

Fire and Wine

Casey Dorman

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Chapter 1

Jimmy Taggart wasn't sleepy; he didn't feel the tiredness in his head or eyes, but his muscles ached and each time he slid from the driver's seat of Napa County Fire Department's Engine 24, he could feel the muscles in his back and legs begin to cramp, as if his body were screaming to him that he couldn't keep going at this pace. His four-man crew had been fighting wildfires in multiple locations for the last four days, pulling sixteen-hour shifts. It seemed to Jimmy, that as soon as one fire was brought under control two more popped up. It was as if the whole county were in flames, transforming what had always seemed like a corner of heaven into the center of hell. Jimmy knew that Rick Wells, Norman Rueda and Ted Wilson, the other members of his team, felt as exhausted and battered as he did.

Up ahead Jimmy could see their destination: a gray column of smoke rising from a grove of trees just off Route 121. The road, which connected the towns of Sonoma and Napa, was normally heavy with traffic, but today, because of the fires, it was barren. Hot embers from the wildfires a few miles farther north were being blown south by the strong winds, making the location of fresh outbreaks unpredictable. Jimmy's engine was a roving effort to find such outbreaks and contain them before they erupted into more serious fires.

As they pulled up, Jimmy and his crew could see that this particular fire was already burning itself out. The tops of the trees had ignited, probably from wind-borne embers, but the trees were still green and although all of the trees showed some sign of destruction from the flames, of the eight or nine in the grove, only two had completely burned, blackening the leaves and grass beneath them. The fact that the grove was surrounded by vineyards, with their moist, leafy vines, had kept the fire from spreading. A few flames were still flaring up among the tree limbs and his crew, like a platoon of soldiers approaching a battle, disembarked from the engine

and headed for the grove with axes and shovels. Jimmy still had about 200 gallons of water in the truck's water tank, but there was no sense wasting it on a fire that had no place to go.

As he stepped down from the truck, he noticed a white Lexus SUV sitting in a turnout, twenty yards away, partially obscured by the trees. He didn't see a driver. The car wasn't in danger from the fire, but he decided to investigate anyway. It must be some yokel rubbernecking the fire from up close, despite the official warnings to stay away.

The SUV was empty. From the depth of the layer of ash on its roof and hood, Jimmy guessed that it had probably been parked at its location when the fire in the grove was more active than it was now. He looked inside. There was nothing; no papers, no discarded hats or coats, no empty coffee cups. The interior was a lot cleaner than his own car. He tried the door handle. It was unlocked. He opened the door, then hesitated, closing it again. It wasn't his business to go through the glove compartment or check the registration. The owner was probably somewhere nearby and would return shortly.

Jimmy turned his attention to the grove of burning trees. He needed to join his crew putting out what was left of the fire so they could be ready to go to the next eruption spotted by the roaming surveillance helicopter, which had alerted them to this one. He hurried toward the smoking trees. He was met by Norman Rueda, running from the grove, his face flushed and his eyes wide with excitement. "Grab the bag and mask," Norman yelled, "we found a body."

Chapter 2

“It’s odd to think of Martin as dead,” Cloris Monahan said as she absentmindedly bit the end of a French fry she was holding, looking over at Nyles, who was juggling a hamburger in one hand while driving their Prius with the other. They’d just turned off the 5 freeway onto Highway 580, headed west. They were two-thirds of the way to Napa from their home in Los Angeles. “I feel bad for Sarah, but I hate to say it; I’m not really broken up about Martin dying. I could only tolerate him because of Sarah.”

Nyles glanced over at this wife. She knew that he had never like Martin Overman—he’d always considered him a boorish braggart—but it was unusual for his wife to speak ill of others, especially the dead. She was gazing at her husband, as if waiting for his reaction to her words. He decided to ignore them; he’d only feel like a hypocrite if he said anything. “How do you think Sarah is feeling?” he asked.

Cloris continued eating her French fries and talking between bites. “I’m not going to speak for her, but if I’d had to live with that man, I’d probably be relieved that he died. He’d always bullied her, and she told me that he got worse after he developed Alzheimer’s. But once he became sick and had to retire as a state senator, her conscience wouldn’t let her leave him.”

At the mention of Martin’s dementia, Nyles’ stomach tightened, an unwelcome sign of the anxiety that plagued him. Old age was like crossing a minefield. Death or disability lurked beneath every step. He often felt that his health was a catastrophe waiting to happen: his blood pressure, his cholesterol, his prostate were all conspiring to kill him. Alzheimer’s dementia triggered his anxiety even more other diseases, although, unlike his other health worries, no physician had ever warned him about dementia, never

even brought it up as a possibility. Nyles' worry was self-generated. He knew his body was aging, but he hoped his mind wasn't. His mental capacities were central to his sense of competence and his identity. His intellect and his memory were what had allowed him to excel when he had been a homicide detective, and they were still necessary in his work as a private detective. Martin had developed Alzheimer's as he was turning sixty and Nyles was already sixty-five. "I still find it unbelievable that he developed Alzheimer's at such a young age."

"He was sixty."

"We're both sixty-five."

"My mind's not completely intact," Cloris said, looking over at him.

Nyles knew that his wife was serious. He felt a wave of guilt; he had been worrying about his own mental capacities when five years ago Cloris had nearly died from a stroke and had remained in a coma for months. Her recovery had taken years. "You're sharper than I am, even after your stroke," he told her. "I can't tell the difference between you now and before it happened." He was exaggerating, although only a little. Cloris was the center of his life and the experience of having almost lost her had left him in a permanently protective mode as far as she was concerned.

"I still have trouble remembering words. That's why I'm no longer acting." Cloris had been a successful actress, mostly in television, before her stroke.

"The doctors said that difficulty remembering words was to be expected. You don't have Alzheimer's, and you keep getting better and better. I'm thinking of having a stroke myself, just to improve my mind."

“Be serious,” she said looking askance at him. Although she feigned disapproval of his morbid humor, it usually made her laugh.

“You could try acting again if you wanted to, and, anyway, your recovery hasn’t kept you from doing other things.” He was referring to his wife’s recent work helping Hollywood actresses who were coming forward to describe the abuse they’d suffered at the hands of producers, directors and fellow actors.

“Actually what I’m doing is more important than getting back into acting. After the funeral I might talk to Sarah about joining me in my work. It would take her mind off of Martin’s death.”

“It might be a little soon. Anyway, we were talking about why he developed Alzheimer’s so early.”

“Bad genes?” Cloris ventured. “Or maybe his drinking. I’ve read that alcoholism is sometimes a risk factor for Alzheimer’s.”

“God, I hope not,” Nyles said, half-jokingly. They both knew he drank a beer or two every day.

“Martin was an alcoholic, you’re not,” she said. “If either of us was, it was me—before my stroke—and that period in my life is over. We both drink in moderation now...*you* always have.”

He didn’t want to get into it any further. “And now we’re headed for wine country, my periodic respite from beer,” he joked. “Anyway, I don’t want to end up like Martin. From what Sarah says, it was his Alzheimer’s that killed him, causing him to wander off into one of the fires.”

Cloris shivered. “That sounds horrible. I wouldn't wish it even on him. But don't worry. Your mind is better than anyone I've ever met. At least you won't have to use it for this trip. We're going to a funeral.”

