

Chapter 1

"The Ziegler Winery will be the perfect site, Charlotte. So historic!" Meredith, my best friend since grade school, twirled in the middle of The Cheese Shop, arms spread wide, the flaps of her red raincoat fluting outward. Moisture from today's rainfall sprayed off of her like a sprinkler. "With just a pinch of *mystère*."

I shuddered. "More than just a pinch."

"Fiddle-dee-dee!" Meredith spun again, bubbling with the kind of excitement I expected from a kid on Christmas, not a thirtysomething elementary school teacher.

"Whoa, whirling dervish." I leashed her in before the zippered corners of the jacket could slaughter every display I had set out. April was the best time of year to add fresh touches to Fromagerie Bessette, before tourist season kicked into high gear. I'd added amber-colored tablecloths embroidered with spring motifs to all the display barrels, and mounded them with wheels of tasty Gruyère and decorative containers of pesto, mustards, and jams, as well as tasty crackers made of goji berries and pistachios. My grandfather, Pèpère, said I was inviting disaster, putting the jars out where little children could accidentally whack them in passing. But children weren't what I was worried about at the moment—Meredith and her unbridled enthusiasm were. I steered her to a safe place.

"Just think what turning the abandoned winery into a liberal arts college will do for our town," Meredith went on.

Bring an odd assortment of lookie-loos, that's what.

Back in the late eighteen hundreds, Zacharia Ziegler, one of Providence, Ohio's, first

mayors, landed on the idea to build a winery. Not just an ordinary winery. A mock-castle with spires and towers. Its sprawling grounds, befitting a king, dwarfed the nearby Quail Ridge Honeybee Farm. Then Ziegler's wife went insane. She killed her son and committed suicide. Soon thereafter, Ziegler shut down the operation. In 1950, upon her father's death, Ziegler's daughter deeded the winery to the town of Providence and hightailed it to New York. The town council suggested the winery be boarded up.

"Oh, did I tell you?" Meredith leaned in close, as if expecting to be overheard. She couldn't be. It was only seven a.m. I didn't open the shop until nine. "*Vintage Today* has been at the winery all week giving it a facelift. But, shhhh, it's a secret."

Vintage Today is a home makeover show that doesn't know the word: *understatement*. I could only imagine what they'd do with the winery's oak-paneled tasting rooms and the musty cellars.

Meredith removed her paperboy-style hat and fluffed her tawny hair. "Isn't it exciting? We'll have so many new faces. Professors and administrators and—" She cut a sharp look toward the kitchen. "What's that?"

"What?" My heart did a jig.

"That incredible smell."

I chuckled at my overreaction. Talking about Ziegler's Winery had put me on edge. "Honey-onion quiche." In addition to selling cheese, I offered homemade quiches. I tried to come up with a new recipe every week. Today's was made with honey from Quail Ridge, applewood-smoked bacon, sweet Vidalia onions, and Emmenthaler cheese to give it a nice bite. The first batch was minutes from coming out of the oven.

"I have to buy one before I leave."

"I'll give it to you, compliments of the house."

"You're the best. Anyway, where was I?" Meredith tapped her lower lip with her index finger. "Right. The big bash to celebrate. I know it's short notice, but I've set it for tomorrow. I've invited potential donors. Colleges need a constant flow of cash, you know. I thought we'd have mariachis at the entrance."

"I adore Latin music, but why mariachis?"

"They're festive. Maybe some of your grandmother's actors will dress up in serapes and sombreros and carry guitars."

Something this avant garde would be right up Grandmere's alley. In addition to being town mayor, she ran the Providence Playhouse, which put on a mixed bag of productions, to say the least.

"They won't have to play the guitars, of course," Meredith went on. "They'll pretend. Karaoke style, you know. Piped through speakers. I'll have the gals at Sew Inspired Quilt Shoppe help me decorate. Doesn't it sound fun?" She painted the air with her fingers.

"And we'll have a scavenger hunt to look for the buried treasure."

"That's a rumor."

"Old Man Ziegler swore on his deathbed that there was treasure."

I let out an exasperated sigh. If something valuable was buried beneath the winery, I'd bet dimes to dollars Ziegler's daughter had unearthed it before she skipped town. Unless, of course, she'd found a body buried there, and that was why she really left.

"Let me show you what else I have planned." Meredith pulled a piece of purple haze paper with frayed edges from her tote and waved it.

The timer in the kitchen tweeted.

"Give me a sec." I hurried to the rear of the shop, pulled the quiches from the oven to cool, grabbed the quickie breakfast I'd intended to eat in the silence of my office, two floral napkins, a knife, and a bottle of Kindred Creek spring water, and led my friend through the stone arches into the wine annex that abutted the main store. I set the breakfast on one of the mosaic cafe tables, poured the water into two of our big-bowled wineglasses, and offered Meredith half a croissant swathed with soft Taleggio cheese and homemade raspberry jam. Melt-in-your-mouth goodness.

