as Elizabeth and Reed examined his entry—a large wheel with distinctive markings that Mari recognized from his aging cave.

"Our final entry in the heritage category," Elizabeth announced to the gathered VIPs, "is an Alpine-style cheese aged twenty-four months in limestone caves, submitted by The Aged Page. Mr. Fontaine claims it uses cultures and techniques dating back to the original Blackwood Dairy operation."

Marcel nodded politely. "Indeed. The recipe was taught to me by Michael Landry himself, before his unfortunate... disappearance."

The direct reference to Landry in this public setting caused a visible reaction from both Elizabeth and Reed. Mari watched as Elizabeth's fingers tightened around her judging pencil, while Reed's expression darkened with barely suppressed anger.

"How... nostalgic," Elizabeth managed, her voice tight despite her maintained smile. "Though I doubt anyone here remembers our family's modest dairy beginnings."

"On the contrary," came a new voice as Detective Ryan Armstrong approached the judging table. "The Blackwood Dairy operation is of considerable historical interest. Particularly certain aspects that didn't appear in the official records."

Elizabeth's composure faltered momentarily before she recovered. "Detective Armstrong. I wasn't aware law enforcement had an official presence at our festival."

"Just a community member with an appreciation for local history," Armstrong replied smoothly, though his attention remained focused on Marcel's cheese entry. "And artisanal techniques."

As the judges prepared to taste Marcel's submission, he stepped forward with a specialized tool that Mari recognized as the cheese knife he had shown Denise and Liv—the *sonde* used to extract a core sample without cutting the entire wheel.

"If I may," Marcel said, addressing Elizabeth directly. "This heritage variety should be sampled from the center, where the aging process creates the most complex flavor profile."

Before Elizabeth could object, Marcel inserted the knife with practiced precision, extracting a small cylindrical sample from the wheel's heart. But instead of the expected cheese, the core revealed something else entirely—a small metal cylinder, gleaming dully in the festival lighting.

"What is that?" Elizabeth demanded, her aristocratic facade crumbling as she recognized the potential threat to her carefully maintained narrative.

"Evidence," Marcel replied simply, removing the cylinder and offering it to Armstrong. "A specialized data storage device containing copies of the original Blackwood Dairy ledgers, documenting the counterfeit cheese operation and subsequent money laundering through real estate development."

A murmur rippled through the gathered VIPs, confusion and curiosity mixing as they witnessed what appeared to be an unexpected deviation from the judging protocol.

"This is absurd," Reed declared, his voice carrying the practiced authority of a literary agent accustomed to controlling narratives. "Detective Armstrong, surely you don't entertain such theatrical accusations at a community event?"

Armstrong examined the cylinder with professional interest. "I entertain evidence, Mr. Reed. Particularly when it correlates with financial

records already in our possession connecting Blackwood Development to your literary agency through a series of shell companies."

Elizabeth's expression hardened into something cold and calculating. "This is harassment," she stated flatly. "Based on the amateur investigations of a book club with an overactive imagination. My attorneys will—"

"Will have considerable work explaining the pharmaceutical evidence," Mari interrupted, stepping forward. "Victoria Sterling's Lexapro was substituted with counterfeit pills containing the active ingredient but lacking the specific enzyme marker that pharmaceutical companies include to prevent exactly this kind of tampering."

"An enzyme marker detailed in Victoria's manuscript for *The Curdled Truth*," Liv added. "As if she knew exactly how someone might use her medication against her."

"And testing of the remaining pills found in her room confirms the substitution," Armstrong concluded. "With trace elements matching products imported by Reed International prior to its FDA citations for mislabeling."

The calculated revelation of their evidence had exactly the impact they'd anticipated. Elizabeth's aristocratic composure fractured completely, while Reed's expression shifted from controlled anger to something approaching panic.

"This is preposterous," Elizabeth declared, though her voice had lost its customary authority. "Detective Armstrong, I insist you end this disruptive spectacle immediately."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Mrs. Blackwood," Armstrong replied, his tone professionally neutral despite the tension crackling through the pavilion. "Elizabeth Blackwood and Marcus Reed, you're under arrest

for the murder of Victoria Sterling and financial crimes spanning four decades."

As if on cue, Denise appeared with two uniformed officers, their presence finally revealing the law enforcement operation that had been positioned throughout the festival. The gathered VIPs drew back, creating an impromptu perimeter around the unfolding drama.

For a moment, it seemed Elizabeth might maintain enough dignity to surrender quietly. Then, with surprising speed for a woman of her age, she lunged toward Marcel's cheese display, reaching for something concealed beneath the tablecloth.

"Gun!" Denise shouted, her former detective's training instantly recognizing the threat.

Armstrong moved with practiced efficiency, stepping between Elizabeth and the stunned onlookers while drawing his service weapon. "Drop it, Elizabeth," he commanded, his voice carrying the unmistakable authority of decades in law enforcement.

Instead, Elizabeth turned the small revolver toward Mari, her aristocratic features transformed by desperation and fury. "This is your doing," she snarled. "You and your meddling book club. Victoria at least had the sense to know when she was outmatched."

Time seemed to slow as Mari faced the barrel of Elizabeth's gun, her anxiety replaced by an almost supernatural clarity—her "prose-ac vision" focusing her thoughts despite the mortal danger. She was acutely aware of the positions of everyone in the pavilion: Armstrong and his officers calculating angles of fire, Liv tensed to pull her to safety, Denise reaching for her own concealed weapon.

But it was Ellie who acted first, launching a perfectly aimed wheel of Brie that struck Elizabeth's arm with surprising force, disrupting her aim as the gun discharged. The bullet shattered a wine bottle on the

judging table, sending glass and liquid spraying across the competition entries.

In the momentary confusion, Reed made his move, shoving past a startled server and bolting toward the exit. He might have escaped had Trish not stepped directly into his path, swinging her heavy librarian's tote bag with devastating accuracy. The bag—containing three hardcover editions of Victoria Sterling's novels—connected solidly with Reed's temple, sending him crashing to the ground in a heap of expensive tailoring and thwarted escape plans.

"Isabel Greene solves another case," Trish announced triumphantly, standing over the dazed literary agent.

Meanwhile, Armstrong and Denise had subdued Elizabeth, relieving her of the weapon and securing her wrists with handcuffs that looked starkly incongruous against her cream linen suit.

"Elizabeth Blackwood," Armstrong recited formally, "you're under arrest for the murder of Victoria Sterling, conspiracy to commit financial fraud, and the attempted murder of a civilian investigator. You have the right to remain silent..."

As the Miranda warning continued, Mari found herself at the center of a protective circle formed by her fellow Novel Sippers—Liv's arm around her shoulders, Ellie checking her for shock, Trish still clutching her weaponized tote bag, and Denise coordinating with the officers now securing the scene.

"Is everyone all right?" Mari asked, her voice steadier than she would have expected given their narrow escape.

"Better than our suspects," Liv replied with grim satisfaction, watching as Reed was helped to his feet and handcuffed alongside Elizabeth.



"That was some throw, Ellie," Denise commented professionally. "Didn't know Brie could be used as a defensive weapon."

"Stress-baking has improved my aim," Ellie admitted with a small smile. "Though I never thought I'd actually use cheese as a projectile."

"And Trish with the books," Mari added, genuine admiration in her voice. "Victoria would have appreciated the literary justice of it."

"Isabel Greene's collected works," Trish confirmed, patting her tote bag. "Seemed appropriate."

As Armstrong's team escorted Elizabeth and Reed from the pavilion, the gathered crowd—now significantly larger as festival attendees had been drawn to the commotion—broke into spontaneous applause. The Novel Sippers exchanged embarrassed glances, unaccustomed to public recognition for their investigation.

Marcel approached, his expression one of profound satisfaction mixed with lingering sadness. "It is done," he said simply. "After thirty-seven years, Michael can rest in peace."

"And Victoria," Mari added softly. "Though I imagine she'd say this ending was a bit too dramatic even for one of her novels."

"Sometimes reality exceeds fiction," Armstrong observed, returning after ensuring the suspects were secure in transport vehicles.

"Especially when amateur detectives decide to cheese the day."

The deliberate cheese pun—so unexpected from the serious detective—broke the remaining tension. The Novel Sippers dissolved into slightly hysterical laughter, the release of weeks of investigation and danger finally overwhelming their careful composure.

"Did you just make a cheese pun, Detective Armstrong?" Mari asked when she could speak again.

Armstrong's weathered face creased in what might have been his first genuine smile of the investigation. "I've been around you five long enough to be infected by your terrible wordplay," he admitted. "Though I draw the line at wine puns."

"Those are reserved for experts," Liv agreed with a wink.

As festival staff began restoring order to the disrupted judging area, Armstrong drew the Novel Sippers aside. "The prosecutor will need your statements," he explained. "And there will be formal recognition of your assistance in solving Victoria's murder. But for now..." he hesitated, uncharacteristically uncertain.

"Yes?" Mari prompted.

"I was wondering if you might have room for one more at your book club," he said finally. "I've been meaning to discuss Isabel Greene's detection methods with fellow enthusiasts."

The Novel Sippers exchanged surprised glances before Mari smiled warmly. "The Novel Sippers would be honored to welcome you, Detective Armstrong. Though I should warn you—our discussions tend to involve equal parts literary analysis, wine appreciation, and terrible cheese puns."

"I believe I can adapt," Armstrong replied solemnly, though his eyes held unexpected warmth. "And please, call me Ryan."

As they moved away from the chaotic pavilion, leaving Armstrong to coordinate the continued investigation, Mari felt a profound sense of completion. Victoria Sterling's murder had been solved, justice secured for Michael Landry after decades, and the Novel Sippers had proven themselves as effective investigators despite—or perhaps because of—being underestimated middle-aged women.

"What happens now?" Ellie asked as they found themselves at the festival's edge, overlooking the harbor that had given Inkwell Cove its name.

"Now," Mari said, watching the afternoon sun glint off the water, "we return to being a book club. We discuss mysteries, drink wine, eat cheese, and make terrible puns."

"With occasional forays into real-world investigation?" Trish suggested hopefully.

"Let's take a break from actual murder," Denise advised. "At least until we've processed this one properly."

"With proper wine pairings," Liv added. "I'm thinking a robust cabernet for discussing Elizabeth's downfall and perhaps a crisp sauvignon blanc for Reed's literary deceptions."

"And plenty of comfort cheddar," Ellie concluded with a knowing smile at Mari. "For those prose-ac moments when we need to ground ourselves."

Mari looked at her friends—these remarkable women who had transformed from casual book club members to amateur detectives and back again, their bonds strengthened by shared danger and triumph. Like a perfectly aged cheese, the Novel Sippers had only grown more complex, more distinctive, and more powerful with time.

"To the Novel Sippers," she said, raising an imaginary glass. "May our next mystery be safely fictional."

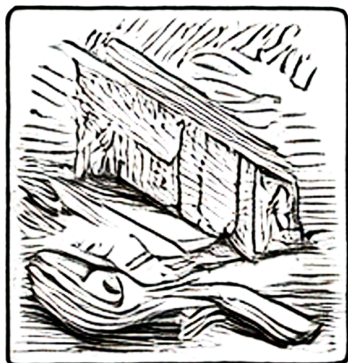
"To Victoria," Liv added. "Whose books brought us together and whose death united us in pursuit of justice."

"And to cheese," Trish concluded with irrepressible enthusiasm. "Without which none of this would have been possible."

Their laughter carried across the harbor, five middle-aged women celebrating friendship, justice, and the unexpected adventures that had transformed their book club into something none of them could have anticipated—but none would trade for all the artisanal cheese in Inkwell Cove.

The big cheese had been caught, the mystery solved, and the Novel Sippers were ready for whatever story awaited them next—preferably one with fewer actual corpses and more fictional demises safely contained within the pages of a good book.

# Chapter 16: Sharp Instincts



The lock clicked behind Mari as she entered Bound Together, the familiar scent of books and brewing coffee failing to soothe her as it usually did. She flipped on the lights, illuminating the space that had become both livelihood and sanctuary over the past four years. The window that had been broken two nights earlier was now properly repaired, the plywood replaced with fresh glass that caught the early morning sunlight.

But the restored storefront did nothing to quell the tightness in her chest.

With the Cheese & Wine Festival less than a week away, the Novel Sippers' investigation had reached a critical juncture. Elizabeth Blackwood and Marcus Reed were clearly feeling threatened—enough to damage property, issue warnings, and perhaps worse. The fragments of evidence connecting them to Victoria's death were assembling into a pattern that even the most skeptical observer would find compelling.

Which made them dangerous.

Mari moved through her opening routine mechanically, her mind cataloging threats rather than the day's tasks. The recording Liv had made in the Blackwood estate caves. Marcel's financial records. The pharmaceutical evidence Armstrong was waiting on from the lab. Each piece of evidence was another nail in Elizabeth and Reed's coffin—and another reason for them to silence the Novel Sippers.

"Stop it," Mari muttered to herself, measuring coffee into the small shop brewer. "You're catastrophizing again."

She recognized the thought spiral, having learned to identify it in therapy after her divorce. The way anxiety took reasonable concerns and accelerated them to worst-case scenarios with dizzying speed. The Lexapro helped moderate these patterns, transforming what once would have been paralyzing fear into manageable apprehension, but it wasn't infallible.

Especially when the threats were real.

The bell above the door chimed, startling her from her thoughts. She turned, expecting the first customer of the day, but found Denise instead, her former detective's eyes sweeping the shop with professional assessment.

"Morning security sweep," Denise announced without preamble. "Armstrong suggested we check each other's spaces before fully opening for business."

"You think they'd plant something?" Mari asked, immediately registering the folded paper Denise held.

"After our little field trip to Blackwood Estate? I wouldn't put anything past them." Denise handed over the paper. "Found this shoved under your door when I arrived."

Mari unfolded it with suddenly unsteady fingers. The message was brief, typed in generic font on plain paper:

*Middle-aged women should stick to book clubs, not detective work.  
Final warning before your prescription becomes problematic.*

The direct reference to her medication sent a chill through Mari's body. They knew about her Lexapro. Just as they'd known about Victoria's.

"Breathe," Denise said, noticing Mari's reaction. "That's exactly what they want—to frighten you into backing off."

"It's working," Mari admitted, her voice tight as she handed the note back. "They killed Victoria by tampering with her medication. And now they're threatening to do the same to me."