“I expect I'll see Phil MacDonald,” he answered. “He's still Sheriff in Napa and he must have known Martin. He's Scottish and I'm Irish. Maybe we'll have a wake for old Martin. We'll drink beer or whiskey. Wine doesn't sound appropriate. ” Nyles chuckled and stole a glance at Cloris. She gave him a sidelong grimace, then shook her head in feigned disapproval.

Chapter 3

Martin and Sarah Overmans' home was a sprawling one-story, ranch style brick and wood house nestled among the tall pines in an upscale, heavily wooded neighborhood near the Napa Valley Country Club. Unlike many other areas they had passed after entering Napa County, this neighborhood appeared to have been spared from the devastating fires of a week ago. Nyles remembered that the Overmans had moved to the house right after Martin's retirement as a state senator three years ago. Martin had begun having balance problems, which made navigating the steep staircase in their former two-story home difficult. The funeral was the next day and Sarah had asked them to stay with her for a few days. As always, Nyles felt uncomfortable staying in someone else's house—he felt as if he was both intruding on them and losing his own privacy—but he'd given in when Cloris explained that being in the same house as Sarah would allow her to provide support to her longtime friend. It would be selfish of him to put his discomfort ahead of the needs of a woman who had just become a widow, especially after Sarah had spent so much time five years ago helping Cloris during the acute stages of her illness. Nevertheless, he felt himself tense as he turned toward the driveway and contemplated being a captive guest for the next several days.

As they pulled into the driveway next to a sleek black Maserati, Sarah emerged from the front door and came out to greet them. "That must be Ronnie's car," Nyles said. "I don't think Sarah would drive a car like that."

"Maybe Martin did," Cloris responded.

Nyles shook his head as he opened the door to get out. "Martin drove a white Lexus SUV." It was a habit of his to tuck information like that away in his mind, never

knowing when it would be useful. He felt a momentary sense of relief that he could still remember small details like the make of someone's car.

Cloris was climbing out of the car, one of the few physical activities that she still found strenuous, because of a remaining weakness in her right leg, which showed up especially after sitting for a long time as she had on this trip. She struggled out, then stood and threw her arms around her friend in a warm embrace. "I'm so sorry, Sarah. How are you holding up?" She drew back her head to look the other woman in the face.

At sixty years old, Sarah Overman was still a handsome woman. She had once been a beautiful young actress, just breaking into film and TV roles, some of her success due to mentoring by Cloris, who had befriended the five-year younger starlet when she'd first come to Hollywood. After marrying the rising political figure, Martin Overman, and leaving show business, Sarah had kept up her appearance, as befitted the wife of a public figure—a politician who was zealously attentive to the appearance of his wife. Today she wore face makeup and Cloris knew that she'd had a facelift ten years earlier. Her silver-blond hair was wrapped artfully in a bun on top of her head, but she looked tired, and she greeted Cloris with a grim smile. Cloris saw that her lower lip was quivering and wondered if her emotion was because she was happy to see her guests or if her near tears were an expression of her grief.

"I'm so glad you came. Ronnie's here. He'll be happy to see both of you," Sarah said hugging first Cloris and then Nyles as he came around the front of the car. She stepped back and looked at the him. "You never change, Nyles. don't you ever gain weight? I wish I had your secret. It's a constant fight for me."

Nyles smiled self-consciously. Unlike his wife, who always seemed to know what to say, he felt at a loss as to how to respond. “You look great, as always,” he said, feeling foolish as soon as he said it, since she didn’t look great at all. She looked haggard and stressed; as she should, he thought, her husband having died less than a week ago.

“You can bring your bags in and put them in the spare bedroom,” Sarah said, walking toward the house.

“Is Ronnie staying with you?” Cloris asked.

“No, but he’s been here almost constantly since Martin died. I think he’s afraid I’m too fragile to be left alone.”

“Well, we’re here now,” Cloris said, giving her friend a reassuring smile and hooking her arm in Sarah’s. Nyles busied himself with taking the single suitcase they shared from the back of the Prius. He was glad that Sarah’s son wasn’t staying in the house. The more people around him, the more he felt a loss of privacy, a thought which again made him feel selfish, since he was here to console a friend.

It had been at least five years since Nyles had seen Martin and Sarah’s son. He could see that the younger man had put on weight in his face and around his waist, but otherwise looked pretty much the same. Nyles thought Ronnie must be in his mid-thirties by now. He was nattily dressed in a pair of dark blue slacks and an open-necked blue linen shirt, and his wing-tips were highly polished. He was a real estate agent and Nyles figured that appearance probably mattered in a business like that, especially in the upscale Napa and Sonoma areas. It also explained the Maserati in the driveway. Ronnie was sitting in the living room, and he stood when his mother and Cloris entered the house, followed by Nyles with the suitcase. Cloris hugged the young man and Nyles put

down the suitcase long enough to shake his hand. Ronnie offered to show him where the bedroom was.

Nyles put the suitcase on the foot of the bed and then used the en suite bathroom to wash his hands and dash some cold water on his face to remove any remains of the burgers, fries and snacks he'd enjoyed on the drive up. He dried his face and hands, noting that Sarah had put out what appeared to be new, lush guest towels. She still managed to be the perfect hostess, even in her time of need. When he returned to the living room he saw that it was furnished with the same matching set of flowered couch and chairs that he remembered from the former house. Ronnie was in a chair and was having a whiskey, while Sarah and Cloris sat on the couch each holding a glass of white wine. When Ronnie asked Nyles what he'd like to drink, Nyles opted for a glass of red wine, remembering that Martin and Sarah had prided themselves on their cellar. "Time for me to gain a little sophistication," he joked. "Beer seems out of place up here."

"You'd be surprised," Ronnie said, bringing in a glass of red wine from the kitchen. "Craft beer is even starting to invade wine country. We've got some good breweries in Carneros and Sonoma. This is a Cabernet, one of those we're famous for. The winery's only a few miles from here. Very dry, very smooth. I think you'll like it." He handed the glass to Nyles.

Nyles pretended to look at the wine with suspicion, then raised his glass in the air. "When in Rome..." he said, although he immediately felt self-conscious about toasting a get together that was occasioned by the death of Sarah's husband and Ronnie's father. Everyone smiled, so he guessed he hadn't made too much of a blunder.

Chapter 4

“I’m glad you’re both here,” Sarah said, looking first at Cloris and then at Nyles, while sighing with relief. Her expression had become more relaxed, as though she could finally let down her guard, now that she was surrounded by friends. “You’re two of my oldest friends and I need some advice from you, Nyles.”

“Advice?” He wondered what she could want of him. Maybe something to do with Martin’s insurance or investments, neither of which he felt qualified to advise her about. Ronnie, because of his real estate background, no doubt knew more about such things than Nyles did.

“Your expertise, really,” Sarah answered. Her expression had become more troubled. “You know they found Martin’s body several miles away from the house, along with his car—the Lexus—which he hadn’t driven for two years. He’d wandered into a grove of trees and died of smoke inhalation.”

“That’s what Cloris told me,” Nyles answered, since she appeared to be addressing him. “I was shocked when I heard about it, and sad for you...and Ronnie.” He could tell by her face that she was having difficulty talking about her husband’s death, and he was at a loss as to what she was going to request of him.