As I took my seat, Meredith handed me the list. In addition to the scavenger hunt, she'd written down sack races, tag football, and Frisbee contests. Over fifty people had been invited.

"Oh, I almost forgot the main reason I came to see you," Meredith said, her mouth half-full. A tiny moan of gourmet delight followed her words. "I want you to serve fondue at the party."

I gulped. Fondue is not your typical buffet item. It's lovely for an intimate group of six or eight, but fifty or more? On a day's notice? Oh, my.

"I want lots of different kinds of fondues." Meredith ticked her fingers. "A cow's milk, a goat's milk, and a sheep's milk."

"Sheep's milk cheese doesn't really melt well."

"Sure, you know best. Anyway, it'll fit into the party's theme. Lost and Fondue. Get it? We're *finding* a new college." She giggled, tickled with her cleverness. "And I want Matthew to put on a wine tasting."

My cousin, a former sommelier, was my partner in The Cheese Shop and Meredith's flame.

"I know it's last-minute, but please say yes. Please?"

How could I say no in the face of her excitement? I nodded.

Meredith leaped to her feet. "Yippee. Let's have platters of cheese, too. You have to include that Humboldt Fog and, hmmm, that rosemary-crusteD sheep's cheese."

"Mitica Romao?"

"That's it. And that Red Hawk from the Cowgirl Creamery. I made an open-faced salmon melt, like you suggested. Major yum!"

Red Hawk cheese was one of my all-time favorites. It had a buttery flavor and the smoothness of a Camembert. The closer to room temperature it was served, the better. That was true for any cheese.

"Did I tell you that I've invited my niece and her art class from Ohio State University to commemorate the event?"

The last time I'd seen Quinn, I was her babysitter.

"I told you she's studying fine arts, didn't I? She's part of this tight-knit group that hopes to go on to the Sorbonne or to the Pasadena Art College of Design or the Pratt Institute. They're coming to paint pictures of the winery before it becomes a college. Sort of like a Degas gathering. I've gotten them some press. Isn't that cool?" Meredith polished off her breakfast, swigged some water, then rose from her chair. "I can't wait to tell my older brother you said yes. You remember Freddy, don't you?"

I warmed all over, remembering my first kiss with Freddy on stage, behind the curtain, in the Providence Elementary auditorium. He was eight, I was seven. His lips had tasted like peanut butter.

"I always thought the two of you would have hooked up."

When Freddy was a senior, he had asked some other junior to the prom. I'd cried for days.

"You and he would have been terrific. You both have so much energy, and you're kindhearted, and—" Meredith's voice caught ever so slightly. "Did I tell you he adores the Food Network and classic films and juicy mysteries, just like you?"

She had. Many times.

"But now you're with Jordan, and I'm so happy for you."

Over the past few months, I'd been dating Jordan Pace, one of our local cheese makers, a man with the good looks of a movie star, the voice of a crooner, and the edginess of a gambler. Except in his case, he liked to keep his past—not his cards—close to his chest.

Meredith glanced at her watch. "Gotta go. Quiche?"

While I packaged a pie in a gold box and tied it with strands of raffia, she kept talking about Freddy and her niece and the other talented artists.

Seconds after she departed, Rebecca, my young assistant, trotted in dressed in a yellow raincoat and matching knee-high boots. She smacked the heels of her boots on the rug by the front door to rid them of water.

"Morning, boss." She whipped off her coat and hung it on a peg at the rear of the shop. Beneath, she wore a yellow crocheted sweater dress that fit her coltish frame perfectly and looked suspiciously new. I kept myself from commenting on her spending habits. She didn't need me to mother her. She set straight to work, unwrapping cheeses and laying them on the cutting board. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Lovely," I lied. An inch of rain in less than twenty-four hours wasn't my idea of

beautiful, just sloppy. A foot of fresh snow and a snowball fight with Matthew's twin girls—now, that would be fun. We hadn't had snowfall in weeks and probably wouldn't until next year.

As if reading my mind, Rebecca said, "How are the twins?"

"Super."

In the course of the past year, I had fallen head over heels for my preteen nieces. At the insistence of my grandparents, I had taken my cousin and his girls into my home when Matthew's wife abandoned him for a cushier life with Mumsie and dear old Dad back in their cottage in England. Cottage, ha! A twelve-acre estate complete with a bowling alley and a dressage ring. So far, having the four of us live under one roof was working out just fine. If only I could stop the girls from sliding down the white oak banister of my old Victorian home. Even beneath their frail weight, the banister creaked. I worried for their safety but pushed the angst aside. In many ways, children are like cheese. Wrap them too tightly with protective wrap, and they'll suffocate.