"Which is why we implement buddy systems and security protocols," Denise replied, her calm professionalism steady. "Armstrong has officers doing regular drive-bys of all our properties, and I've shown each of you basic surveillance detection techniques."

Mari nodded, trying to focus on these practical measures rather than the creeping dread that had settled in her stomach. "Has Armstrong gotten the lab results back on Victoria's remaining pills?"

"Not yet. He's pressing the lab, but these things take time, especially when you're trying to identify specific enzyme markers."

The mention of enzymes triggered a connection in Mari's mind.

"Speaking of which, I need to call Hillside Creamery about this week's cheese delivery. They're usually here by now."

"Your specialty supplier?" Denise asked, beginning her methodical inspection of the store, checking behind shelves and under displays with practiced efficiency.

"Yes. They make that incredible clothbound cheddar I brought to our last meeting." Mari picked up her phone, scrolling to the creamery's number. "Their timing is usually impeccable—they've never been late before."

As she waited for someone to answer, Mari felt that familiar flutter in her chest—the anxiety trying to assert itself despite medication. The call went to voicemail after six rings.

"That's odd," she murmured, leaving a brief message requesting a callback.

"Everything all right?" Denise asked, emerging from the mystery section.

"Probably nothing," Mari said, though the tightness in her chest suggested otherwise. "Just unusual for them not to answer."

"Add it to the list of things we're keeping an eye on," Denise advised, completing her sweep. "Store looks clean—no obvious surveillance devices or tampering. I should get to the festival grounds. Armstrong wants me to check the security setup before tomorrow's vendor load-in."

After Denise left, Mari tried to focus on normal business tasks—arranging a new display of summer beach reads, processing online orders, preparing for an afternoon children's storytime. But the unanswered call to Hillside Creamery nagged at her, an inexplicable loose thread that her anxiety-enhanced observation skills wouldn't let go.

By mid-afternoon, with still no callback from the creamery, Mari made a decision. "Trish," she called to her friend, who had stopped by to help with the children's event, "can you watch the shop for an hour? I need to check on something."

"Cheese emergency?" Trish asked with attempted lightness, though her eyes reflected concern.

"Something like that," Mari confirmed. "Probably nothing, but..."

"But your instincts are telling you otherwise," Trish finished. "Go. I've got this covered. Just remember—"

"Buddy system, I know," Mari sighed. "I'll text Liv to meet me there."



Hillside Creamery sat on ten picturesque acres at the edge of Inkwell Cove, its restored Victorian farmhouse and modern production facility featured prominently in regional food magazines. Mari had been ordering their artisanal cheeses since opening Bound Together, developing a friendly relationship with owners Jacob and Melissa Harper over the years.

Liv was waiting in the gravel parking area when Mari arrived, her wine expert's vehicle looking incongruously elegant against the pastoral backdrop.

"What's our cover story?" Liv asked as Mari approached, the casual question belied by the alertness in her eyes.

"No cover needed—I'm genuinely checking on a missed delivery," Mari explained. "But something feels off. They've never missed a delivery date, and they're not answering calls."

"Trust that feeling," Liv advised. "Your 'prose-ac vision' has been right more often than not during this investigation."

Together they approached the farmhouse that served as both retail shop and office. A handwritten "CLOSED" sign hung on the door—unusual for a Thursday afternoon during peak tourist season.

"Definitely not normal," Mari murmured, peering through the window. The interior appeared undisturbed but empty, computer monitors dark on the reception desk.

"Let's check the production building," Liv suggested, nodding toward the larger structure behind the farmhouse.

As they rounded the corner, they spotted a single vehicle parked near the loading dock—Jacob Harper's distinctive blue pickup truck. The loading dock door stood partly open, the interior dimly visible.

"Jacob?" Mari called, approaching cautiously. "It's Mari Paige from Bound Together. Just checking on this week's order."

No response came from within. Mari exchanged concerned glances with Liv before moving closer to the partially open door. The cheese production area was immaculate as always, stainless steel equipment gleaming under fluorescent lights, but no workers were visible on the floor.

"Mr. Harper?" Mari tried again, her unease growing.

A crash from the back office startled them both. After a moment, Jacob Harper emerged, his normally cheerful face drawn with stress. He stopped short upon seeing them.

"Mari," he said, surprise evident in his voice. "And Ms. Winters. I... we're closed today. Family emergency."

"I was worried when you missed our delivery," Mari explained. "Is everything all right? You look..."

"Fine," he interrupted, too quickly. "Just fine. We'll deliver tomorrow. I should have called."

Mari noticed his hands trembling slightly as he wiped them on his apron. Behind him, the office door remained ajar, papers visible scattered across the floor—the likely source of the crash they'd heard.

"Jacob," Mari said, using her most calming bookstore-owner voice, "if something's wrong, we might be able to help. Is Melissa okay?"

At the mention of his wife, Jacob's composed facade crumbled. "She's with her sister in Boston," he said, his voice dropping to nearly a whisper. "I told her to stay there until this blows over."

"Until what blows over?" Liv asked, her tone gentle but direct.

Jacob glanced nervously toward the parking area before gesturing them inside. Once the door was closed behind them, he seemed to deflate, leaning heavily against a preparation table.

"Three days ago, we received a letter," he explained, rubbing his face wearily. "Informing us that our lease payments would be doubling, effective immediately. When I called to dispute it, I discovered our property had been sold last month to a holding company."

"Let me guess," Liv said, her wine business experience evident in her understanding. "A subsidiary of Blackwood Development?"

Jacob's head snapped up in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Because we're investigating Elizabeth Blackwood's business practices," Mari explained carefully. "Including her control of local food production."

"Well, she controls us now," Jacob said bitterly. "When I couldn't make the increased payment, a representative visited yesterday. Very polite, very professional. Explained that certain 'adjustments' to our production methods could help us meet our financial obligations."

"What kind of adjustments?" Mari asked, though she already suspected the answer.

"Using lower-grade milk but maintaining premium labeling. Accelerating aging processes with chemical additives while claiming traditional methods. Cutting corners on cultures and rennet quality." Jacob's disgust was palpable. "When I refused, they made it clear that our equipment might suffer 'mechanical failures' that would shut us down entirely."

"Extortion," Liv said flatly.

"Exactly what they did to the Blackwood Dairy workers in the 80s," Mari added, connecting the pattern. "The counterfeit cheese operation that Michael Landry discovered before he disappeared."

Jacob stared at them, visibly processing this information. "You know about that? I thought it was just local legend."

"It's very real," Mari assured him. "And part of a larger criminal enterprise we're working to expose with Detective Armstrong."

Hope flickered briefly in Jacob's eyes before doubt replaced it. "The police won't help. The rep yesterday implied they had 'arrangements' with local law enforcement."

"Not all of them," Liv said firmly. "Armstrong is trustworthy. But in the meantime, you need protection from retaliation."

"What we need is to document everything," Mari suggested, her anxiety momentarily overshadowed by determination. "The letter, the visit, the threats—anything that connects Blackwood Development to these demands."

Jacob hesitated only briefly before nodding. "I kept the letter. And I recorded the conversation yesterday on my phone. Wasn't sure it would matter, but..."

"It matters," Liv assured him. "It's evidence of ongoing criminal activity that directly connects to our investigation."

As Jacob retrieved the documents from his office, Mari felt that familiar tightness return to her chest—but now accompanied by a strange clarity. Her "prose-ac vision" was connecting dots, seeing the pattern extend beyond Victoria's murder to a systematic control of local businesses, all ultimately benefiting the Blackwood empire.

By the time they left Hillside Creamery with copies of Jacob's evidence, Mari's hands were shaking despite her outward calm. The scope of the Blackwood operation was larger than they'd imagined, with tentacles reaching into every aspect of Inkwell Cove's economy.

"We need to tell Armstrong immediately," Liv said as they reached their cars. "This proves the operation Victoria uncovered continues to this day."

"I'll call him from the shop," Mari agreed, her voice steadier than she felt. "Thank you for coming with me."

"Buddy system," Liv smiled, though concern showed in her eyes. "Are you okay to drive? You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine," Mari assured her automatically. "Just processing."

But as she drove back toward Bound Together, the tightness in her chest increased, accompanied by a lightheadedness that she recognized as the beginning of a panic attack. She pulled into the bookstore's small parking area, turned off the engine, and gripped the steering wheel, trying to regulate her breathing as her heart raced.

"Not now," she whispered to herself, closing her eyes against the wave of dizziness. "Not when we're so close."

The passenger door opened unexpectedly, startling her. She turned to find Ellie sliding into the seat beside her, concern evident in her therapist's gaze.

"Trish called me," Ellie explained simply. "Said you might need some professional backup."

"I'm having a moment," Mari admitted, her voice tight as she pressed a hand to her sternum. "Just need to breathe through it."

"Panic attack," Ellie nodded, her clinical assessment immediate and matter-of-fact. "Pretty significant one, from the looks of it. May I?" She gestured toward Mari's wrist, seeking permission to check her pulse.

Mari nodded, too focused on controlling her breathing to speak. Ellie's fingers found her racing pulse with professional precision.

"Your heart's doing exactly what it's supposed to during a threat response," Ellie said calmly, her voice steady and reassuring. "Your body is trying to protect you from danger. It's just being a bit overzealous about it."

Despite her distress, Mari managed a weak smile at this characterization.

"I brought emergency supplies," Ellie continued, reaching into her bag with her free hand while maintaining contact with Mari's wrist. She produced a small container. "Emergency comfort cheddar. The sharp variety—protein helps stabilize blood sugar, which helps manage anxiety symptoms."

Mari accepted a small cube of cheese, the familiar action of eating something—anything—providing a momentary focus beyond the panic. The rich, tangy flavor registered dimly through her distress.

"Now, let's work on that breathing," Ellie instructed. "In for four, hold for seven, out for eight. Just like we practiced in your sessions. Focus on my counting."

For several minutes, they breathed together in Mari's parked car, Ellie maintaining steady eye contact and calm guidance while Mari fought through the wave of panic. Gradually, her breathing slowed, the vise-like tightness in her chest easing into something more manageable.

"There we go," Ellie nodded encouragingly. "Coming back now. How's the dizziness?"

"Better," Mari managed, her voice sounding distant to her own ears. "But my hands are still..."

"Trembling is normal," Ellie assured her. "Your body dumped a lot of adrenaline into your system. It takes time to metabolize."

They sat in silence for a moment, Mari focusing on the gradual return of equilibrium while Ellie maintained her calm, grounding presence.

"Want to talk about what triggered it?" Ellie finally asked.

Mari took a deep breath, steadier now. "We just discovered the Blackwoods are extorting local food producers, including my cheese supplier. They're forcing them to create counterfeit products, just like they did at the dairy before Michael Landry disappeared."

"That's significant evidence," Ellie acknowledged.

"But it's not just that," Mari continued, the words tumbling out now. "It's everything—Victoria's murder, the threats, Armstrong's determination to pursue justice despite departmental pressure... and that note this morning, directly threatening my medication. Just like they did to Victoria."

Ellie's expression grew serious. "You didn't mention a note."

"Denise found it under the shop door this morning. Warning me to back off or my 'prescription would become problematic.'" Mari shuddered. "They know about my Lexapro, Ellie. Just like they knew about Victoria's."

"That is genuinely concerning," Ellie agreed, her professional demeanor momentarily giving way to visible worry. "But remember,

we've implemented safeguards. You're not taking medication from unknown sources, and we're checking in regularly with each other."

"I know that logically," Mari sighed. "But anxiety isn't logical, is it?"

"No," Ellie admitted with a small smile. "That's what makes it both exhausting and occasionally useful."

"Useful?" Mari raised an eyebrow.

"Your 'prose-ac vision,' as you call it," Ellie explained. "That heightened state of awareness that helps you notice details others might miss. Your brain is constantly scanning for potential threats—exhausting, yes, but also remarkably effective for investigative work."

Mari hadn't considered this perspective before. "You think my anxiety is actually helping the investigation?"

"I think you've learned to channel it productively," Ellie clarified. "You've developed coping mechanisms that transform what could be debilitating into something functional—even advantageous in certain situations. That's extraordinary, Mari."

The validation from someone who understood the daily struggle with anxiety provided unexpected comfort. "Is that why you became a psychiatrist?" Mari asked. "To help others find that transformation?"

Ellie's expression softened. "Partly. I also wanted to understand my own mind better." She hesitated before adding, "Did you know I've been on Lexapro myself for almost a year now?"

"You have?" Mari was genuinely surprised. Ellie had always seemed so composed, so professionally collected.

"Started after my father died," Ellie nodded. "The grief triggered anxiety patterns I'd been managing independently for years. Finally decided to



practice what I preach to patients about medication being a valid tool, not a last resort."

"That's why you've been so helpful during this investigation," Mari realized. "You're not just offering professional perspective—you're speaking from experience."

"Exactly. And watching you use your 'prose-ac vision' to connect dots in Victoria's case has been inspiring," Ellie said. "We tend to view anxiety as something to overcome, but you've shown it can also be a superpower when properly channeled."

A knock on the car window startled them both. Detective Armstrong stood outside, concern evident in his expression. Mari rolled down the window, aware that her appearance likely still showed traces of her panic attack.

"Everything all right?" he asked, his gaze taking in both women with professional assessment. "Ms. Martinez mentioned you might need assistance."

"We're good," Mari assured him, finding her voice steadier than expected. "But we have important information about Blackwood Development's current operations. They're extorting local food producers, including my cheese supplier."

Armstrong's expression sharpened with interest. "That connects directly to the historical pattern we've been tracking. Can you come inside and provide details?"

"Absolutely," Mari nodded, gathering her composure. "Ellie brought emergency comfort cheddar. I'm fully restored."

Armstrong's weathered face cracked in a brief smile at the phrase. "Emergency comfort cheddar sounds like exactly what this investigation needs," he said, offering a hand to help Mari from the car.

The gesture was unnecessary but appreciated. As Mari accepted his assistance, she noticed the careful strength in his grip—supportive without being presumptuous. Their eyes met briefly, an unexpected connection forming in that moment of vulnerability.

"Thank you," she said simply.

"For what?" he asked, genuine curiosity in his tone.

"For taking us seriously," Mari replied. "The Novel Sippers. Five middle-aged women with a theory about Victoria's death. Many officers would have dismissed us outright."