“Thank you, Nyles.” She straightened up, trying to pull herself together. She glanced over at her son, who was starting to frown. She took a long sip of wine, as if to brace herself, then continued. “I was shocked, too, when the sheriff called me and said they’d found Martin. It didn’t make sense to me—and still doesn’t—that Martin would have driven his car somewhere. He was too disoriented to drive—confused as he was—

and he knew that. Losing his ability to drive was one of the first losses he suffered from his illness.”

Nyles didn't understand the problem. If Martin was confused, then driving his car when he shouldn't didn't sound too far out of the ordinary, but he could see that Sarah's concern was real. “So what do you think happened?”

She shook her head. “I don't know. I left him alone, but I was only gone for an hour. We live in a wooded area, but, as you can see, the fires didn't touch us here and I thought it was safe to run to the store for a few things.” She had a helpless look on her face. “I'd left him alone for longer than that lots of times. I shouldn't have left at all with the fires going on, but I was sure he wouldn't go anywhere.”

“You mean someone else might have driven him?”

She gazed at him, her eyes wide and, Nyles thought, pleading, but he still wasn't sure what she wanted of him. “Someone else must have,” she said. “Martin was completely unable to drive a car. He'd tried many times when he was first ill, and he became confused as soon as he got into the car. He would forget where he wanted to go, he had no idea which road to take, even how to get out of the neighborhood. He would just sit in the car and go nowhere.”

“Dad was confused, Mom,” Ronnie interrupted her, his tone a mixture of concern and exasperation, making Nyles think that Sarah must have raised this same topic before. “He didn't drive, but that day he obviously decided to. Who else would have driven him... and left him there with his car parked on the side of the road? The sheriff and the fire department said he wandered into the grove when it was filled with smoke.”

Sarah didn't look at Ronnie, she just shook her head then gazed at Nyles. He could see the pain on her face. "Maybe I'm obsessing about it. Maybe I feel guilty for leaving Martin alone," she said.

Ronnie was shaking his own head. "You took better care of him than he deserved... given the way he treated you." He sounded deeply bitter.

Sarah looked over at her son. "I know you were angry with your father..."

"Angry? I hated him," Ronnie said savagely. He took a deep drink from his whiskey and looked challengingly at Nyles and then Cloris, as if he expected them to react to his outburst. Then he looked down at the floor. "Anyway, whatever happened, he's better off dead than becoming even more out of control. You couldn't have taken care of him by yourself much longer. He would have hurt you."

Nyles and Cloris both looked at Sarah, expecting her to explain her son's words, but she just stared at the floor. "Was Martin becoming violent?" Nyles asked.

Sarah looked up. "He'd always had a temper, but it was getting worse. He'd become confused or unable to find something and he'd start throwing things around, or accuse me of hiding things from him."

"Did he hit you?" Nyles asked.

"He tried a few times. He'd lost a lot of his mobility, so he never really hurt me."

"He bullied you Mom, just like he used to bully me," Ronnie said, the venom obvious in his voice. "He hit you even before his dementia." He looked over at Nyles. "Twice in the last two months I had to come over and physically restrain him. He could have seriously injured her," he looked over at his mother. "My mother is in denial."

“None of this is the point,” Sarah said, an embarrassed expression on her face. “I just don’t think Martin could have driven himself to that fire area. Nyles, I know you know Phil MacDonald, the sheriff. I do too, but you’re a policeman; you and Phil worked together once. I just want you to ask him some questions, get him to take another look at the circumstances of Martin’s death.”

“You don’t think it was an accident?” Nyles asked. He tried to hide his skepticism. He didn’t really want to challenge her suspicions, even if he felt that they were probably related to her guilt about leaving her husband alone. An unexpected death was something people often found hard to accept. They often searched for an explanation—sometimes for sinister plots or motives.

“C’mon Mom, what else could have happened?” Ronnie asked, making no effort to disguise his skepticism.

“He had a lot of enemies, honey,” Ronnie’s mother said, softly. “As recent as a month ago he got another threatening letter from Giuseppe Malta.

“You never told me,” Ronnie said. He looked surprised.

“Who’s Giuseppe Malta?” Nyles asked, suddenly wondering if Sarah’s suspicions weren’t so far-fetched after all. The name Giuseppe Malta was vaguely familiar. He thought he’d heard Martin mention it once.

“He’s a man that Martin sent to prison twenty years ago, when Martin was the District Attorney,” Sarah answered. “This Malta man claimed that he was framed. He began threatening Martin from the day he was convicted. About once a year we’d get letters from him saying he was going to make Martin pay. He was let out of prison a

month ago and sent a letter saying that now that he was home, he was going to expose Martin. . . whatever that meant.”

“Did he say he was going to harm him?” A threat could mean that Sarah’s suspicions weren’t just a product of her imagination.

“No,” she said, sounding mildly disappointed. “But he said he had proof about something Martin had done with regard to his case. And he’d threatened Martin in the past.”

“How did Martin react—to this latest threat about this Malta person having proof of something?”

“He flew into a rage, but within less than ten minutes he forgot about it, like everything else since he developed Alzheimer’s. Martin remembered every detail from years ago, but if you had a conversation with him five minutes ago, he forgot it even happened. That was part of his illness.”

Nyles felt the familiar anxiety wash over him. Alzheimer’s was the scourge of aging and hearing about Martin’s condition reminded him of it. He knew others who’d developed the disease—his old boss, Captain Bowers at the LAPD, for instance. John Bowers’ illness was what had started Nyles worrying about his own mental faculties. He had to quit obsessing about it. “Martin’s Alzheimer’s began about four years ago, right?” he asked, forcing himself to talk about the subject. “I remember we visited right before he retired, but I could barely detect that he was impaired.”

“He could conceal it at first,” Sarah said. She had resumed her composure. “He would talk about the past and no one noticed that his conversations were monologues. Anything you said to him, he promptly forgot. He was even able to start a memoir about

his political career. In fact he was still writing it when he died. His memory for some events in his past was perfect.”

“Too perfect,” Ronnie chimed in. “His judgment was so bad, he was talking about things that were supposed to be private and confidential.”

“His doctor said it was good for him to exercise his memory like that,” his mother said. She looked over at her son quizzically. “How do you know what he was including in his memoir. He didn’t even let me read it.”

Ronnie looked sheepish. “Shari mentioned a few things to me.”

“Who’s Shari?” Nyles asked. He looked over at Cloris, who was listening quietly to the conversation while she was gazing over at him. Her expression suggested that she knew his interest was because Sarah’s suspicions might give him a case to investigate. He couldn’t tell whether she was irritated with him or not.

“She was typing Martin’s memoir,” Sarah answered. She looked sharply at her son. “I know you recommended Shari, but I thought you and she were a thing of the past. And she shouldn’t have been talking to you about your father’s private things.”

Ronnie frowned at her. “She didn’t tell me anything specific; just that he was including stuff that she felt sometimes needed to be censored or it would get him or some of his former colleagues in trouble. I have lunch with her every once in a while, that’s all. We’re not dating anymore.”

Sarah stared at him for a moment, then turned to Nyles. “We’ve gotten off topic. Will you talk to Sheriff MacDonald for me, Nyles? Ask him to look a little closer into Martin’s death? A lot of people died over that week because of the fires and I think they probably thought Martin was just one more.”