I tied a brown apron over my chinos and gold-striped sweater and joined Rebecca at the cheese counter.

"Did I see Meredith leaving the shop?" she asked.

I brought her up to speed about Meredith's plan to convert the winery into a college.

"Oooh." Rebecca began facing the surfaces of the cheeses with a fine-edged knife while I arranged the prepared cheeses in the display case. "I heard there's buried treasure there."

"Rumors." I blew a loose strand of hair off my face.

"Have you ever been inside?"

"Not on your life." Back in high school a group of daring souls, led by Meredith's brother Freddy, stole in. I chickened out. I had no desire to skulk through cobwebbed rooms or socialize with the rodents that had to have taken over the place.

Rebecca said, "You know, on *CSI: New York*, there was this story about—"

The grape-leaf-shaped chimes over the front door jingled, and Grandmère chugged inside, wagging her gnarled finger. "Where is your grandfather?"

She strode to the back of the shop, the flaps of her raincoat furling open and revealing a bright pink sweater and patchwork skirt. I smiled. My grandmother might be in her seventies, but she still had the style of a hip gypsy and the energy of a locomotive going downhill with no brakes.

She peeked into the kitchen and into the walk-in refrigerator. "I need him at the theater."

"What's the play you're doing this spring, Mrs. Bessette?" Rebecca asked.

"A new playwright's work: *No Exit with Poe*." My grandmother gave a dramatic flourish of her hand. "Edgar Allan Poe's poetry, as interpreted by the characters of Garcin, Estelle, and Inez."

"That makes no sense," I said.

"Why?" Rebecca asked. Before leaving her Amish community and moving to Providence, Rebecca had never been to the theater. Now, she was an empty vessel eager to be filled with knowledge. In addition to being a TV mystery junky, she read a play a week.

I said, "Because *No Exit* is an absurdist play about three people in hell who probe each other's painful memories. It has nothing to do with Poe."

Grandmère sidled up to me and tapped my nose with her fingertip. "That is where you're wrong. The playwright is focusing on Sartre's main theme, the suffering of being, as seen through the poetry of Poe. We'll get rave reviews, mark my words." She scuttled to the wine annex and looked inside. "Where is your grandfather?"

"Not here."

"He said he was going for a cup of coffee at the diner, but I know him. He can't resist coming to The Cheese Shop. Oh, Etienne!" she called in a singsong manner.

She was right. My grandfather loved spending time in the shop. He may have retired, but he needed to breathe the pungent air inside Fromagerie Bessette on a daily basis or he'd die.

"He's hiding, *non*?" Grandmère returned to my side and peered cynically into my eyes, like a snake charmer who was being conned by the snake.

"Oh, please," I sniffed. "You think I'm abetting him? Maybe he's taking a little stroll. You know how self-conscious he's become about the few pounds he's gained since his retirement." My grandfather loved to sneak slices of cheese from the tasting platters we set on the marble countertop. "Look, there he is." I pointed. Pèpère was exiting the Country Kitchen across the street. "And you'll notice he's not headed this way."

Grandmère muttered something in French, chastising herself for not believing the love of her life, and I smiled. Theirs was the kind of relationship I craved, aged like a fine cheese.

"Charlotte," Rebecca said. "Did you tell your grandmother about Meredith's fundraiser? And that she wants local actors to perform?"

I cocked my head. Exactly when did she think I'd had time to do that?

"At the abandoned winery," Rebecca added.

Color drained from my grandmother's face. "Not at Ziegler's. No, no, no!"

I flinched at the panic in her tone. She wasn't one to buy into rumors. "Why not?" I asked, unable to mask my concern.

She didn't answer.

A shiver coursed through me. "Grandmère?"

She shook her head. "I must fly." She petted my cheek. "*Au revoir, chérie.*"

As she scurried out, I turned the sign in the front window to open. Customers bustled inside. Many sampled cheeses, while others came to hang out and chat. With the flurry of activity, the feeling of foreboding vanished. An hour later, I believed nothing in the world could go wrong.

Was I ever mistaken.

The door burst open, a gust of cool air invaded the shop, and in bounded Sylvie, Matthew's ex-wife.

With her you-owe-me attitude, enhanced lips, and augmented breasts, Sylvie, as Grandmère would say, was all huff and fluff. She adjusted a gargantuan leather tote over the shoulder of her faux ocelot coat—at least I hoped it was faux—flipped her acid-white hair off her shoulders, and in a shrill English accent that would make Anglophiles cringe, shouted, "Where are my babies?"