Armstrong's expression softened slightly. "Ms. Paige, having observed your investigation methods firsthand, 'dismissing' is the last word I'd use to describe your book club." He hesitated, then added, "Besides, anyone who appreciates Isabel Greene's methodical approach to detection clearly has good investigative instincts."

The reference to Victoria's fictional detective—and the implicit acknowledgment of their shared appreciation for the character—created another momentary connection.

Inside Bound Together, they gathered around the small table in Mari's office, where Armstrong took detailed notes about the Hillside Creamery situation. His questions were precise, professional, but Mari noticed a new warmth in his manner—a respect that went beyond courtesy.

"This fits the pattern exactly," he concluded, reviewing Jacob's documentation. "The same techniques Victoria described in her notes about the original dairy operation, updated for current businesses. This provides concrete evidence of ongoing criminal activity, not just historical fraud."

"Will it be enough?" Ellie asked, the question they were all wondering.

Armstrong considered this carefully. "Combined with the pharmaceutical evidence we're waiting on, Marcel's financial records, and Liv's recording from the Blackwood estate... it's building into a compelling case." He met Mari's gaze directly. "Your instincts about Hillside Creamery were spot on, Ms. Paige. Sharp, like the cheddar Dr. Chen prescribed."

The small joke, unexpected from the serious detective, brought a genuine smile to Mari's face despite the lingering exhaustion from her panic attack.

"Speaking of sharp," Armstrong continued, his tone shifting back to professional, "I should warn you that my investigation is attracting attention within the department. My supervisor has expressed... concern about resources being allocated to what he terms 'a straightforward accidental death.'"

"Blackwood influence?" Ellie suggested.

"Possibly," Armstrong acknowledged. "Or simple bureaucratic resistance to reopening a closed case. Either way, I'm proceeding carefully—documenting everything, maintaining secure copies of evidence, and keeping certain aspects of our partnership... unofficial."

The implication was clear—Armstrong was potentially risking his career to pursue justice for Victoria Sterling. The realization added another dimension to Mari's appreciation for the detective.

As they concluded their meeting, Armstrong paused at the door. "One more thing, Ms. Paige. After the threatening note this morning, I've arranged for additional patrols past your store and residence. And I'd like to install a temporary security camera above your entrance, if you'll permit it."

"Of course," Mari agreed, touched by his concern.

"Good. I'll have someone come by this afternoon." He hesitated, then added, "And perhaps consider staying with a friend for a few days? Just until we've secured more evidence."

"She can stay with me," Ellie offered immediately. "I have a guest room, and my building has excellent security."

"Perfect," Armstrong nodded with evident relief. "Though I trust you'll maintain your buddy system regardless."

After he departed, Ellie turned to Mari with a knowing smile. "He's concerned about you."

"He's concerned about all of us," Mari corrected, though she felt a warmth in her cheeks that belied her casual tone.

"Mmhm," Ellie hummed skeptically. "That's why his eyes kept finding yours throughout the entire conversation."

"Professional respect," Mari insisted, busying herself with organizing papers to hide her flustered reaction.

"If you say so," Ellie replied, amusement clear in her voice. "Though I should note that as a trained observer of human behavior, I—"

She broke off suddenly, her attention caught by something on the mystery section shelving. "Mari," she said slowly, "was that small black object there yesterday?"

Mari followed her gaze to a tiny device nestled between two hardcover Isabel Greene novels—hardly noticeable unless you were looking directly at it.

"No," she whispered, ice forming in her stomach. "It definitely wasn't."

Ellie carefully approached the shelf, examined the object without touching it, then stepped back. "That," she said with professional

certainty, "is a surveillance device. Someone's been listening to everything in your shop."

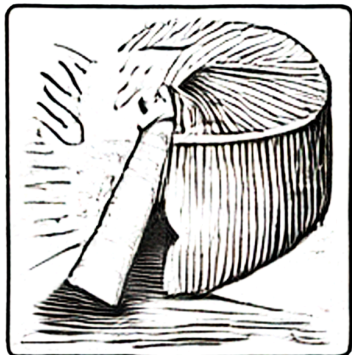
The realization that even Bound Together—Mari's sanctuary since her divorce—had been compromised should have triggered another anxiety spike. Instead, a strange calm descended, her "prose-ac vision" sliding into focus with crystalline clarity.

"Call Armstrong," she said, her voice steady. "Tell him we need to sweep the entire store. And then we need to decide what information we want Elizabeth and Reed to 'overhear' while we still control the narrative."

Ellie's eyebrows rose in surprise at this strategic response. "Mari Paige," she said with evident admiration, "your sharp instincts never cease to amaze me."

As Ellie made the call, Mari studied the surveillance device with newfound determination. The Blackwoods had invaded her space, threatened her medication, and attempted to intimidate her into silence. But in doing so, they'd underestimated the Novel Sippers once again—particularly the middle-aged bookstore owner whose anxiety gave her the sharpest detection instincts of all.

# Chapter 17: The Aged Relationship



Detective Ryan Armstrong studied the surveillance device they'd discovered at Bound Together, turning it carefully with a gloved finger. The small black object—barely larger than a thumbtack—had been expertly nestled between two Isabel Greene hardcovers in Mari's mystery section.

"Professional grade," he concluded, placing it in an evidence bag. "Not something you'd buy at a spy shop or online. This required connections."

"Blackwood connections," Denise suggested, her former detective's instincts clearly in sync with Armstrong's assessment.

The Novel Sippers had gathered in Mari's office after hours, the store carefully swept for additional listening devices. Armstrong's team had found two more—one near the register and another in the reading nook where they often held their Plot Committee meetings.

"How long do you think they've been listening?" Trish asked, her librarian's precision needing specific timelines.

"Hard to say," Armstrong replied. "Battery life on these models is approximately two weeks. Given their placement, I'd estimate they were installed shortly after Ms. Paige's confrontation with Elizabeth and Reed at the estate."

Mari felt a chill at the thought of being surveilled in her own sanctuary. "So they've heard our planning discussions. They know what evidence we have."

"Not necessarily," Armstrong countered. "These devices transmit to a receiver, typically within a few hundred yards. Someone would need to be nearby to monitor the feed in real time or retrieve the recording device regularly."

"The delivery person," Liv realized suddenly. "That new courier service that started handling packages for the block. Always lingering, adjusting equipment on his belt..."

"I'll have him identified immediately," Armstrong nodded, making a note in his leather-bound book—a habit Mari had noticed mirrored Denise's own investigation methods.

"The question now," Ellie said pragmatically, "is how to use this discovery to our advantage."

"Controlled information," Denise suggested immediately. "Feed them what we want them to hear."

"Exactly," Armstrong agreed, his professional respect for the former detective evident. "We leave one device 'undiscovered' and use it to advance our investigation."

As they discussed strategy, Mari found herself observing Armstrong with new interest. In the week since they'd discovered the threat to Hillside Creamery, he had become increasingly integrated with their investigation—no longer merely tolerating the Novel Sippers' amateur detecting but actively collaborating with them.

"Detective," she said during a lull in the planning, "you never really explained why you took our investigation seriously from the beginning."

Most law enforcement would have dismissed us as overzealous book club members."

Armstrong's weathered face remained composed, but something shifted in his gray eyes—a decision being made about how much to reveal.

"Victoria Sterling wasn't the first writer to die investigating the Blackwoods," he said finally, setting down his notebook. "Twenty years ago, when I was a rookie officer, a journalist named Caroline Walsh came to Inkwell Cove researching traditional industries. She spent several weeks interviewing locals about the old dairy operation before she was found dead in her rental cabin—carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heater. Ruled accidental."

"You didn't believe it was an accident," Mari guessed, recognizing the same quiet determination she'd observed in him throughout their partnership.

"I noticed inconsistencies in the scene," Armstrong confirmed. "The heater had been recently serviced. Walsh had written notes about meeting a 'concerned insider' at the dairy. And most tellingly, her research materials vanished before I could properly document them."

"But your concerns were dismissed," Denise said, professional to professional.

"Discouraged would be more accurate." A hint of old frustration colored Armstrong's voice. "My supervising officer—who later became chief—explained that the Blackwoods were Inkwell Cove's first family and suggested my career would benefit from focusing on 'more promising cases.'"

"Blackwood influence in the police department," Liv concluded.



"Pervasive but difficult to prove," Armstrong acknowledged. "I learned to be selective about what went into official reports. But I never stopped watching them."

"And when Victoria Sterling died under similar circumstances..." Mari prompted.

"I recognized the pattern immediately," Armstrong said, retrieving his notebook and turning to a page filled with meticulous notes on Victoria's death scene. "Another writer investigating Blackwood history, another 'accidental' death eliminating a threat."

"But you couldn't pursue it officially without evidence," Denise nodded in understanding.

"Not at first," Armstrong confirmed. "The department accepted the accidental overdose theory without question. The Blackwood influence remains strong, though less overt than in Walsh's day."

"So you've been conducting a parallel investigation all along," Mari realized.

Armstrong's expression softened slightly as he met her gaze. "When I learned that Victoria had been meeting with your book club before her death, I began monitoring your activities. Five observant women with different skills and community connections—it seemed possible you might uncover something I couldn't access through official channels."

"You were watching us," Trish said, somewhere between impressed and indignant.

"Discreetly," Armstrong admitted. "At The Wine Plot during your discussions. Near the library when Ms. Martinez accessed the archives. Observing from a distance to determine whether your amateur investigation might yield useful evidence—or simply put you in danger."

"And now?" Ellie asked perceptively.

Armstrong closed his notebook, his decision apparently made. "Now we're partners. Your collective insights and community access combined with my law enforcement experience give us the best chance of bringing Victoria's killers to justice—and stopping the Blackwood operation permanently."

The explicit acknowledgment of their partnership felt significant, a shift from reluctant tolerance to genuine collaboration.

"Speaking of partnership," Denise said, always focused on practicalities, "we should coordinate our approach to the pharmaceutical evidence. Has the lab made progress on identifying the enzyme marker in Victoria's pills?"

"Initial results are promising but inconclusive," Armstrong replied. "They've confirmed the pills contain the active ingredient in Lexapro but lack certain binding compounds found in the legitimate prescription. They're now analyzing for specific enzyme markers that would connect to artisanal food production."

"The connection between counterfeit cheese and counterfeit pharmaceuticals," Mari mused. "Victoria had identified it in her manuscript, but we thought it was just a fictional plot device."

"Isabel Greene's cases often reflected Victoria's real investigations," Armstrong observed. "I've been reviewing all her novels for potential insights into the Blackwood operation."

"You're familiar with Victoria's books?" Mari asked, surprised by this revelation.

A slight flush colored Armstrong's weathered cheeks. "I've been a mystery reader since childhood. Isabel Greene's methodical approach

and attention to detail always struck me as more realistic than most fictional detectives."

"Mari says the same thing," Ellie noted with a subtle smile that Mari chose to ignore.

"Well, her detection methods are worth emulating," Armstrong continued, clearly trying to maintain professional focus. "Particularly in *The Stilton Stalker*, where she uses her anxiety-enhanced observation skills to notice details others miss."

"Mari's 'prose-ac vision,'" Liv commented, earning her a warning glance from Mari.

"An apt description," Armstrong acknowledged, his gaze returning to Mari with unexpected warmth. "That heightened awareness has proven invaluable to our investigation multiple times now."

The conversation shifted back to immediate concerns—how to safely transport the evidence they'd gathered, when to expect lab results, which device to leave "undiscovered" for misinformation purposes. But Mari found herself occasionally distracted by this new dimension of Detective Armstrong. Not just a dedicated law enforcement officer, but a fellow mystery enthusiast who understood the value of Isabel Greene's—and by extension, Mari's—anxiety-driven detection style.

As the meeting concluded and the others prepared to leave, Armstrong lingered, examining the case board they'd created on Mari's office wall.

"Your organization is impressive," he commented as Mari collected empty coffee cups. "Very similar to how we structure investigations in Homicide."

"Denise's influence," Mari explained. "She insisted on proper evidence tracking from the beginning."

"Smart. Admissible evidence requires clear documentation." Armstrong stepped closer to the section detailing Reed's background. "I've been meaning to ask—how did you first connect Reed to the Blackwood family? That relationship wasn't in any public records I could access."

"Trish's librarian superpowers," Mari smiled. "She cross-referenced town records with business filings and found Reed's mother's maiden name buried in a property transfer from the 1970s."

"Impressive," Armstrong murmured, studying the connection chart. After a moment, he asked, "Have you eaten?"

The question was so unexpected that Mari momentarily fumbled the cup she was holding. "I—what?"

Armstrong looked slightly embarrassed but pressed on. "It's nearly nine, and I noticed you've been here since opening. I thought perhaps we could continue discussing the case over dinner. There's a diner around the corner that stays open late."

"Oh," Mari said, processing this unexpected development. "Yes, I suppose I am hungry. Dinner would be... fine."

"Good," Armstrong nodded, his professional demeanor firmly back in place. "Purely case-related, of course. I have some theories about the enzyme connection I'd like to discuss."

"Of course," Mari agreed, ignoring the knowing look Ellie shot her as the psychiatrist gathered her belongings. "Let me just lock up."

Twenty minutes later, they were settled in a booth at Harbor Lights Diner, a local institution that served breakfast all day and catered to the fishing crews working irregular hours. The vinyl seats were worn but clean, the coffee strong, and the privacy adequate for discreet conversation.

"So," Mari said after they'd ordered, "theories about enzyme connections?"

Armstrong nodded, retrieving his notebook. "I've been researching artisanal cheese production processes. Certain enzymes used in traditional aging methods are remarkably similar to compounds that can react with SSRI medications like Lexapro."

"Making them more potent?" Mari guessed, thinking of Victoria's apparent overdose.

"Or altering their effects when combined with alcohol," Armstrong confirmed. "Creating symptoms that would appear consistent with an accidental interaction."

"That's... disturbingly specific knowledge," Mari observed. "How did you make that connection?"

Armstrong hesitated, closing his notebook. "My father was a cheesemaker," he said finally. "Small operation in Vermont. I grew up learning about cultures, enzymes, aging processes—knowledge I never expected to apply to detective work."

"What happened to the business?" Mari asked, sensing the story beneath his matter-of-fact tone.

"Couldn't compete with industrial production," Armstrong replied, a hint of old bitterness surfacing. "Corporate dairies undercut his prices, distributors demanded volume he couldn't provide, and eventually a health department citation—questionable in its findings—forced him to close."

"The Blackwoods?" Mari suggested gently.