“But it’s important to you to find out more?” Nyles asked.

Sarah looked over at Cloris, her best friend. “I’m not sure how I feel about Martin being gone. We were together forty years. But they weren’t all—or even mostly—happy years, and with his disease, things got worse. But I want to be sure that the way he died was really what I’ve been told. That’s all.”

“I’m sure Nyles will be happy to pass your concerns along to the sheriff,” Cloris said, patting Sarah on the forearm.

“Ok,” Nyles said nodding to both Sarah and his wife. “I’ll talk to Phil MacDonald.”

Chapter 5

For the first time since arriving in Napa, Nyles noticed the lingering smell of smoke in the air, although the sky was crystal blue with only occasional thin wisps of clouds on the distant horizon. He and Cloris had gotten out of their car and were walking across the spongy carpet of recently watered, freshly mown grass toward the open grave where Martin was to be buried. Earlier, they had attended a church service, along with well over 300 friends and acquaintances of the former District Attorney and California state senator. He and Cloris had sat next to Sarah and Ronnie, and Ronnie had pointed out some of the wine growers from the more famous wineries, as well as former and present state and local officials. Even a former governor, who had served during many of the years of Martin's senate career, was in attendance. Nyles had spoken briefly to Napa County Sheriff Phil MacDonald, an old friend and, several years previously, a colleague on a case that spanned much of coastal California. Nyles had told MacDonald that he wanted to talk to him later, perhaps at the cemetery.

Most of those at the church service, which was filled with speeches lauding Martin Overman's service to the region and to the state, were also at the cemetery. The graveside service was to be a simple one and most of the crowd would leave after, with only a small number of friends invited back to Sarah's house, where caterers were now preparing food. Nyles looked around for Phil MacDonald. He wasn't sure if the sheriff was invited to the house or not, although he knew that he and Martin Overman had worked together when Martin was a prosecutor. Cloris was heading for Sarah's side near the grave, but Nyles spotted MacDonald, in his dress uniform, standing somewhat back from the grave and he let Cloris go on her own while he walked over to the sheriff. He noticed that MacDonald, who was about five years younger

than he was, had gained a lot of weight. He was almost bursting the buttons on his dress shirt. His hips had widened and his face was round and puffy.

“Are you going to the house afterward?” Nyles asked.

“Sarah invited me,” the large, overweight man answered, frowning, “but I’m not sure I can make it. We’ve got a lot of cases going on right now with these fires and the damage they caused. It’s mostly fire department stuff, but every death was seen by the coroner and my desk is overflowing with reports.” The Sheriff’s Department and the Coroner’s Office were one and the same in Napa County.

Nyles looked around to make sure that his absence at Cloris’ side didn’t seem conspicuous, but she and Sarah were standing with their heads together, holding each other’s hands, as if they were a pair of trees leaning on one another to weather the battering of a brutal storm. Sarah looked up and glanced at Nyles, nodding her approval when she saw him talking to the sheriff. “I need to talk to you about Martin,” he told MacDonald.

The sheriff looked at him. “What do you mean?”

Nyles was surprised by the sharpness of the man’s question. Phil MacDonald was usually pretty laid back, especially for someone with such a long career in law enforcement. Maybe the fires had put even more stress on him than he was letting on. “Sarah thinks it might have not been an accident.”

MacDonald reached in his pants pocket and pulled out what looked like a hard candy. He unwrapped it and stuck it in his mouth before turning to Nyles. “I quit smoking three months ago. I’m popping these candies like they’re Oxycontin. Damned fire and all these deaths have just made it worse.” He glanced over at Sarah Overman, who had her head bowed as the minister

read his sermon. “I investigated Martin’s death myself. The fire department investigator called me in. He was already at the scene.”

“He thought it was suspicious?”

“Not suspicious so much as he knew that it was Senator Overman and that made it a high profile death—plus there were a few anomalies.”

Nyles would like to hear about the anomalies, but this wasn’t the time or place. The minister was just finishing up. Cloris glanced at him as if wondering why he wasn’t at Sarah’s side, as she was. Nyles knew that Sarah understood—she’d asked him to talk to the sheriff—but he still felt self-conscious about carrying on their conversation in the middle of the funeral. “Can I come see you tomorrow? You can tell me more.”

“Come at noon, we’ll go out for lunch and a beer.”

“A beer?” he wondered when MacDonald had started drinking during the day.

“Relax, it’s Sunday, remember. I’m only in the office in the morning to catch up on paperwork. I’ll be done by noon.”

“Right,” Nyles said. He wondered why he had jumped to a conclusion about his friend so quickly... and why he forgotten that it was the weekend.

Chapter 6

Nyles marveled at how many of Martin and Sarah's friends were connected to the wine industry. The house seemed to be filled with growers, distributors, and restaurateurs as well as a number of Sarah's friends from the local theater and garden club. Most of the theater people knew who Cloris was and were eager to speak to her about her years in Hollywood. He noticed Ronnie in an intense conversation with an attractive young woman who was dressed in a tight-fitting, below-the-knee black dress, that showed off her very shapely figure. Ronnie looked self-conscious when he saw Nyles watching him but then he motioned for Nyles to join him.

"This is Shari Randall," Ronnie said, introducing the young woman to Nyles. "Shari was my father's secretary, editing and typing his memoir for him." He turned to the woman. "Shari, this is Nyles Monahan, an old friend of the family. You met Cloris, his wife, earlier."

Nyles nodded to the young woman. Up close she was even more strikingly beautiful than from a distance. She had an upturned nose, prominent cheekbones, and a wide mouth, which was open in a broad smile, showing her even, white teeth. She seemed awfully cheerful for a funeral, but Nyles didn't wonder that Ronnie had dated her, or that Martin had chosen her as his secretary, for that matter, remembering Martin's reputation as a womanizer. He wondered what it had been like trying to focus Martin's attention on work, especially when he was losing his ability to keep his mind focused on anything and was, according to Sarah, prone to losing control of his impulses. Nyles assumed that Ms. Randall didn't dress like this when she came to work for the senior Overman. "What will you do now?" he asked her.

"Pardon?" the woman asked, her smile becoming less certain.

“With the memoir.” Nyles answered. “Will you continue editing it, or is it to be abandoned?”

“Abandoned,” Ronnie answered before the young woman had a chance to respond. “My father’s mind wasn’t clear enough to write a coherent memoir. He just rambled from one disconnected topic to another. It was only thirty pages, anyway.”

“So you’ve seen it?” Nyles asked, wondering how Ronnie knew so much about a memoir that, according to his mother, was supposed to be private.

Ronnie’s face colored. “I haven’t seen it, but Shari told me about it.” His expression hardened. “Besides, I know what my father’s mind was like for the last couple of years. He couldn’t do anything that required more than five minutes of attention span.”

“Except drive a car, I guess,” Nyles answered drily. He couldn’t help but feel that there was something unnatural in Ronnie’s answers about the memoir. Ronnie was staring back at him, as if he was trying to figure out what Nyles was aiming at with his questions. Nyles turned to Shari Randall. “It must have been very challenging trying to type the memoir of someone who had dementia.”