Armstrong's expression confirmed her guess. "Their influence extended beyond Inkwell Cove, especially in the eighties and nineties."

Any artisanal producer who wouldn't participate in their counterfeit scheme became a target."

"Is that why you became a police officer?" Mari asked, recognizing the pattern of personal motivation driving professional choices.

"Partly," Armstrong acknowledged. "I wanted to understand how systems of power operated—and how to counteract them from within."

"But you stayed in Inkwell Cove," Mari noted. "Where the Blackwoods hold the most influence."

"Keep your friends close, your enemies closer," Armstrong quoted with a wry smile. "Besides, someone needed to watch them. After the Walsh case, I knew they weren't above eliminating threats."

Their conversation paused as the server delivered their food—breakfast for dinner, a comfort food tradition Mari had appreciated since childhood.

"May I ask you something personal?" Armstrong said after they'd begun eating.

Mari nodded, curious about what the usually reserved detective might consider personal.

"Your 'prose-ac vision'—the anxiety-enhanced observation you've mentioned. Is that something you've always experienced, or did it develop with time?"

The question was unexpected but posed with genuine interest rather than clinical detachment. Mari considered how to respond.

"Both, I suppose," she said finally. "I've always noticed details others miss—patterns, inconsistencies, things out of place. But it became

more pronounced after my divorce, when anxiety transformed from an occasional visitor to a constant companion."

"And the Lexapro helps manage it?" Armstrong asked.

"It creates space between the observation and the panic," Mari explained, finding it surprisingly comfortable to discuss this with him. "Before, noticing a detail might spiral immediately into catastrophic thinking. Now, I can notice without being overwhelmed by what I've noticed. It allows me to use the heightened awareness productively."

Armstrong nodded thoughtfully. "Like Isabel Greene in Victoria's books. She often says her anxiety gives her an edge in investigations precisely because she's always scanning for threats."

"Art imitating life," Mari smiled. "Victoria told me she based Isabel's anxiety on her own experiences. That connection was what made her detective feel so authentic to me."

"To me as well," Armstrong admitted. "Most fictional detectives rely on remarkable genius or superhuman perception. Isabel's methods feel... achievable. Noticing what others overlook because she's paying attention in a different way."

"Exactly," Mari agreed, warming to the subject. "And she's not diminished by taking medication. It's just another tool in her detective kit, like her notebook or magnifying glass."

"A refreshing perspective in detective fiction," Armstrong said, and Mari was struck by the genuine appreciation in his voice.

They continued discussing Isabel Greene's methods throughout dinner, their professional collaboration temporarily giving way to shared enthusiasm for Victoria's creation. Mari found herself enjoying Armstrong's insights—he had clearly read the series closely, noticing nuances in Isabel's approach that many casual readers missed.

It was only when the server brought their check that Mari realized two hours had passed in conversation that had drifted far beyond case-related theories.

"I should get home," she said, reluctantly returning to the present circumstances. "Ellie's expecting me—buddy system and all."

"Of course," Armstrong nodded, immediately back to professional mode. "I'll drive you to Dr. Chen's apartment. Safety protocols remain essential, especially now that we know they've been monitoring Bound Together."

In his unmarked police vehicle, they traveled the short distance to Ellie's building in comfortable silence. When they arrived, Armstrong insisted on walking her to the entrance—standard protection procedure, he explained, though Mari suspected Armstrong would have done the same regardless of circumstances.

"Thank you for dinner," Mari said as they reached the lobby door. "And for sharing your father's story. It helps understand your commitment to this case."

"The Blackwoods have been destroying lives and livelihoods for decades," Armstrong replied, his expression somber in the building's security lighting. "Your friend Marcel, my father, Michael Landry, Caroline Walsh, Victoria Sterling—all victims of their determination to protect their empire. It's time someone stopped them."

"We will," Mari said with quiet certainty. "The Novel Sippers and Detective Armstrong—partners in justice."

A ghost of a smile softened Armstrong's weathered features. "A collaboration Isabel Greene would approve of, I think."

"Definitely," Mari agreed. "Though she'd probably make a terrible cheese pun about it."



"Something about aging relationships developing complex flavors over time?" Armstrong suggested, surprising Mari with this attempt at the Novel Sippers' trademark wordplay.

"Detective Armstrong," she laughed, "there may be hope for you yet."

An unexpected moment of connection stretched between them—no longer merely bookstore owner and detective, but two people united by shared purpose, mutual respect, and perhaps something more that neither was quite ready to acknowledge.

The moment was broken by Mari's phone chiming with a text from Ellie: *Where are you? Buddy system check-in overdue.*

"I should go," Mari said, holding up her phone. "Apparently I'm violating buddy system protocols."

Armstrong nodded, stepping back to a professionally appropriate distance. "Of course. I'll be in touch tomorrow about the surveillance strategy. And Ms. Paige—"

"Mari," she corrected gently. "After cheese metaphors and Isabel Greene discussions, I think first names are permitted."

"Mari," he amended, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly. "Thank you for trusting me with your investigation. The Novel Sippers could have kept your findings private, especially given the department's history with the Blackwoods. Your willingness to collaborate has made this case possible."

"Likewise, Ryan," she replied, testing his first name and finding it suited him. "Not every detective would take a book club seriously, even one with a former homicide detective among its members."

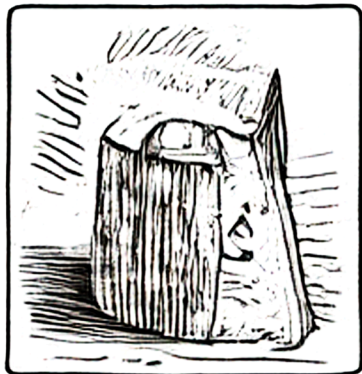
"Not every book club would uncover a four-decade criminal enterprise that seasoned investigators missed," he countered. "You've earned my respect—all of you."

With that, he nodded a professional goodnight and returned to his vehicle, waiting until Mari was safely inside the building before driving away. She watched his taillights disappear around the corner, reflecting on the unexpected dimensions of Detective Ryan Armstrong that had emerged over dinner.

Not just a dedicated officer with a personal vendetta against the Blackwoods, but a fellow mystery enthusiast who appreciated Isabel Greene's anxiety-enhanced detection methods. A man whose childhood among cheese cultures had given him the specialized knowledge needed to understand Victoria's murder method. A surprising ally whose weathered exterior concealed depths the Novel Sippers were only beginning to explore.

Like the aged cheeses they so often discussed, some relationships developed complex flavors only with time and proper conditions. This one, Mari suspected as she headed up to Ellie's apartment, might prove particularly worth aging.

# Chapter 18: Culture Shock



The Novel Sippers gathered in Mari's back office at Bound Together, the space now thoroughly swept for surveillance devices following their discovery the previous day. Outside, twilight was settling over Inkwell Cove, streetlights flickering to life along the harbor. Inside, tension hummed beneath their usual camaraderie as they processed recent developments.

"To recap," Denise said, standing beside the investigation board with professional authority, "we've confirmed the Blackwoods are continuing their counterfeit operation through local producers like Hillside Creamery. We have evidence connecting Marcus Reed to both the Blackwood family and suspicious import businesses. Armstrong's lab is analyzing Victoria's medication for enzyme markers that would prove tampering."

"And we know they've been monitoring us," Mari added, glancing toward the one surveillance device they'd deliberately left in place—now disconnected from its battery and serving only as a decoy. "Which means they consider us a serious threat."

"As they should," Liv remarked, arranging cheese and crackers on a plate—comfort food for what promised to be a difficult strategy session. "We're closer to exposing them than anyone has gotten in four decades."

Trish had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meeting, her usual librarian's enthusiasm replaced by a pensive expression. As the others discussed next steps for securing their evidence against the

Blackwoods, she fidgeted with the corner of a folder she'd brought, her discomfort increasingly apparent.

"Trish?" Ellie prompted gently, her therapist's instincts detecting the unspoken distress. "You've been quiet tonight. Is everything all right?"

Trish looked up, her expression unusually somber. "There's something I need to tell you all," she said, her voice lacking its typical animation. "Something I should have mentioned earlier."

The others exchanged concerned glances as Trish opened the folder she'd been holding.

"I... knew Victoria Sterling before she came to Inkwell Cove," she admitted, not meeting their eyes. "At least, I tried to know her. Three years ago, I submitted a manuscript to her literary agent—to Reed. A cozy mystery featuring a cheese-themed detective series."

A moment of surprised silence followed this revelation.

"You never mentioned this," Liv said carefully, keeping accusation from her tone.

"Because it was humiliating," Trish replied, her cheeks flushing. "Reed rejected it personally with a note saying it was 'too cheesy, even for cozy mysteries.' I was devastated. When Victoria's Isabel Greene series became popular with its cheese-loving detective, I assumed it was just unfortunate timing."

Mari reached across the table to touch Trish's hand. "But now you're wondering if there's more to it than coincidence."

"Either Reed used elements of my concept," Trish nodded, "or he rejected mine because it was too similar to what Victoria was already developing. Either way, it creates a connection I didn't know existed."

"And potentially makes you look suspicious," Denise concluded, her detective's mind immediately assessing implications. "A rejected author with a similar concept who might harbor resentment toward Victoria."

"Exactly." Trish's voice trembled slightly. "What if the Blackwoods or Reed try to use this to discredit our investigation? Or worse, to frame me for Victoria's death?"

Mari squeezed her friend's hand. "That won't happen. We know you had nothing to do with Victoria's murder."

"Besides," Ellie added reassuringly, "the timing doesn't work. Your manuscript submission was three years ago, long before Victoria came to Inkwell Cove or showed interest in the Blackwood operation."

"But perception matters," Denise pointed out pragmatically. "If Reed wanted to create reasonable doubt about our investigation, he could suggest Trish had motive."

"Then we need to get ahead of it," Liv decided. "Trish, do you still have records of your submission? The rejection letter, correspondence with Reed?"

"Everything," Trish confirmed, her professional organizing skills evident even in personal disappointment. "I'm a librarian—we document obsessively. It's all in my home files."

"Good," Denise nodded approvingly. "We'll inform Armstrong immediately. This doesn't change our investigation, but he should be prepared if Reed tries to use it against us."

"I'm so sorry I didn't mention it sooner," Trish said, visible relief in her expression as her friends accepted her revelation without judgment. "I was embarrassed, and then as we got deeper into the investigation, it felt increasingly awkward to bring up."

"We all have personal connections to this case that we're still discovering," Mari assured her. "That's what happens when you investigate in your own community."

As she spoke these words of comfort, Mari noticed Liv's expression change—a subtle tightening around her eyes that suggested Trish wasn't the only one harboring secrets. Before she could inquire, however, Armstrong arrived, knocking briefly before entering with his customary professional efficiency.

"Ladies," he greeted them, nodding to each Novel Sipper in turn, his gaze lingering momentarily on Mari. "I have updates on the pharmaceutical evidence."

"Progress?" Denise asked hopefully.

"Confirmation," Armstrong replied, producing a folder of lab reports. "The pills found in Victoria's room contain an enzyme marker consistent with traditional cheese cultures—specifically, a compound used in accelerating aging processes for certain Alpine varieties."

"Like those produced at the original Blackwood Dairy," Mari realized.

"Exactly," Armstrong nodded. "And subsequently in Reed's import business, according to FDA citations for 'irregular additives' in products they imported from European suppliers."

"So we can prove the pills were tampered with," Ellie concluded, "and establish a connection to both the historical dairy operation and Reed's subsequent businesses."

"It's compelling circumstantial evidence," Armstrong cautioned, "but not yet definitive proof of murder. We still need to establish who had access to Victoria's medication and opportunity to substitute the counterfeit pills."

"Reed was at the Harborview the night before she died," Trish reminded them. "He told the desk clerk he wouldn't be staying overnight, but the night manager saw him leaving after midnight."

"Speaking of Reed," Mari said, "Trish has just shared something important we should all be aware of."

As Trish explained her manuscript submission and rejection, Armstrong listened with focused attention, occasionally making notes. When she finished, his expression remained professionally neutral.

"Thank you for bringing this forward," he said. "While it doesn't impact our evidence against the Blackwoods or Reed, it does create a potential complication if the defense tries to suggest alternative motives or suspects."

"Could they really use it to implicate Trish?" Mari asked, concerned for her friend.

"It's thin," Armstrong admitted, "but defense attorneys have built cases on less. We'll document your manuscript submission and Reed's rejection properly, establishing the timeline that predates Victoria's arrival in Inkwell Cove. That should neutralize any attempt to use it against our investigation."

Trish's shoulders sagged with visible relief. "Thank you for taking it seriously. I was worried you might think I'd compromised the case."

"On the contrary," Armstrong replied. "This level of transparency strengthens our approach. We need to anticipate every possible counter-narrative the Blackwoods might employ."

As the discussion turned to securing Trish's documentation and updating their evidence timeline, Mari noticed Liv becoming increasingly withdrawn, swirling her wine glass absently while lost in

thought. When Armstrong stepped away to take a call, Mari moved to sit beside her friend.

"Everything all right?" she asked quietly. "You've been distant since Trish's revelation."

Liv met her gaze, indecision and distress evident in her expression. "I..." she began, then faltered. "It's complicated."

"More personal connections to the case?" Mari guessed.

Liv nodded almost imperceptibly. "I've been researching the Blackwood real estate portfolio as part of our investigation," she said, her voice lowered to ensure only Mari could hear. "Cross-referencing property acquisitions with investment records from local businesses."

"And you found something," Mari prompted when Liv paused.

"I found my husband," Liv whispered, pain evident in her voice.

"Thomas invested significantly in Elizabeth Blackwood's transition from dairy to real estate development. Multiple properties, all purchased during the crucial period after the dairy closed and Landry disappeared."

Mari absorbed this revelation with growing concern. Liv's husband had died three years earlier after a brief illness, leaving her the wine distribution business they'd built together and a substantial portfolio of investments. His death had devastated Liv, transforming her from social butterfly to reserved widow almost overnight.

"That doesn't mean he knew about the criminal aspects," Mari suggested gently.

"Doesn't it?" Liv's grip tightened on her wine glass. "The timing is too perfect, Mari. The investments began immediately after Landry's disappearance and continued through the dairy's closure and



transition. Thomas was a meticulous businessman—he must have conducted due diligence on the Blackwoods before investing so heavily."

The implication hung unspoken between them—that Liv's beloved husband might have knowingly participated in laundering money through Blackwood Development's fraudulent real estate operations.

"Have you found any direct evidence of his knowledge?" Mari asked carefully.

Liv shook her head. "Nothing explicit. Just investment patterns that align perfectly with what we now know were key transition points in the Blackwood operation." She took a sip of wine before adding, "I've been aging this secret like fine Gouda, Mari. Afraid to examine it too closely, afraid of what might be revealed with time."

The cheese metaphor, normally a source of light-hearted humor among the Novel Sippers, carried poignant weight in this context. Mari reached for her friend's hand, providing silent support as Liv struggled with this potential reframing of her husband's legacy.

"You need to tell the others," Mari said finally. "Just as Trish did. We can't afford surprises at this stage of the investigation."

"I know," Liv agreed, her expression resolute despite her evident distress. "I've just been... processing."

When Armstrong returned and the group refocused on their strategy session, Liv cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention.

"In the spirit of full disclosure that Trish has modeled," she began, setting down her wine glass with deliberate care, "I've discovered a personal connection to the Blackwood case that you all should be aware of."

The Novel Sippers listened with varying expressions of surprise and concern as Liv detailed her discovery about her late husband's investments. When she finished, the office fell silent, each woman processing the implications.

"I understand if this complicates your trust in me," Liv concluded, her composure remarkable despite the emotion evident in her voice. "I wanted to be transparent before proceeding further."

"Liv," Ellie said gently, "this doesn't change who you are or your commitment to finding justice for Victoria."

"If anything," Denise added pragmatically, "it gives you additional motivation. If your husband was unwittingly involved in their operation, exposing the truth honors his memory by revealing how the Blackwoods manipulated legitimate investors."

"And if he wasn't unwitting?" Liv asked, voicing the fear she'd been harboring.

"Then you still deserve to know the truth," Armstrong said, his tone professional but kind. "Whatever that truth may be."

Mari watched as Liv visibly gathered herself, the wine expert's customary poise reasserting itself. "Thank you," she said simply. "For understanding that this changes nothing about my commitment to our investigation."

"Both your revelations actually strengthen our position," Armstrong observed, looking between Trish and Liv. "They demonstrate that this investigation continues despite personal stakes and potential conflicts—that truth matters more than protecting comfortable narratives."

"The Novel Sippers in a nutshell," Mari smiled, feeling a surge of pride in her friends. "Five middle-aged women too stubborn to let uncomfortable truths remain buried."

"Speaking of uncomfortable truths," Armstrong continued, returning to his professional demeanor, "we need to accelerate our timeline. My department has received inquiries from Blackwood Development's attorneys regarding our 'harassment' of their client. It appears Elizabeth is attempting to leverage official channels to shut down our investigation."

"Can she do that?" Ellie asked with concern.

"Not easily, with the evidence we've accumulated," Armstrong assured them. "But it does suggest she's feeling cornered, which makes her more dangerous."

"The Cheese & Wine Festival is three days away," Mari noted, glancing at the calendar on her office wall. "All suspects will be present, with public witnesses and media coverage."

"The perfect venue for a confrontation," Denise agreed, her detective's mind clearly strategizing. "But we need to be fully prepared—all evidence secured, all personal connections documented, all contingencies planned for."

As they refined their approach for the festival, integrating both Trish and Liv's revelations into their evidence timeline, Mari found herself reflecting on the complex web of connections that their investigation had uncovered. What had begun as a simple quest for justice for Victoria Sterling had revealed layers of history, secrecy, and personal involvement that none of them had anticipated.

Like the cultures used in cheese production, these revelations had transformed their investigation—introducing new elements that altered its development in unexpected ways. Some might have seen these

personal connections as contaminants, compromising the purity of their pursuit. But Mari recognized them as essential to the unique character of their work—creating depth and complexity that made their investigation distinctly their own.

By the time they concluded their strategy session, the Novel Sippers had integrated these new elements into a strengthened approach. Trish's manuscript rejection would be documented as predating Victoria's arrival, neutralizing any attempt to suggest personal motive. Liv's discovery about her husband's investments would be framed as further evidence of the Blackwoods' widespread influence in local business development.

"We meet again tomorrow at The Wine Plot to finalize festival plans," Denise confirmed as they gathered their materials. "Armstrong will coordinate with plainclothes officers who'll be positioned throughout the event."

"And we maintain buddy system protocols until then," Ellie added. "No one investigates alone, especially with the surveillance revelation."

As the others departed, Mari and Armstrong remained behind to secure the evidence in the office safe. A comfortable silence settled between them as they worked, the rapport established during their dinner conversation evident in their efficient coordination.

"Your friends handled their revelations remarkably well," Armstrong observed as he arranged documents in a sealed evidence envelope. "Many investigation teams would fracture under such personal complications."

"The Novel Sippers aren't a typical investigation team," Mari replied with a small smile. "We were friends first, detectives second. That foundation matters when things get complicated."

Armstrong nodded thoughtfully. "In my years on the force, I've seen partnerships dissolve over far less. The ability to acknowledge personal stakes while maintaining professional focus is rare."

"Perhaps because we're not trying to be professional," Mari suggested. "We're just five women who care about truth and justice, with no careers or reputations at stake."

"Except yours," Armstrong countered, meeting her gaze directly. "You've put your business, your home, and your personal safety on the line for this investigation. That's a significant commitment for someone with 'no stakes.'"

The observation was perceptive and delivered with unexpected warmth. Mari found herself momentarily at a loss for words, unused to having her courage acknowledged so directly.

"Victoria deserves justice," she said finally. "And Isabel Greene would never back down from a case just because it became personally difficult."

A ghost of a smile touched Armstrong's weathered features. "Using a fictional detective as your ethical compass. I find that remarkably refreshing."

"Says the detective who quotes Isabel Greene's methods," Mari teased gently.

"Touché," Armstrong acknowledged, closing the safe with a decisive click. "Perhaps we're more alike than professional boundaries would typically allow."

The statement hung in the air between them, layered with implications neither seemed ready to fully explore. After a moment, Armstrong cleared his throat and returned to safer, professional territory.

"I'll coordinate with forensics about analyzing Trish's manuscript rejection documentation," he said. "And we should investigate the specific properties your friend's husband invested in—they may correspond to key transition points in the Blackwood operation."

"Liv can provide those records," Mari nodded, accepting the conversational retreat. "She's been remarkably thorough despite her personal distress."

"A testament to her character," Armstrong observed. "And to the strength of your group. The Novel Sippers continue to impress me with their resilience."

As they finished securing the evidence and prepared to leave—Mari to Ellie's apartment where she was still staying for safety, Armstrong to continue his investigation at the station—Mari reflected on how their partnership had evolved. From skeptical law enforcement officer tolerating amateur detectives to genuine collaborator who respected their insights, Armstrong had become an integral part of their investigation team.

And perhaps, Mari acknowledged as she watched him check the street before escorting her to her car, something more personal was developing alongside their professional alliance. Like the complex cultures cultivated in artisanal cheese production, their relationship was transforming through the careful introduction of new elements—mutual respect, shared purpose, and increasingly, a genuine personal connection.

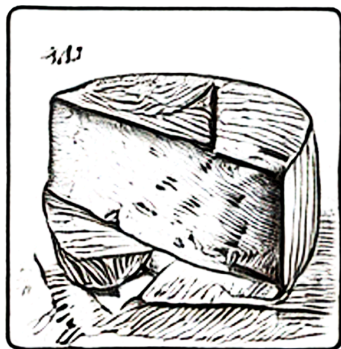
Whether that culture would develop into something lasting remained to be seen. For now, the investigation demanded their full attention. With the Cheese & Wine Festival approaching and the Blackwoods feeling cornered, the Novel Sippers needed every advantage they could muster—including the clarity and focus that came from acknowledging uncomfortable truths.

Culture shock, Mari reflected as she drove toward Ellie's apartment, could be devastating or transformative. The revelations about Trish's manuscript and Liv's husband had initially threatened to destabilize their investigation. Instead, through honest disclosure and mutual support, they had strengthened the Novel Sippers' commitment to finding justice for Victoria Sterling.

Whatever culture emerged from this investigation, Mari was certain of one thing—it would be uniquely their own, complex and nuanced like the best artisanal cheeses, and impossible to replicate through industrial methods. The Blackwoods might have wealth, power, and decades of successful operation on their side, but the Novel Sippers had something equally powerful—authentic connection forged through shared purpose and absolute honesty.

Against that culture of truth, even the most carefully aged conspiracy would eventually crumble.

# Chapter 19: The Perfect Blend



Elizabeth Blackwood's invitation to a private tour of her estate's wine cellar lay on the table in Mari's office, the heavy cream cardstock embossed with the Blackwood family crest gleaming under the bookstore's soft lighting. The Novel Sippers gathered around it like investigators examining a suspicious package—which, in many ways, it was.

"It's clearly a trap," Denise stated, arms crossed over her chest. "She knows we're onto her, and she wants to isolate Mari."

"Obviously," Liv agreed, examining the elegant penmanship with professional interest. "But it's also an unprecedented opportunity to gather evidence directly from the heart of the Blackwood operation."

Armstrong stood slightly apart from the group, his weathered face unreadable as he considered the invitation. "This wine cellar—it's connected to the cave system you explored previously?"

"According to Elizabeth, yes," Mari confirmed. "She mentioned the 'old tunnel entrance' that supposedly connected to the original dairy property. The same tunnels that lead to Marcel's shop."

"Where evidence of both the counterfeit operation and possibly Michael Landry's murder are hidden," Trish added, her librarian's precision filling in the critical connection.

Ellie, who had been observing the group's reactions with her psychiatrist's careful attention, finally spoke. "The question isn't whether it's a trap—we know it is. The question is whether we can use Elizabeth's invitation to our advantage."



Armstrong nodded slowly, coming to a decision. "I think we can. But it would require careful preparation and significant risk." He turned to Mari, his gray eyes serious. "And it would place the greatest burden on you, Ms. Paige."

"Mari," she corrected automatically, meeting his gaze steadily despite the flutter of anxiety in her chest. "And I'm willing to take that risk. Elizabeth extended the invitation to me specifically—we can't pass up this opportunity."

"Not without proper precautions," Armstrong emphasized. From his jacket pocket, he produced a small object that looked like an elegant silver brooch in the shape of a book. "This is a concealed recording device from our undercover operations division. Audio and limited video capability, with encrypted transmission to a receiver we can monitor from a secure location nearby."

Mari took the brooch, turning it carefully in her palm. "Will Elizabeth's security detect it?"

"Not unless they're using professional-grade scanners, which is unlikely even for the Blackwoods," Armstrong assured her. "It's designed to evade standard detection methods."

"So I wear this, tour the estate, and try to get Elizabeth talking about her operation," Mari summarized, the simplicity of the plan belying its danger.

"While recording everything for evidence," Denise confirmed. "But you'll need more than just technology. You'll need psychological preparation for engaging with Elizabeth on her territory."

"Which is where we come in," Liv said with determined confidence. She reached into her tote bag and produced several wine reference books and tasting notes. "I'll coach you on wine terminology and cellar

appreciation. You need to be convincing as someone genuinely interested in her collection."

"And I'll help with self-defense techniques," Denise added. "Simple movements that can create space if the situation becomes physically threatening."

"I can prepare you for the anxiety responses you're likely to experience," Ellie offered. "Grounding techniques that work even when your medication is being challenged by extreme stress."

Trish completed the support circle. "And I've compiled a detailed history of the Blackwood estate and wine collection from public records. The more you know about what you're supposedly admiring, the more control you maintain in the conversation."

Mari looked around at her friends—these remarkable women who had transformed from casual book club members to her personal investigation team and support system. The weight of what they were planning settled on her shoulders, but instead of feeling crushed, she felt anchored by their collective strength.

"When did the Novel Sippers become so... formidable?" she wondered aloud, a small smile softening the tension in her face.

"About the time Victoria Sterling recognized our potential and trusted us with her research," Liv replied with a warm glance around the circle.

"Speaking of trust," Armstrong interjected, his professional focus returning, "we need to establish emergency protocols. If the situation becomes dangerous, we need a way to extract you immediately."

The next hour was spent finalizing details—code words that would signal distress, the positioning of Armstrong's team around the Blackwood property, routes of escape should the need arise. By the time they concluded their planning session, Mari felt simultaneously

reassured by their thoroughness and intimidated by the reality of what she had agreed to do.

As the others gathered their materials to leave, Armstrong held back, waiting until they were alone in Mari's office before speaking.

"Are you certain about this?" he asked, his professional detachment momentarily giving way to personal concern. "There's no shame in reconsidering. Elizabeth Blackwood has eliminated people who threatened her operation before."

Mari appreciated his directness. "I'm not certain at all," she admitted. "I'm terrified. But Victoria deserved better than dying for getting too close to the truth. And if I'm being honest, there's a part of me that's angry—angry that people like the Blackwoods believe they can intimidate and silence anyone who challenges them."

Armstrong nodded, understanding in his eyes. "That anger can be protective, as long as it doesn't cloud your judgment. Just remember, your primary objective is to gather evidence and return safely. No heroics, no confrontations unless absolutely necessary."

"Don't worry," Mari smiled weakly. "My anxiety ensures I'm always planning worst-case scenarios. Heroics aren't in my nature."

"I disagree," Armstrong said quietly. "What you and the Novel Sippers have done throughout this investigation demonstrates remarkable courage. Especially considering the personal stakes that have emerged."

The unexpected compliment warmed Mari despite her apprehension. "Thank you for saying that. And for taking us seriously from the beginning. Not many law enforcement officers would have."

"Most law enforcement officers hadn't been watching the Blackwoods for twenty years," Armstrong replied with a wry smile. "Or share an appreciation for Isabel Greene's investigative methods."

As they finished securing the evidence and prepared to leave, a comfortable silence fell between them—the kind that often developed between people who had faced danger together and emerged with deepened trust.

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The following evening found Mari in Ellie's apartment, surrounded by the Novel Sippers for final preparations before her meeting with Elizabeth. Liv circled Mari critically, adjusting the collar of the outfit they'd selected—professional enough to be appropriate for the occasion, with strategic pockets for emergency supplies and the recording device securely fastened as a decorative brooch.

"Remember," Liv instructed, handing Mari a glass of water that stood in for wine during their practice session, "when Elizabeth offers you something to drink, examine it before tasting. Comment on the color, hold it to the light, swirl it gently, and inhale before you sip."