She looked over at Ronnie, a look of apprehension on her face, as if she were afraid she might say the wrong thing. She took a quick sip of her drink. “It was pretty much like Ronnie said,” she answered, barely glancing at Nyles as she spoke. “Mr. Overman couldn’t keep a train of thought for very long. Sometimes he remembered long and involved episodes from the past and he would tell me those in great detail, almost as if he was re-experiencing them. I wrote them all down, but putting them together in a narrative was difficult.”

“So you won’t continue?” Nyles asked.

She smiled, having regained her composure. “Like Ronnie said, his memoir wouldn’t have made sense. It was really only a fragment, anyway—too short to be published.” Ronnie was nodding at her as if he approved of her answer.

“So you’ll look for another job?”

“Oh I have one.” She smiled brightly. “The Napa Valley Wine Consortium has hired me.”

“Wine Consortium?”

“It’s a group of about thirty wineries,” Ronnie answered, taking a step forward so that he partially came between Nyles and Shari Randall. “A few large ones and a lot of smaller ones... mostly marketing lower priced wines.”

Nyles could see that Ronnie didn’t want his father’s secretary to say too much. He wondered what was being hidden, and why Ronnie was involved, but before he could ask any more questions his attention was caught by Cloris, who was still standing close to Sarah, like a watchdog protecting her owner. Cloris was holding up her wine glass for a refill. He excused himself from the two young people and walked over to join his wife.

Chapter 7

The modern-looking stone building, with its distinctive round turret, looked as if it might be one of the wineries located on the vineyards that dotted the landscape. The building housed the Napa County Sheriff's Department offices, including its crime scene unit and labs. The headquarters was located just outside of Napa in an industrial and business area near the tiny Napa County Airport. The last time Nyles had visited the building was eleven years earlier, right after it had been built. That was when he and Phil MacDonald, then an Assistant Sheriff in charge of the Violent Crimes Investigation Unit, had worked together tracking and eventually catching the so-called "Silent Night Killer," who had viciously strangled eight single women in their bedrooms up and down the California coast. Today was Sunday, but the parking lot in front of the building was three quarters full. Law enforcement didn't take time off, although Sheriff MacDonald had told him that he would be ready to go to lunch by noon.

Despite the fact that the Napa County Sheriff's offices were miniscule compared to those of the LAPD, stepping into the building reminded Nyles of the days when, every morning—often on weekends—he had reported to work at the downtown Parker Center in Los Angeles. Nyles had been a cop for forty years, a homicide detective for thirty of those. All but the first three years were spent with the LAPD. He'd retired before he had planned to, because he wanted to spend time with Cloris, both because of the length of her rehabilitation and because her long illness and her closeness to death had made him realize how precious their time together was. As a cop, he'd always devoted more time and more attention to his work than to home, something about which Cloris, who enjoyed a busy career of her own, had never complained. But with Cloris' acting career over, and Nyles traumatized by the experience of nearly losing her, he couldn't justify living that way any longer. Phil MacDonald, who had gone through much of

Cloris' illness with Nyles and had later lost his own wife to cancer, understood completely why Nyles had made the choice to retire. Phil had been one of the few people Nyles had talked to when he had been debating his decision.

Sheriff MacDonald was waiting for Nyles in the second floor lobby. The large man with a baby face—a look that was accentuated by his having gained weight—greeted his old friend and colleague with a broad smile and a strong handshake. He escorted Nyles back to his office, where he had been working on his computer dealing with the aftermath of one of the most horrific weeks in Napa County History. Nearly fifty people had died in the wildfires that had ravaged the region, nearly half of them in Napa County. Because the Sheriff's Department included the County Coroner's Office, all the death reports came across the sheriff's desk.

“This has been a hell of a two weeks,” MacDonald said, offering Nyles a chair, and staring down at his own chair behind the desk as if it were a torture chamber he was about to enter. “Never seen anything like it in all my years in law enforcement. We had 23 deaths in this county alone, and Sonoma had even more, Mendocino had a few also. One whole neighborhood in Santa Rosa burned to the ground.”

“How about your house?”

“I was OK, but three of our men lost their homes. None of their families were hurt, thank God.”

Nyles shook his head in sympathy. He'd never been involved in massive fires such as the ones that had just devastated the wine country area, but he remembered the Northridge earthquake and the Rodney King riots. Massive disasters, either natural or man-made, were hard

on all first responders. “Martin was one of those deaths,” he said, directing the conversation to the reason he was there.

“I talked to Sarah,” MacDonald said, settling his large bulk in the big high-backed leather chair behind his desk, its metal frame creaking under his weight. “She said to share everything we’ve got with you.” He unwrapped a candy and popped it into his mouth, then slid a file across the desk. “I put it all in a report and made you a copy.” He opened a similar file in front of him. “I’ll go over the basic details, then we can talk over lunch. The report will have to stay with me.”

Nyles appreciated the favor MacDonald was doing. He knew it was because both Sarah and he were old friends of the sheriff. He began reading. It was a typical, chronologically ordered police report—three pages long. At 10:48 a.m., a fire department engine company had been the ones to discover Martin’s body lying within a still burning grove of trees next to Route 121, the main road between the cities of Napa and Sonoma. Nyles thought he remembered driving the same road on previous trips to the area. It wasn’t too far from Martin and Sarah’s house, but remembering what Sarah had said about her husband’s inability to drive, Nyles noted that getting from their house to the highway would take some navigation ability. According to the report, Martin’s car was parked in a turnout a few yards down the road from the grove. The engine crew had tried to resuscitate him as soon as they found the body, but to no avail, and he was declared dead over the phone by a medical examiner at 11:00 a.m. The fire department’s own investigator had been called, which Nyles knew from his own work with the LA Fire Department, was routine when there was a death by fire, and the investigator identified Martin from his driver’s license, which was in his wallet in his pants pocket. The report said that Martin was wearing pants, a shirt and socks and house slippers. Was that unusual, Nyles wondered, for a person with dementia to leave the house in his slippers? He’d taken out a small notebook and he

made a note of it to himself. He looked across the desk at Phil MacDonald. The sheriff was reading through the report again, even though he was no doubt the one who'd written it. Nyles continued reading. There was an abrasion on Martin's head, but the fire department investigator thought he had died from smoke inhalation. The report said he called the sheriff because of "the importance of the victim," and because he had an abrasion on his head, which raised the possibility that the death could be "suspicious." Nyles thought about the circumstances. Would such details have raised a question in his own mind? He wasn't sure. The slippers weren't odd given, his condition, but the abrasion needed an explanation. He kept reading. Sheriff MacDonald had verified everything observed by the fire department investigator. The car at the scene was Martin's Lexus, identified by the registration in its glove compartment, but no key was found on Martin's person or nearby. Another anomaly, Nyles thought, writing it down. Crime scene investigators had taken pictures of the scene and of the car, then the body was taken in for autopsy. The autopsy report, completed the next day, had found that Martin had, indeed, died of smoke inhalation and that the abrasion on his head was probably from a blow, perhaps caused by him hitting his head when he fell. It would not have caused death by itself, although perhaps unconsciousness.

Nyles looked up. "Was there anything around the body he could have hit his head on? Any blood on any rocks or branches?"

MacDonald had finished reading. He shook his head. "We didn't see anything. There were some fallen branches nearby, but none within five feet or so of the body. None of them had blood, but most of them were pretty badly charred. He also might have bumped into a low-hanging branch."

"Any blood on any of the branches?"

“Nope. But some of them were burned enough to have destroyed any traces of blood.”