"And keep the glass in your hand at all times," Denise added firmly. "Never set it down where it could be tampered with."

"If you feel anxiety building, use the 5-4-3-2-1 technique we practiced," Ellie reminded her. "Five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear—"

"Two you can smell, one you can taste," Mari finished. "I've got it."

"And if Elizabeth mentions the dairy operation or Victoria directly," Trish contributed, "steer the conversation toward her family's 'impressive transition' from agricultural production to real estate development. That

opens the door for her to either boast about legitimate business acumen or reveal something incriminating."

Mari nodded, mentally reviewing their instructions while trying to manage the tightness building in her chest. Despite her outward composure, her friends knew her well enough to recognize the signs of escalating anxiety.

"Deep breath," Ellie said gently. "You've taken your medication, you're well-prepared, and Armstrong's team will be monitoring everything. You're not doing this alone."

Mari followed Ellie's guidance, inhaling slowly and releasing the breath in a controlled exhale. The familiar ritual helped center her, though it couldn't completely eliminate the flutter of nerves.

"I keep thinking about when I first started Lexapro," she admitted. "After David left. How terrified I was that the medication would change me somehow—make me less observant, less myself. How all of you supported me through those first uncertain months."

"I remember bringing you emergency chocolate during those early adjustment weeks," Trish smiled, the memory momentarily lightening the tension.

"And I kept finding excuses to drop by the shop with 'surplus' food from my dinner parties," Liv added. "Making sure you were eating properly."

"While I researched every potential side effect so you'd know what to expect," Denise contributed, her investigative thoroughness evident even in friendship.

"And I provided professional insights while pretending it was just casual conversation," Ellie concluded with a wry smile. "We've always taken care of each other. That hasn't changed."

The reminder of their long friendship steadied Mari more effectively than any anxiety management technique. These women had been her anchors through divorce, depression, business struggles, and now a murder investigation. Whatever happened at the Blackwood estate, she wouldn't truly be alone.

A knock at the door announced Armstrong's arrival. He entered with professional efficiency, accompanied by a technician who immediately began checking the recording device's transmission quality.

"The perimeter team is in position," Armstrong reported. "We have officers stationed near all potential exit points from the estate, and a medical unit on standby two blocks away."

"That's... reassuring," Mari said, not entirely sure if it was.

The technician confirmed the recording equipment was functioning properly and departed, leaving Armstrong to deliver final instructions. He handed Mari a small earpiece, nearly invisible once properly placed.

"This will allow us to communicate if absolutely necessary," he explained. "We'll maintain radio silence unless there's critical information you need to know, so don't be concerned if you don't hear from us."

Mari nodded, the reality of the operation settling heavily on her shoulders.

"One more thing," Armstrong said, his professional demeanor softening slightly. "Marcus Reed appeared on the Today Show this morning, promoting what he called 'Victoria Sterling's final unpublished works.' He announced plans for a posthumous collection, with proceeds benefiting a literacy foundation Elizabeth Blackwood chairs."

"He's accelerating his plans to profit from her death," Liv observed with disgust.

"And creating positive publicity that makes any accusations against him or the Blackwoods seem vindictive," Denise added.

Mari absorbed this new information, feeling a renewed determination beneath her anxiety. "Then we need to accelerate our plans too. Victoria deserves better than having her legacy controlled by the people who killed her."

Armstrong checked his watch. "It's time. The car is waiting downstairs."

As the Novel Sippers gathered for a final moment together, Mari was struck by the transformation their book club had undergone. What had begun as a casual gathering to discuss mysteries over wine and cheese had evolved into something both more serious and more powerful—a team united by shared purpose and genuine affection.

"To Victoria," Liv said, raising an imaginary glass in their traditional toast.

"And to justice," Denise added.

"Served with the perfect cheese pairing," Trish couldn't resist adding, prompting smiles despite the tension.

"Be careful," Ellie said simply, giving Mari a quick hug.

As Mari prepared to leave, Armstrong held her back for a moment. "There's something else you should know," he said, his voice lowered so only she could hear. "This case... it's become personal for me in ways I didn't initially acknowledge."

Mari waited, recognizing the difficulty with which he shared personal information.

"My father wasn't just any artisanal cheesemaker," Armstrong continued. "He was a pioneer in reintroducing traditional Alpine techniques to Vermont production. The Blackwoods targeted his business specifically because he refused to compromise his standards or participate in their counterfeit operation."

"Like Marcel," Mari realized, connecting the parallels.

Armstrong nodded. "My father lost everything—his business, his reputation, eventually his health. Finding justice for Victoria has become my way of honoring what he stood for—integrity in craftsmanship, even when it comes at personal cost."

The revelation created another bond between them—a shared understanding of how personal motivation could fuel professional commitment without compromising it.

"Thank you for telling me," Mari said simply.

"I wanted you to know what's at stake," Armstrong replied. "Not just for the Novel Sippers or for Victoria's memory, but for everyone the Blackwoods have damaged over decades of unchecked corruption."

With this added perspective weighing on her mind, Mari joined Armstrong in the unmarked police vehicle that would take her to the periphery of the Blackwood estate. From there, she would proceed alone to the main entrance, maintaining the fiction that she had accepted Elizabeth's invitation out of wine appreciation rather than investigative purpose.

As they drove through the darkening streets of Inkwell Cove, Armstrong handed her a small object—a flash drive housed in a protective case.

"What's this?" Mari asked, turning it carefully in her hand.



"Insurance," Armstrong replied. "It contains copies of all the evidence we've gathered—Marcel's financial records, the pharmaceutical analysis, Jacob Harper's testimony about the pressure on his creamery, everything. I've placed additional copies with trusted colleagues outside Inkwell Cove."

The implication was clear—if anything happened to them or their investigation, the evidence would still find its way to appropriate authorities.

"Is that standard procedure?" Mari asked.

Armstrong's expression remained carefully neutral. "Let's just say I've learned from experience that when dealing with the Blackwoods, redundancy is essential."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, each absorbed in final mental preparations for the operation ahead. When they reached the drop-off point—a public overlook with views of the Blackwood estate through the trees—Armstrong stopped the car but left the engine running.

"Remember," he said as Mari prepared to exit, "your safety is the priority. If at any point you feel the situation becoming dangerous, use the code word, and we'll extract you immediately."

"Limburger," Mari nodded, their cheese-themed danger signal bringing a momentary smile despite the circumstances.

"And Mari," Armstrong added, using her first name with careful intent, "you've already shown more courage than most trained officers I've worked with. Whatever happens tonight, remember that."

The unexpected compliment steadied her as she stepped from the car and began the short walk to the Blackwood estate's imposing gates. Night had fully descended, the mansion's windows glowing with warm light that belied the coldness Mari knew waited within.

Her anxiety hummed beneath her skin, but alongside it ran something stronger—determination fueled by friendship, justice, and the memory of Victoria Sterling's final words to the Novel Sippers: "Trust your prose-ac vision. The truth is here, between the lines, where the curd was cut."

The truth was indeed there, hidden beneath layers of respectability and power, like a carefully crafted counterfeit waiting to be exposed by those who knew what authentic quality truly meant. Tonight, Mari and the Novel Sippers would begin the final stage of uncovering that truth, whatever personal risk it entailed.

As Mari approached the gates, she thought of Isabel Greene, the fictional detective who had first connected her to Victoria Sterling. What would Isabel do in this situation? The answer came immediately: she would transform her anxiety into heightened awareness, she would trust her training and her instincts, and she would remember that sometimes the most overlooked observers made the most effective detectives.

The gates opened automatically at her approach, security cameras tracking her movement up the curving driveway. Somewhere nearby, Armstrong and his team monitored her progress through the recording device. In different locations throughout Inkwell Cove, the Novel Sippers waited for updates, each ready to play her part should the situation change.

Mari was walking into danger alone, but she carried with her the perfect blend of support, preparation, and purpose—a combination as carefully calibrated as the finest wine pairing or the most exquisite cheese. Whatever Elizabeth Blackwood had planned for this evening, she had underestimated the strength of that blend.

Taking one final deep breath, Mari reached the massive front door and pressed the bell. The rich tones echoed within, announcing her arrival

at what felt like both a culmination and a beginning. The door swung open to reveal Elizabeth Blackwood herself, elegant in understated luxury, her silver bob gleaming in the entryway light.

"Ms. Paige," Elizabeth greeted her with practiced warmth that didn't reach her eyes. "How delightful that you could accept my invitation. I've been so looking forward to showing you my collection."

"The pleasure is mine," Mari replied with equal insincerity, stepping over the threshold into the Blackwood estate. "I've heard your wine cellar is quite remarkable."

"Oh, it is," Elizabeth assured her, closing the door with a decisive click that sounded unnervingly final. "I think you'll find it contains many... unexpected treasures."

As she followed Elizabeth deeper into the mansion, Mari felt the recording device pressed against her collar bone—a small, solid reminder of purpose and connection. In her ear, the comm unit remained silent, but its presence reassured her that she wasn't truly alone.

The game had begun. Now she needed to play it perfectly until the final move was revealed.

# Chapter 20: Cultured Perspective



The Blackwood estate sprawled before Mari in all its imposing grandeur, illuminated by strategic landscape lighting that highlighted its architectural features while casting dramatic shadows across the manicured grounds. Elizabeth led her through high-ceilinged hallways adorned with artwork that Mari suspected cost more

than her entire bookstore inventory, her practiced commentary on each piece thinly disguising what Mari recognized as a calculated intimidation tactic.

"This Wyeth has been in the family for generations," Elizabeth remarked, gesturing toward a moody landscape. "My grandfather acquired it directly from the artist. He had quite the eye for... investments that appreciate over time."

"A family tradition, it seems," Mari replied, the double meaning clear to both women though Elizabeth's polite smile never faltered.

The recording device nestled against Mari's collarbone felt suddenly heavy, a tangible reminder of the high-stakes game unfolding between them. In her ear, the comm unit remained silent—Armstrong and his team monitoring but not intervening as planned.

"Indeed," Elizabeth agreed smoothly. "The Blackwoods have always recognized value where others see merely... product." She paused before a massive oil painting depicting the original dairy operation,

circa 1920. "Like this piece. Most would see only a rustic agricultural scene, but I see the foundation of an empire."

Mari studied the painting, noting details with her "prose-ac vision"—the limestone cliffs behind the dairy buildings that must house the cave system, the workers posed stiffly in period clothing, the milk cans arranged with almost military precision.

"It's remarkable how your family transitioned from dairy production to real estate development," Mari observed, following their planned conversational strategy. "Such different industries."

Elizabeth's smile took on a satisfied edge. "Not as different as one might think. Both involve recognizing inherent value and maximizing it through proper... processing." She gestured toward a door at the end of the hallway. "Speaking of which, shall we proceed to the wine cellar? I believe that was the purpose of your visit."

As they descended a sweeping staircase, Mari maintained her calm exterior while mentally cataloging potential exits and reviewing Denise's self-defense instructions. The staircase opened into a temperature-controlled anteroom featuring a tasting table and display cases filled with wine accessories.

"We begin our tour here," Elizabeth explained, her tone shifting to one of practiced presentation. "This space acclimates guests before entering the cellar proper, where temperature and humidity are maintained at ideal conditions for aging."

"Similar to cheese aging, I imagine," Mari commented, deliberately introducing the topic that connected to Victoria's investigation.

"An apt comparison," Elizabeth acknowledged, opening a heavy wooden door that revealed the main cellar beyond. "Both require patience, precision, and an understanding of how time transforms raw materials into something... valuable."

The wine cellar itself was cavernous, with arched stone ceilings and row upon row of bottles nestled in custom racks. The lighting was subdued, creating an atmosphere both elegant and slightly ominous. Mari couldn't help but think of Victoria's description in *The Curdled Truth*—a setting designed to impress while concealing its true purpose.

"This section houses the Bordeaux collection," Elizabeth continued, leading Mari deeper into the cellar. "First-growth estates exclusively, with vintages dating back to the 1940s."

"Extraordinary," Mari murmured, genuinely impressed despite herself. "Your family has been collecting for generations, then?"

"The serious collection began with my father," Elizabeth replied. "After the dairy operation... evolved. He recognized that fine wine, like certain other commodities, increases in value predictably when properly documented and stored."

The emphasis on documentation and value felt deliberate—another of Elizabeth's verbal chess moves, placing pieces on the board without committing to a specific strategy.

As they moved through the cellar, Elizabeth offered Mari a glass of wine—a vintage Burgundy that Liv had specifically prepared her to recognize. Following her friend's coaching, Mari examined the color, swirled the glass, and inhaled before taking the smallest possible sip.

"Remarkable depth," she commented, using the terminology Liv had drilled into her. "The tertiary notes are just beginning to emerge."

Elizabeth's eyebrow raised slightly, perhaps reassessing Mari's knowledge level. "You have a surprisingly educated palate for a bookstore owner."

"Books and wine share many qualities," Mari replied. "Both improve with age when properly cared for, both require discernment to appreciate fully, and both can transport you to another time and place."

"How poetic," Elizabeth said, though her tone suggested she found it anything but. She led Mari toward the rear of the cellar, where the modern fixtures gradually gave way to rougher stone walls—clearly part of the original cave system. "This section predates the house itself. Formed naturally in the limestone that runs beneath much of Inkwell Cove."

Mari noted the transition carefully—they were approaching the area most likely to connect to the tunnel system Marcel had described. "Part of the same formation that made the area so suitable for dairy production, I imagine," she prompted.

"Indeed." Elizabeth stopped before what appeared to be a solid stone wall with a single wine rack positioned against it. "The same caves that once aged my grandfather's cheeses now age my wines. Adaptation is key to survival, wouldn't you agree?"

The question hung between them, laden with implication. Mari met Elizabeth's gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated despite the flutter of anxiety in her chest.

"I've always believed that authenticity is key to survival," she countered. "Pretending to be something you're not rarely ends well—in books or in life."

Elizabeth's smile tightened almost imperceptibly. "How interesting that you mention authenticity, Ms. Paige. I've been meaning to discuss that very topic with you." She set down her wine glass and pressed a section of the stone wall that appeared indistinguishable from the rest.

To Mari's astonishment, the wall slid sideways, revealing a rough-hewn tunnel beyond. "Few guests are privileged to see this portion of the

estate," Elizabeth continued. "The original tunnel entrance, dating from the dairy days. My grandfather had it constructed to connect the production facility with the aging caves."