“How about blood in the car?”

The sheriff shook his head again. “Nothing visible to the naked eye. There was no reason to examine the car in more detail, since, even at the scene, he appeared to have died from smoke inhalation.”

Nyles understood he meant they hadn’t asked CSI to examine the car for traces of blood. “You saw the abrasion. How much blood was there?”

“It was caked pretty thick, right at the top of his forehead,” he touched his own head to indicate the point of the wound. “The lack of blood at the scene was kind of a mystery, but a fire had gone through there and most of the leaves or branches that might have had blood on them had been burned.”

“Was *he* burned? His clothing?”

“Just barely. There was some singeing around his nostrils, indicating he had breathed in some very hot air, maybe even ashes. I saw it and so did the fire department investigator. It meant he was alive when he entered the grove. His clothing was mostly intact.”

“How smoky was it when you got there?”

“Not too bad. The fire department crew said it was worse when they arrived and probably a lot worse before they got there. A helicopter had spotted the fire and called it in.”

“How certain are you that there’s nothing suspicious about it?” Phil MacDonald was an experienced investigator; Nyles trusted his judgment.

“There’s some loose ends—the missing key and the head wound—but given that he had Alzheimer’s and the cause of death was clearly from smoke, it makes some sense that he got in his car that morning, drove down to the highway, then drove along the road, saw a small fire, got out to take a look and either couldn’t find his way back to his car, or hit his head on something, or fell down...or whatever. Without any reason to think otherwise, I’d say I’m 99% sure it was a fire-related accidental death. Like I said, we had more than two dozen of them that week in our county alone.” He was still chewing on the candy. He gazed across the desk at Nyles. His expression didn’t reflect any doubt about his statement.

Nyles nodded. He pushed the file back across the desk. “I might want to take a look at the crime scene photos, but first I want to talk. How about lunch?”

MacDonald smiled broadly. “And a beer?”

“Of course.”

Chapter 8

Over a beer and a corn beef sandwich with potato salad, Nyles watched Phil MacDonald pick at his shrimp salad, a look of distaste on his face, as he jealously eyed what Nyles was eating. They were sitting in Duffy's Irish Tavern, which was actually a pub-style restaurant in downtown Napa.

"I've put on almost fifteen pounds in three months, since I quit smoking," MacDonald confided, taking a drink of his beer. "I don't know how you stay so skinny."

"I never smoked," Nyles said. "Cloris never liked it, and I just never took up the habit. Why'd you stop?"

"I've got high blood pressure and diabetes, neither of which have gone down since I quit—probably because of the weight I've put on. I'm supposed to be exercising, but I can't get away from my desk. Maybe after we get past all this business from the fires...." He shrugged, as if he knew he was only hoping.

Phil MacDonald's health worries reminded Nyles of his own obsession about dementia. He took pills for his blood pressure which had been mildly elevated, and a statin to keep his cholesterol under control. "We're never very far away from health problems at our age," he said ruefully.

"At least we're still here... unlike poor Martin," MacDonald observed.

"Were you aware that Martin had received death threats?" Nyles asked.

MacDonald looked up suspiciously. "Who told you that?"

Nyles was surprised at MacDonald's reaction, but he wasn't sure what it meant. "Sarah. She said somebody named Giuseppe Malta had recently been released from prison and had threatened to expose something about Martin."

MacDonald's expression changed to irritation. He had a scowl on his face. "Malta's a blowhard and a hothead. He always claimed he was framed and that Overman was part of the frame. Martin was the prosecutor on his case."

Sarah had intimated as much. "What was he convicted of?"

"His trucking company had a contract with a distributing company that served the wine industry. He was convicted of siphoning off some large shipments and selling them... probably to overseas interests. He claimed it was another trucker that did it."

"But he was convicted," Nyles said.

"They found some of the shipments on his property. He said they were planted there by a competitor." It wasn't clear to Nyles if MacDonald believed Malta's story or not.

"Why did he blame Martin? He was only the prosecutor."

"The competitor was a big donor to Martin's campaign for DA. Malta claimed Overman knew the goods were planted by his competitor but refused to go after him because the competitor supported Martin's campaign."

The story made Nyles wonder. He'd never trusted Martin Overman—but then he didn't trust most politicians. It wouldn't surprise him to find that Martin had done some donors favors. But this sounded like a serious crime.

"What do you think?"

“Malta is a sleaze. He’d been involved in shady dealings before. I wouldn’t put it past him to steal from his customers. But then the other guys—the ones he said were the real culprits—aren’t all that lily white either.”

“Overman hasn’t been a prosecutor for almost twenty years. Malta must have gotten a long sentence if he just was released.”

“Martin threw the book at him. That’s another reason Malta was mad.”

“Mad enough to kill him?”

MacDonald gave Nyles a skeptical look. He let out a sigh. “There’s no reason to think Martin was murdered. He died from breathing too much smoke... just like 45 other people last week.”

“I think Sarah wants Martin’s case reopened.” Nyles said.

MacDonald frowned. “He had Alzheimer’s. His judgment was impaired.” He shook his head. “I know Sarah asked you to talk to me, but Jesus Christ, Nyles, there’s no evidence to justify a homicide investigation. You read the report.”

“There’s some loose ends. You said so yourself. You could reopen it for further investigation as a suspicious death. His wife said he never drove anymore, he had a wound on his head, he didn’t have his car keys on him.”

“That’s not enough to think someone killed him. The DA won’t go for something like that—especially in a high profile case like Martin’s.” MacDonald’s frown had widened into a scowl. “Besides, I can’t spare any investigators. Everyone is overloaded from the deaths and property losses associated with the fire. We even had some looting in houses that were evacuated. We’re too busy.”

“I can keep looking,” Nyles said.

“You? You’re retired.”

“As a cop I am, but I’m a licensed PI.”

“Really?” MacDonald’s face showed his surprise. He started to chuckle. “A private dick? You never told me that. Shouldn’t you be wearing a fedora? Are you carrying?”

Nyles shook his head. He wasn’t embarrassed by his private work. In fact, he knew how necessary it was for his own mental health. He wasn’t carrying a gun, but he kept one in his car. He didn’t mention that to MacDonald. “I consult on cold cases mostly—usually with police departments, well, LAPD mostly. I worked on a friend’s case once, his lawyer hired me. Actually I worked for free on that one.” He was talking about the time he had helped Father Tom O’Flannery when he’d been falsely accused of child molestation.

“If you’re thinking I’ll hire you, I can’t—not for this.”

“I’m not suggesting you hire me. Just share your information with me and I’ll do the legwork. If I find something, I’ll come back to you and ask you again about reopening the case—and share what I’ve found, of course.”

“I guess I can do that... for Sarah.” He looked his friend in the eye, as if searching for a hidden reason behind his request. “I thought you were just up here for the funeral, a little vacation maybe.”

Nyles thought about what MacDonald was saying. He realized it wasn’t just to fulfill Sarah’s request that he wanted to investigate Martin’s death. It was for the same reason that he continued with his private practice as an investigator. Without a case to work on, he felt himself descending into depression. For forty years his life had revolved around his career as a detective.

Other than Father Tom, the Irish-American priest, and Cloris, he had no close friends, no social life, and no hobbies. When he'd first retired, in order to help his wife with her recovery, he was busy enough that he wasn't bothered by leaving his job. But as his wife improved and needed him less, the weight of despair that he had associated with his fear of losing his wife attached itself to the lack of purpose in his own life. Cloris saw what was happening and suggested that he find some private work to keep him busy. The LAPD had hired him to look into some cold cases and he found that the involvement in tracking down murderers, particularly those who'd thwarted the other members of LA law enforcement buoyed his spirits. But it was a fragile respite. Every time he finished one case and had to wait for another, he could feel the ominous tug of gloom begin to pull him down. He'd finished his last case more than a month before. Now there was Martin.

MacDonald was staring at him, waiting for Nyles to answer.

"I just want to get Sarah's questions answered," he said, although he knew he was lying. He didn't want to go into his inner thoughts with MacDonald, even if he was a friend. Actually, he wasn't sure why Sarah wanted to find out if Martin had been murdered. He suspected that, despite her years of resentment toward her husband, her guilt in having left him alone, then finding that he'd wandered away and died was something that she was unable to bear. If someone else was responsible for his death, then her conscience would be salved. "And speaking of that, there's one more thing," he said.

MacDonald had finished his salad. He drained his beer and looked around as if wondering where the rest of the food was, then he turned back to Nyles. "What's that?"

“How about taking me to the crime scene... maybe now?”

MacDonald breathed a long sigh. “You really are going to do this, aren’t you?”

Nyles nodded. His friend’s skepticism bothered him, but not enough to persuade him to back off. In addition to his personal reasons for wanting a case to work on, something just didn’t feel right about the circumstances of Martin Overman’s death.

“OK, but just one thing,” MacDonald said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a fire scene, not a crime scene.” MacDonald was grinning, but his voice was serious.

Chapter 9

The partially blackened grove of trees was exactly as described in the police report and was recognizable from the crime scene photographs, which they'd stopped by the evidence room at the station to pick up on their way to visit the site where Martin's body had been found. The main difference from the crime scene photos was that the pile of limbs and brush that were in the pictures were no longer visible and a large mound of ashes, looking more like a pile of mud than burned leaves and branches, was in their place. The fire crew had burned them, then doused them in water to keep them from reigniting and spreading the fire.

Nyles and Phil MacDonald had driven in the sheriff's vehicle and they parked in the turnout where Martin Overman's car had been found. Highway 121 was busy with tourists today, only a week after the wildfires that had devastated the area.

Nyles examined the ground where the photos showed that Martin's car had been parked. "How long was Overman's car here before they towed it in?"

"I don't know," MacDonald answered. "The M.E. estimated he'd been dead only an hour or so, and they towed his car before I left the scene, so it was here maybe three hours total. Why?" He had stopped and was scratching his head. He seemed irritated that they were there in the first place and he was impatient to move to the grove and show Nyles around the scene.

"I can still see the outline of the car in the ashes. I assume it's his car, since there wouldn't have been any ashes falling on a car parked here after they put out the fire. There's some ashes where the car sat and a lot more outside of the outline, which means the fire in the grove was both already burning and deposited some ashes before he arrived, and it continued to burn, depositing more ashes after he parked here."

“It wasn’t a big fire, probably sparked by an ember carried by the wind from another fire. The winds were blowing hard that day—embers flying all over the place.”

Nyles thought about what the sheriff was saying. “So, if Martin stopped to look at the fire and the grove was already burning, it would mean he walked into the middle of a fire, even if it wasn’t a major one.”

“Hmm,” MacDonald grunted without commenting. He turned and headed toward the grove. Nyles followed him.

He could still smell the scent of the burned trees as he and the sheriff stood in the middle of the grove. Two of the trees were completely blackened, while the others showed various stages of destruction. Limbs had been sawed off several of the trees, becoming, Nyles assumed, part of the pile of branches and brush he had seen in the crime scene pictures and now part of the mound of soggy ashes near the edge of the grove.

Sheriff MacDonald held a photo out in front of him, trying to picture the exact location where Martin Overman’s body had been found. The picture showed the body as it lay under the trees. “It was right here,” MacDonald said, stepping onto the area where the body had lain. He handed Nyles the stack of photos, each one of the body, shot from different angles, all showing Martin’s face staring vacantly up at the sky.

“He was on his back when they found him?” Nyles asked.

“No. The fire crew turned him on his back in order to try to resuscitate him. They were sure he was dead, but they’re required to attempt resuscitation whenever they find a body that looks like it’s recently deceased, which he appeared to be. They said he’d been face down on his stomach, his hands at his sides when they found him.”

Nyles nodded. He looked around the area. The floor of the grove was weeds and grass, covered by leaves. All of them had been at least partially burned. He bent where the leaves were thickest and scraped them away, leaving some still fresh grass underneath.

MacDonald was watching him. “The fire began in the tops of the trees and mostly stayed up there,” the sheriff said. “Some of the leaves on the ground and some of the grass caught fire. The leaves and grass were dry. We haven’t had rain for a while.”

“And it generated a lot of smoke?” Nyles asked.

“That’s what the firemen said. They spotted the fire from a ‘copter in the air and sent the engine here, but the fire was nearly out when they got here.”

Nyles thought about what MacDonald had said. It seemed even more likely that Martin had walked into a very smoky fire area, probably with flames in the tops of the trees. Even for someone with dementia, such behavior seemed unlikely—but then he didn’t really know what people with dementia did or didn’t do. “Let me see the rest of the photos of the area,” he said to the sheriff.

He studied the photos closely, particularly two of them that contained pictures of the body. In the area around the body the ground had been disturbed by the fire crew, but Nyles thought he could see a path through the leaves, very faint and barely visible. He handed the photos to MacDonald. “Do you see a trail heading away from the body?”

MacDonald put on his glasses and looked closely at the photos. He looked up. “Could be. No one noticed it when we were here, not even me and not CSI. I don’t think anybody went over the pictures again, since the preliminary findings were that it was an accident and the autopsy seemed to confirm that... and like I said, we were pretty overworked.” He was frowning

“This looks as if he might have been dragged.”

MacDonald removed his glasses and stared at Nyles. He was still frowning. “The prosecutor isn’t going to open the case, Nyles. This isn’t enough.”

“The way I see it, Martin either walked into a burning grove, where the tops of the trees were on fire and there was smoke everywhere, then was overcome by smoke and fell down, somehow mysteriously bumping his head on a nonexistent branch or rock, and dying of smoke inhalation, or someone knocked him out and dragged him into a burning stand of trees and left him to die.” He stared back at MacDonald, waiting to hear his response.

MacDonald’s frown had become a scowl “Overman was a retired senator and district attorney—one of the most well-known men in the country; no one wants this to be murder.” He looked down at the ground and scuffed his foot through the leaves, like a kid admitting something he was ashamed of. “My hands are tied. If you want to look into it, I’ll give you whatever support I can. But you’ll have to find more than this for me to go to the prosecutor and ask him to reopen it.” He raised his eyes to look at Nyles. “I’m sorry, Nyles. That’s the best I can do.”

Nyles knew he was grasping at straws. Phil MacDonald said that no one wanted Martin Overman’s death to be a case of murder, but MacDonald was wrong. Nyles could feel himself becoming excited at the prospect of having a case to solve. He wasn’t ready to let Martin’s death go, not yet.