"Convenient," Mari observed, her pulse quickening as she realized Elizabeth was voluntarily showing her exactly what they had hoped to discover.

"Efficiency was one of my grandfather's principles," Elizabeth agreed, picking up a lantern that stood ready beside the entrance. "He believed in direct routes between operations. Please, after you."

Every instinct warned against entering the dark tunnel with Elizabeth behind her, but Mari recognized that this opportunity might not come again. She activated the recording device with a subtle movement disguised as adjusting her collar, then stepped into the passage with manufactured confidence.

The temperature dropped noticeably as they moved deeper into the tunnel, the air taking on the distinctive mineral-rich humidity that Mari remembered from Marcel's aging cave. Elizabeth remained unsettlingly close behind her, the lantern casting distorted shadows on the rough stone walls.

"Victoria found this tunnel fascinating," Elizabeth remarked casually, the name dropping between them like a gauntlet. "During her research visit. She had such enthusiasm for local history."

There it was—the first direct confirmation that Victoria had explored these passages before her death. Mari's heart raced, but she kept her voice steady.

"Victoria Sterling visited your wine cellar? I wasn't aware you knew her well."



"Oh, we weren't close," Elizabeth demurred. "But she was quite... persistent in her research. Convinced there was a story here worth telling."

"And was there?" Mari asked, unable to resist the direct question.

Elizabeth's laugh echoed strangely in the confined space. "There are always stories, Ms. Paige. The question is which ones deserve to be told, and which are better left... aged in darkness."

The tunnel widened into a small chamber with several branches leading in different directions. Elizabeth directed the lantern toward one particular passage.

"This route once connected directly to what is now The Aged Page," she explained. "Marcel Fontaine's charming cheese shop. Such an... interesting coincidence that he chose that particular location for his business, wouldn't you say?"

"Perhaps he recognized its historical significance," Mari suggested, carefully maintaining the pretense that this was merely a cultural tour rather than a calculated confrontation.

"Perhaps." Elizabeth set the lantern on a stone ledge, its light creating dramatic shadows across her aristocratic features. "Or perhaps, like certain other individuals, he has an unhealthy interest in matters that don't concern him."

The subtle shift in tone made Mari acutely aware of their isolation. She glanced toward the tunnel entrance, now barely visible in the darkness behind them.

"You seem concerned, Ms. Paige," Elizabeth observed with unsettling precision. "Feeling anxious? I understand you share that particular quality with Victoria as well. The Lexapro, I mean."

The direct reference to her medication sent a chill through Mari that had nothing to do with the cave's temperature. She fought to maintain her composure, Ellie's grounding exercises coming automatically to her rescue.

"Five things you can see," she reminded herself silently. The lantern. The stone walls. Elizabeth's calculating expression. The tunnel entrance. The moisture glistening on the ceiling.

"I find it helps me focus," Mari replied evenly. "Much like Isabel Greene in Victoria's novels."

"Ah yes, the fictional detective with the anxiety disorder," Elizabeth nodded. "Art imitating life—or perhaps life imitating art. Victoria's lines became rather... blurred toward the end. Fiction and reality. Especially regarding her research into local business operations."

Mari recognized the deliberate escalation—Elizabeth abandoning pretense, moving directly into territorial marking. This was the moment to either retreat or advance, and Mari had not come this far to retreat.

"You mean her research into the Blackwood family's transition from counterfeit cheese production to real estate fraud," she said directly, abandoning the careful conversational dance they'd been maintaining.

Elizabeth's expression registered genuine surprise, quickly masked by practiced control. "My, my. The book club has been busy." She reclaimed the lantern, casting Mari's face in stark light. "And here I thought you were simply another middle-aged woman with too much time and too little significance, playing detective to enliven your mundane existence."

"That's the advantage of being underestimated," Mari replied, standing her ground despite the insulting dismissal. "People reveal things they otherwise might keep hidden."

"Indeed they do." Elizabeth's smile turned cold. "Like your little investigation group. The Novel Sippers, is it? Such a charming name for women meddling in matters they don't understand."

"We understand plenty," Mari countered. "Marcel's financial records documenting the transition from dairy fraud to real estate laundering. Victoria's manuscript connecting Reed to your operation. The pharmaceutical evidence confirming how she was murdered."

Each piece of evidence landed like a physical blow, Elizabeth's composure cracking further with each revelation. For a moment, Mari glimpsed the calculation behind her eyes—assessing, measuring, deciding.

"I see," Elizabeth said finally. "And you've come here tonight to... what? Confront me? Gather a confession for your amateur investigation?" She laughed, the sound echoing unnervingly in the stone chamber. "Oh, Ms. Paige. I had such hopes for a more... productive relationship."

"Productive?" Mari questioned, maintaining distance between them as Elizabeth began to move around the chamber with deliberate steps.

"Bound Together is a charming addition to our commercial district," Elizabeth explained, her tone shifting to something resembling a business proposal. "The kind of quaint, cultured establishment that enhances property values and community appeal. The Blackwood Foundation has been considering grants for local businesses with... compatible values."

Mari understood immediately—she was being offered a bribe. The realization was almost insulting in its predictability.

"Compatible values," she repeated. "Meaning businesses that don't ask uncomfortable questions about Blackwood operations."

"Meaning establishments that recognize the value of discretion and cooperation," Elizabeth corrected smoothly. "Your bookstore could thrive with proper support. Expanded premises, enhanced inventory, perhaps even that coffee bar addition you've been considering."

Mari blinked in surprise at this specific knowledge of her business plans—something she'd only discussed with her bank and the Novel Sippers.

"Yes, we've been monitoring your activities quite thoroughly," Elizabeth confirmed, reading her reaction. "Your charming book club has been remarkably industrious. It would be a shame if all that energy were directed toward... litigation rather than literature."

The threat beneath the offer was unmistakable. Mari thought of Armstrong and his team listening through the recording device, gathering evidence with each word Elizabeth spoke.

"I appreciate the offer," Mari said carefully, "but I think the Novel Sippers will stick with our current focus. Victoria Sterling deserves justice, not a cover-up funded by Blackwood grants."

Elizabeth's expression hardened, the socialite facade falling away completely. "Victoria Sterling was warned, just as you're being warned now. She chose to continue her misguided investigation despite ample opportunity to redirect her focus."

"And you had her killed," Mari stated flatly. "Using her own medication against her, just like she described in her manuscript."

"What a creative interpretation," Elizabeth remarked coldly. "Though I would remind you that speculation isn't evidence, and evidence has a curious way of disappearing in Inkwell Cove. Like Caroline Walsh's research twenty years ago. Like Michael Landry before that."

She moved toward a section of wall that appeared identical to the rest, pressing a concealed mechanism that caused a portion to swing inward, revealing another chamber beyond. "This particular section connected directly to the original ledger room beneath the dairy," she explained conversationally, as if they were still on a cultural tour. "Where my grandfather kept certain financial records separate from official inspection."

Mari approached cautiously, aware that Elizabeth was revealing precisely the evidence they had been seeking—but uncertain why.

The small chamber contained an antique desk and several filing cabinets, clearly preserved from the dairy operation days. The layer of dust suggested it hadn't been actively used in years, yet its existence confirmed Marcel's claims about the secret accounting operation.

"Victoria found this room during her... unauthorized exploration," Elizabeth continued, running a finger along the desk's edge. "She was quite excited about her discovery. Convinced it would provide the evidence she needed for her manuscript."

"*The Curdled Truth*," Mari said. "The novel Reed is now claiming was barely started."

"Marcus is handling Victoria's literary estate with appropriate discretion," Elizabeth nodded. "Ensuring her legacy focuses on her detective series rather than her... speculative final project."

"You mean ensuring that her murder investigation is buried along with her," Mari corrected, her anger momentarily overriding caution.

Elizabeth's expression turned dangerously still. "You seem quite invested in narratives about medication tampering, Ms. Paige. One might almost think you have personal concerns about your own prescription management."

The threat was unmistakable—a direct reference to using against Mari the same method that had killed Victoria. She felt a surge of anxiety but channeled it into heightened awareness rather than fear.

"Four things you can touch," she reminded herself silently. The recording device beneath her collar. The wall beside her. The strap of her bag. The smooth fabric of her jacket.

"My medication is quite secure," Mari replied steadily. "As is all the evidence the Novel Sippers have gathered. Multiple copies, multiple locations—the kind of redundancy that ensures the truth will emerge regardless of what happens to any individual investigator."

This was a calculated risk—revealing that they had safeguarded their evidence—but Mari judged it necessary to counter Elizabeth's escalating threats.

For a moment, the Blackwood matriarch seemed to reassess her approach, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studied Mari with new consideration.

"You know," Elizabeth said finally, "you remind me somewhat of Victoria. The same... misplaced confidence. The same inability to recognize when you're outmatched." She stepped closer, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "She had that same look in her eyes when she realized what was happening to her. That mixture of fear and determination. Quite poignant, really."

The confirmation of Victoria's murder, spoken so casually, sent a chill through Mari that momentarily froze her in place. On her hidden recording device, Elizabeth had just implicated herself directly.

"Three things you can hear," Mari continued her silent grounding exercise. The distant drip of water in the caves. Elizabeth's measured breathing. The faint hum of the ventilation system that must connect to the surface.

"I'm not Victoria," Mari said, finding her voice despite the tightness in her chest. "And the Novel Sippers aren't alone in our investigation."

"Ah yes, Detective Armstrong," Elizabeth nodded, surprising Mari with this knowledge. "Another individual with an unfortunate fixation on Blackwood family matters. His supervisor is quite concerned about the department resources being wasted on resolved cases."

The implication was clear—Elizabeth's influence extended into the police department, just as Armstrong had warned. But before Mari could respond, the comm unit in her ear crackled to life for the first time since she'd entered the estate.

"Mari, we have movement at the rear entrance," Armstrong's voice came through, pitched low and urgent. "Security detail converging on your position. Prepare for extraction."

Elizabeth must have noticed something in Mari's expression, because her own eyes narrowed with sudden suspicion. "You're wearing a wire," she realized, stepping back with newfound wariness. "How... amateur."

"Professional grade, actually," Mari corrected, abandoning pretense entirely. "Broadcasting to Detective Armstrong's team surrounding the estate."

Elizabeth's hand moved toward her jacket pocket, but Mari continued quickly: "Every word you've said about Victoria, about the ledger room, about the threat to my medication—all recorded as evidence. Multiple copies, as I mentioned."

For the first time, uncertainty flickered across Elizabeth's aristocratic features. "You're bluffing," she said, though without her previous confidence. "Armstrong doesn't have the authority for a sanctioned operation against me."

"Who said anything about sanctioned?" Mari countered. "Sometimes the most effective investigations happen off the books. Something you and your family have understood for decades."

The distant sound of movement from the tunnel entrance shifted both women's attention. Elizabeth's expression hardened into cold fury.

"Whatever you think you've accomplished tonight, Ms. Paige, I assure you it's inadequate," she said, reaching again for her pocket. "The Blackwoods have weathered greater threats than a bookstore owner and her amateur detective friends."

Before Mari could respond, Armstrong's voice came through her earpiece again: "Limburger, Mari. Extraction team moving in now. Exit through the main tunnel immediately."

The cheese-themed danger signal galvanized Mari into action. Without waiting to see what Elizabeth was reaching for, she turned and moved swiftly toward the main tunnel, calling "Limburger!" aloud to confirm she'd received the message.

Behind her, Elizabeth's voice called out with surprising volume: "Security, intruder in the west tunnel! Lock down exit points!"

Mari increased her pace, navigating the darkness with one hand trailing along the rough stone wall. The main chamber appeared ahead, now illuminated by multiple flashlight beams as figures converged from different tunnel entrances.

"Police! Hands up!" Armstrong's voice rang out, authoritative and unmistakable.

The scene dissolved into controlled chaos—officers securing the area, Elizabeth's security personnel caught off-guard by the coordinated police response, and Armstrong himself moving directly toward Mari with evident relief visible even in the disorienting flashlight beams.



"Are you all right?" he asked as he reached her, professional concern foremost in his expression.

"Fine," Mari assured him, though her racing heart suggested otherwise. "Did you get it? The recording?"

"Every word," Armstrong confirmed. "Including her direct reference to Victoria's murder and the threats against you. Combined with the physical evidence of the ledger room, it's more than enough for multiple warrants."

As officers escorted a furious Elizabeth Blackwood toward the exit, Mari caught sight of movement near one of the side tunnels—a flash of fabric disappearing into darkness. Before she could alert Armstrong, his radio crackled with an urgent report:

"Detective, we have a situation at the estate's southern perimeter. Marcus Reed attempting to flee in a vehicle. Pursuit in progress."

Armstrong's expression tightened. "Elizabeth must have alerted him when she realized you were recording. Standard co-conspirator contingency—one creates a distraction while the other escapes with evidence."

"The manuscript," Mari realized immediately. "Victoria's original pages documenting the Blackwood operation. Reed would have kept them as insurance."

"We'll get him," Armstrong assured her, already moving toward the exit. "My priority now is getting you safely out of here."

As they emerged from the tunnel into the wine cellar proper, Mari was startled to find Liv waiting with a police officer, her expression a mixture of relief and determination.

"Thank god," Liv breathed, embracing Mari quickly. "When we heard the extraction code, I insisted on coming with the team. The others are waiting at the perimeter."

"How did you—" Mari began, but Armstrong interrupted.

"We need to move," he said firmly. "Reed's security team may still be on the grounds, and we don't know how many are loyal to the Blackwoods rather than the estate itself."

They moved swiftly through the mansion, officers securing rooms ahead of them with professional efficiency. Outside, the night air felt shockingly fresh after the mineral dampness of the tunnels. Mari gulped it gratefully, her anxiety receding as they approached the safety of the police perimeter.

Denise, Trish, and Ellie waited beyond the estate gates, their faces lighting with relief as Mari appeared. The reunion was brief but emotional—five middle-aged women who had ventured far beyond book discussions into genuine danger, emerging successful but shaken.

"Did you get what we needed?" Denise asked, her former detective's focus immediately on operational outcomes.

"More than we hoped," Mari confirmed. "Direct confirmation of Victoria's murder, the ledger room exactly where Marcel described it, and explicit threats against me—all recorded."

"Plus physical evidence of the tunnel system connecting to The Aged Page," Armstrong added. "Which confirms Marcel's account of the original counterfeit operation."

"What about Reed?" Trish asked. "Did they catch him?"

Armstrong checked his radio, listening to an update before responding. "They've established roadblocks on all exits from Inkwell Cove. He won't get far."

As the adrenaline of the confrontation began to ebb, Mari felt the familiar post-anxiety exhaustion settling into her limbs. Ellie noticed immediately, her therapist's insight unfailing even in crisis.

"Let's get you somewhere safe," she said, guiding Mari toward a waiting police vehicle. "You've done more than enough for one night."

"The Novel Sippers safe house?" Mari attempted a smile, though it felt shaky even to her.

"My apartment has been secured and swept," Ellie confirmed. "Armstrong had officers check it thoroughly before the operation began."

As they prepared to leave the scene, Armstrong approached Mari one final time, his professional demeanor momentarily giving way to something more personal.

"What you did tonight," he said quietly, "was extraordinarily brave. And effective. Victoria would be proud of how you used your 'prose-ac vision' to maintain control despite Elizabeth's attempts at intimidation."

"I had help," Mari reminded him, glancing toward her friends. "The perfect blend of support, preparation, and purpose."

Armstrong nodded, understanding the reference to their team's combined strengths. "We'll debrief fully tomorrow, but for now, rest. You've earned it."

As the Novel Sippers departed in their police escort, Mari looked back at the Blackwood estate—its elegant façade now disrupted by law

enforcement activity, its secrets partially exposed after decades of carefully maintained obscurity.

From her cultured perspective as both bookstore owner and amateur detective, Mari recognized the satisfying narrative structure of the evening's events. The confrontation in the cave, the revelation of evidence, the villain's partial confession, the dramatic escape—it had all the elements of the cozy mysteries they so often discussed over wine and cheese.

Yet the reality had been far more terrifying—and far more rewarding—than any fictional account. The Novel Sippers had ventured beyond the safety of literary analysis into genuine danger, and emerged with exactly what they had sought: justice for Victoria Sterling and the beginning of accountability for the Blackwoods.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges—securing Reed's capture, formalizing their evidence for prosecution, countering the inevitable legal and public relations offensive the Blackwoods would mount. But tonight, surrounded by the friends who had become her investigation team, Mari allowed herself to simply appreciate their collective achievement.

Like the finest aged cheese, their amateur detection skills had developed complexity and character that no one—least of all Elizabeth Blackwood—had anticipated. The Novel Sippers had been underestimated for the last time.

# Epilogue: Aged to Perfection



Six months after Elizabeth Blackwood's arrest shook Inkwell Cove to its foundations, Bound Together hummed with the familiar energy of a Novel Sippers meeting. Mari surveyed the scene with quiet satisfaction—wine glasses glinting in the evening light, an elaborate cheese board arranged at the center of their circle, and most importantly, her four friends engaged in animated debate about the latest

mystery novel they'd selected.

"The protagonist completely missed the significance of the empty vase," Trish insisted, tapping her annotated copy for emphasis. "It was clearly established in chapter three that the victim always kept fresh flowers there. The absence was a clue, not a random detail!"

"Classic red herring," Denise countered, reaching for a piece of aged Gouda. "The author deliberately drew attention to it precisely because it meant nothing. Classic misdirection."

"I have to side with Trish on this one," Ellie offered, her therapist's eye for detail ever-present. "The emotional significance of the empty vase reflected the victim's state of mind before the murder—she'd stopped caring about the small beauties in life because she knew she was in danger."

Liv topped off their glasses with a Barolo she'd been saving for a special occasion. "Either way, the prose was overwrought. Three paragraphs about an empty vase is excessive regardless of its evidentiary value."

Mari smiled as the familiar rhythm of their literary analysis unfolded. After everything they'd experienced—danger, revelation, and justice—there was something profoundly comforting about returning to the simple pleasure of dissecting fictional crimes instead of solving real ones.

The bell above the shop door chimed, announcing a late arrival. Detective Ryan Armstrong—or just Ryan, as they'd all come to call him—stepped inside, a bottle of wine in one hand and a small package in the other.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, hanging his coat on the rack with the ease of someone who'd become a regular visitor. "The sentencing hearing ran long."

The Novel Sippers paused their debate, attention shifting to the news they'd been anxiously awaiting.

"And?" Mari prompted, trying to keep her voice casual despite the flutter in her chest that had nothing to do with anxiety and everything to do with the man standing before them.

Ryan's weathered face broke into a rare, genuine smile. "Fifteen years for Elizabeth. Ten for Reed. The judge cited the 'calculated and prolonged nature of their criminal enterprise' and gave particular weight to the evidence connecting them to Victoria Sterling's murder."

A collective exhale of relief passed through the group, followed by the clinking of glasses in an impromptu toast.

"To justice," Denise said, raising her wine.

"To Victoria," Liv added.

"To the Novel Sippers," Trish chimed in. "Inkwell Cove's premier amateur detective agency."

"That's not officially on our business cards yet," Ellie laughed, though her expression was warm with pride.

"Maybe it should be," Ryan suggested, setting down his offerings and accepting the glass Mari handed him. "You've had three requests for consultation this month alone."

It was true. In the aftermath of the Blackwood case, the Novel Sippers had achieved a certain local celebrity. What had begun as a casual book club had evolved into something none of them had anticipated—a team with a reputation for solving the kinds of mysteries that eluded traditional investigation.

"Speaking of our detective business," Mari said, gesturing toward a framed document that now held pride of place behind the register. "Our official license arrived yesterday. Denise is officially our supervising investigator of record."

"Never thought I'd come out of retirement," Denise admitted with a rueful smile. "But I have to admit, working with you four is considerably more interesting than my garden club."

"The Novel Sippers Detective Agency," Ryan read from the license. "Specializing in literary analysis and real-world applications thereof."

"Almost as good as 'The Cheese Stands Alone Investigations,'" Trish quipped, referencing one of the many terrible pun names they'd considered during the licensing process.

"Or 'Prose and Cons,'" Liv added with a groan.

"I still maintain that 'Binding Evidence' had a nice double meaning for a bookstore-based agency," Ellie insisted.

Mari laughed, the sound easy and relaxed in a way that still occasionally surprised her. The anxiety that had once been her

constant companion hadn't disappeared—she still took her Lexapro faithfully each morning—but it had found a productive channel, transformed from liability into asset through what Victoria Sterling had so accurately termed "prose-ac vision."

"Oh! That reminds me," Trish exclaimed, pulling a glossy hardcover from her librarian's tote. "Look what arrived at the library today—advanced reader copies of Victoria's final work."

She placed the book reverently on the table. The cover featured a stylized image of a cheese wheel with a knife embedded in it, set against a backdrop of limestone caves. The title shone in embossed silver lettering: *The Curdled Truth: An Isabel Greene Mystery*.

"They really published it," Liv marveled, touching the cover gently. "After everything Reed did to suppress it."

"The new literary executor insisted," Ryan explained. "Once Reed's involvement was exposed, Victoria's family took control of her estate. Apparently, she'd left very specific instructions about this manuscript in the event of her death."

Mari opened the book to the dedication page and read aloud: "*For the Novel Sippers of Inkwell Cove, who understand that sometimes the most overlooked observers make the most effective detectives. May your wine be complex, your cheese perfectly aged, and your friendship as rewarding as both.*"

A moment of silence fell over the group as the weight of Victoria's posthumous acknowledgment settled around them.

"She knew," Ellie said softly. "Even before she died, she believed we would finish what she started."

"And we did," Denise affirmed, her usual pragmatism softened by emotion.



"With some help," Mari added, her gaze finding Ryan's across the table. The connection between them had deepened over the months since Elizabeth's arrest, evolving from professional respect into something more personal. Neither was rushing the process, both understanding that some relationships, like fine cheese, benefited from careful aging.

"Which reminds me," Ryan said, pushing the package he'd brought toward Mari. "This came from the evidence release today. I thought you should have it."

Mari unwrapped the package carefully, revealing a small, elegant cheese knife with an ornate handle inlaid with mother-of-pearl—the same one Marcel had used to extract the evidence from his competition entry during the Cheese & Wine Festival showdown.

"Marcel wanted you to have it," Ryan explained. "He said it represents 'cutting through deception to find the truth hidden beneath the surface.'"

"How is Marcel?" Trish asked. "I heard The Aged Page has been busier than ever since the case."

"Thriving," Ryan confirmed. "The publicity surrounding the Blackwood fraud ironically established him as the authority on authentic artisanal cheese in the region. He's expanded into the space next door."

"Sometimes justice comes with unexpected dividends," Liv observed, examining the cheese knife with appreciation. "Speaking of which, has anyone else noticed the changes around town since the Blackwood influence evaporated?"

They had all noticed. With Elizabeth in prison and Blackwood Development's assets frozen pending numerous investigations, Inkwell Cove was experiencing a renaissance of local business ownership. Properties that had been tightly controlled under inflated leases were now available at reasonable rates. Small entrepreneurs who had been

squeezed by Blackwood policies were expanding. Even the police department had undergone significant restructuring, with several officers taking early retirement when their connections to the Blackwoods came to light.

"Jacob from Hillside Creamery stopped by yesterday," Mari shared. "He's forming a cooperative with other local food producers to ensure fair distribution and authentic labeling. They're calling it the Sterling Standard, in Victoria's honor."

"A fitting tribute," Ryan nodded. "Though perhaps not as personal as your expansion plans."

Mari felt her cheeks warm slightly as the others turned curious expressions toward her. "I was going to surprise you all once the paperwork was finalized, but... I've purchased the space next door. Bound Together is expanding to include a proper wine and cheese section, with regular literary pairing events."

"Mari!" Trish exclaimed. "That's wonderful news!"

"The perfect evolution," Ellie agreed with a knowing smile.

"And long overdue," Liv added. "I've been saying for years that books and wine belong together officially, not just in our evening gatherings."

"The best part," Mari continued, encouraged by their enthusiasm, "is that we'll have a dedicated space for the agency. No more crowding into my office when cases come in."

"Cases," Denise repeated with a shake of her head. "Listen to us. A year ago we were just discussing fictional mysteries over wine and cheese. Now we're expanding a bookstore to accommodate our detective agency."

"Life imitating art," Ryan observed. "Or perhaps art predicting life, if Victoria's books are any indication."

As the evening progressed, their discussion flowed naturally between the novel they'd gathered to discuss, updates on the aftermath of the Blackwood case, and plans for the bookstore expansion. The boundaries between their book club activities and their investigative work had blurred, each informing and enriching the other just as their diverse personalities created a whole greater than its parts.

Near the end of the evening, Liv introduced what had become a regular feature of their meetings. "And now," she announced with theatrical flair, "it's time for our Mystery Cheese segment."

From her tote bag, she produced a carefully wrapped package and set it on a dedicated plate in the center of the table. "Tonight's selection is completely blind. No origin hints, no milk type clues. Pure deduction based on sensory evidence alone."

The Novel Sippers leaned forward with exaggerated seriousness as Liv unwrapped the mystery cheese—a pale, ash-coated pyramid with the distinctive truncated top of Valencay.

"Ooh, symbolism," Trish noted immediately. "The cheese Napoleon couldn't bear to look at because it reminded him of his Egyptian failures."

"The truth altered to protect powerful egos," Ellie added, appreciating the metaphor.

"Or perhaps," Denise suggested, examining the cheese with professional scrutiny, "a reminder that sometimes the most significant clues are found in what's been removed rather than what remains."

"It's also just a truly excellent cheese," Liv laughed, cutting small portions for each of them. "Not everything needs deep analysis."

"Heresy!" Trish gasped in mock outrage. "We're the Novel Sippers! Over-analysis is our brand."

As laughter filled the cozy bookstore space, Mari caught Ryan's eye across the table, a moment of quiet connection amid the friendly chaos. He raised his glass slightly in a private toast, and she returned the gesture, acknowledging what both of them knew—that some questions were best savored slowly, like a complex wine or a perfectly aged cheese.

Later, after the others had departed and she and Ryan were closing up the shop, Mari paused by the display of Victoria Sterling's novels, now prominently featuring the posthumously published *The Curdled Truth*.

"Do you ever wonder what Victoria would think of how everything turned out?" she asked, straightening a slightly misaligned hardcover with habitual care.

Ryan considered the question with his typical thoughtfulness. "I think she'd appreciate the narrative justice of it all. The overlooked middle-aged women solving the crime that ended her life. The arrogant power brokers brought down by their own underestimation of their opponents. The bookstore owner whose anxiety became her superpower."

"Very literary," Mari smiled. "Almost too perfect for real life."

"Sometimes reality delivers better endings than fiction," Ryan replied, helping her turn off the lights. "Though I suspect Victoria would have included more cheese puns in her version."

"The world is definitely poorer without her contributions to dairy wordplay," Mari agreed solemnly, then added with perfect timing: "It's a truly grating loss."

Ryan's groan was followed by reluctant laughter. "That was terrible."

"Terrible but necessary," Mari insisted as they stepped outside into the cool evening air. "Some traditions must be maintained, Detective."

"Speaking of traditions," Ryan said as he locked the door behind them, his tone shifting to something more serious. "I've been meaning to ask if you'd be interested in dinner this weekend. Not to discuss the case or the agency. Just... dinner."

The invitation hung between them, transforming the comfortable partnership they'd developed into something with new potential. Mari felt the familiar flutter in her chest—not anxiety this time, but anticipation.

"I'd like that," she said simply.

As they walked together toward their cars, Mari reflected on the journey that had brought her here—from anxious divorcée to bookstore owner to amateur detective to licensed investigator. None of it had been planned, yet each step had felt strangely inevitable in retrospect, like a perfectly crafted mystery plot where seemingly random elements eventually revealed their essential connections.

The Novel Sippers had evolved from a casual book club into something far more significant—a team of middle-aged women whose diverse strengths created a uniquely effective whole. Their friendship, like the finest wine and most complex cheese, had only improved with age—developing depth, character, and unexpected notes that emerged through proper cultivation.

And now, as Bound Together prepared to expand both its physical space and its conceptual boundaries, Mari found herself looking forward rather than back—anticipating new mysteries to solve, new books to discuss, new cheese puns to inflict upon her friends.

Some things, after all, aged to perfection only with time, patience, and the proper conditions. Friendship. Justice. And perhaps, Mari thought

as she said goodnight to Ryan with the promise of dinner to come, even romance.

Isabel Greene would definitely approve.

The End