Chapter 10

Doctor Jerome Selfridge, the physician who was treating Martin's Alzheimer's, had his office in the medical building adjacent to the Queen of the Valley Medical Center, where he was a member of the Medical Center's Department of Neurology. Sarah had given the doctor permission to talk to Nyles about Martin's illness. She, herself, had told Nyles as much as she could about her husband's day to day functioning, but he wanted an expert opinion on just how confused Martin was and whether he could have driven a car or would have walked into a burning stand of trees.

An elderly woman and her husband, a dapper looking senior dressed in a pair of brown slacks, a white, open collar shirt and a light blue sport coat sat in the waiting room. The woman looked disoriented. She clearly hadn't fixed her hair, she wore no makeup, and she wore rolled up jeans, a pair of dirty sneakers and a sweatshirt that said UC Berkeley and had loose threads hanging from the ends of the sleeves. Nyles felt sorry for her husband. He remembered Cloris' rehabilitation and the strain it had put on him. Although he'd never told anyone, not even Father Tom, he'd had moments when he'd felt he couldn't go on—even, at one point, felt suicidal. But he always knew that Cloris depended on him and he couldn't let her down. He marveled that the neatly attired husband in front of him appeared to be able to maintain his composure so well.

A nurse appeared at a doorway leading from the waiting room. She looked at the elderly couple. "Doctor Waters will see you now." Nyles felt relieved that they weren't seeing Doctor Selfridge; he'd already been waiting for ten minutes.

The old couple stood and the wife heaved a sigh. Her husband had a smile on his face. He turned for the door leading back out into the hallway. "No Sal," his wife told him. "We have to

see the doctor first.” Her husband turned back toward her, a vacant look in his eyes. She guided him through the doorway toward the examination room.

Nyles leaned back and took a deep breath, realizing the reality of the situation he had just witnessed—and misinterpreted. He imagined Cloris having to take care of him the way this woman was taking care of her husband. The real victim in a case of Alzheimer’s was the partner, the loving caregiver.

The door opened again. “Mr. Monahan?” the young nurse with the benign smile on her face looked at him. “Doctor Selfridge will see you now.”

Doctor Selfridge was in his early forties, still fresh-faced, cheerful even, in his starched white coat, as he sat across his desk and looked at Nyles. “I understand you want to know about Martin Overman,” he said in a tone of friendly indulgence.

Nyles bristled—he wasn’t sure why—at the doctor’s upbeat attitude, his readiness to talk about dementia as if it were just another bothersome aspect of aging. *Maybe I’m projecting from my own anxiety*, Nyles thought, acutely aware of his fear of an illness he deeply dreaded. “I’m a friend of the family,” he said, trying not to let his distaste show. He should be grateful that the doctor was being cooperative and friendly. Maybe just being in a neurologist’s office put him in a negative mood. He couldn’t help but remember all the visits surrounding his wife’s illness—visits that always ended with guarded views of the prospects for Cloris’ full recovery. “I’m helping Sarah Overman get a better understanding of her husband’s death.”

The doctor’s expression became solemn. “Martin’s death was unfortunate. I’m afraid many of those who succumbed to the fire were elderly or disabled.”

Nyles wasn't sure if the doctor realized that Martin wasn't even as old as he was—it added to his irritation. He described how Martin had died—driving his car and then getting out and apparently walking into a grove of trees that was on fire. “Martin’s car was at the scene and it’s only an assumption that he drove it there. That’s one of the anomalies of his death. His wife says he hadn’t driven for two years. She didn’t think he was even capable of driving.”

The doctor looked confused. “But it sounds as if he did drive there.”

Was the doctor telling him that it was possible? “So he could have done it—driven on his own, that is—with his condition?” Nyles asked.

“I recommended he stop driving nearly two years ago. Martin had early onset Alzheimer’s dementia. The early onset type progresses rapidly, more so than dementia that develops later in life. Martin first showed signs of the disease four years ago—forgetfulness, momentary confusion. He was taking medications for his blood pressure and I saw him to evaluate whether his meds were causing his symptoms. It was quite clear that this was something else. After that first diagnosis, he deteriorated fairly rapidly. He was often confused, had a volatile temper; within the last year he could rarely remember what he had done or what had been said to him only minutes before. Only his long-term memory seemed to be somewhat intact, which is why he was trying to write a memoir, which I encouraged him to do, as much to give him a purpose as anything else. I’m not sure he could really write a coherent narrative.”

“So if he drove a car, what would happen?”

“He would become lost almost immediately. I’m sure he would have trouble just leaving his house.”

“He drove more than five miles. He not only left his house, he drove out the driveway, then down the road past the golf course, taking first a right then a left turn at intersections, then followed a larger road until another intersection, took a left, then turned onto the highway and drove another three or four miles before he stopped at a turnout on Route 121.” Nyles had driven the same route himself that morning, just to see how difficult it was.

The doctor’s face showed his shock. “That’s remarkable. I wouldn’t have believed that was possible.”

“So in your opinion it was impossible for him to do that?”

The doctor looked puzzled. “But you told me he did. I would have said it was impossible, but I obviously would have been wrong.”

“When he stopped, he left his car and walked into a grove of trees that was on fire. Apparently there were flames and a great deal of smoke. Would his dementia have caused him to do something like that?”

The doctor looked startled. “You mean that’s how he died? I thought perhaps his house had been one of those that burned.”

“He apparently fell down and was overcome by smoke.”

“His balance was impaired. Falling down makes sense, and he might have trouble getting up. But to answer your previous question, his dementia wouldn’t cause him to walk into a live fire, if that’s what he did. He was easily confused and disoriented, but even dumb animals—pardon my crude comparison—don’t enter fires. I suppose he could have been curious and gotten disoriented, but the whole scenario you describe, beginning with driving the car for that distance, is nothing I would have predicted he could or would have done.”

The doctor's opinion wasn't proof of anything, but it confirmed Nyles' suspicion that the official version of Martin Overman's death *could* be wrong. What bothered him was that he had no alternative explanation. "Thank you, doctor," he said. He was tempted to ask more questions about the early symptoms of Alzheimer's, but he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answers. He did have one question. "Early onset Alzheimer's such as Martin had, what causes that, does anyone know?" He knew that he was asking for himself.

"True Alzheimer's such as Martin seemed to have, when it occurs before age sixty five or so, is almost always related to a genetic predisposition. There are other types of dementia, the traumatic encephalopathy seen in football players or other victims of repeated head injury, that have early onset, although those too may require a genetic predisposition as well as additional trauma. As we get older, not only Alzheimer's but other types of dementia, from vascular impairment, for instance, become more likely, and there may be a predisposition to vascular disease, but it's probably more related to lifestyle in most cases."

Neither of Nyles' parents had lived to age sixty-five, his father having died of a stroke, probably due to his alcoholism and his mother of a heart attack. He might have a predisposition to cardiovascular disease, but it didn't sound as if Alzheimer's was a family trait. He felt mildly reassured. If he wasn't developing Alzheimer's yet—and he still worried that he might be—he'd probably die from something else before he developed old-age dementia. Armed with this Pyrrhic victory, he stood and shook the doctor's hand and left.

Chapter 11

As soon as he got back in his car, Nyles' cell phone buzzed. It was Cloris, who had gone with Sarah that morning to visit the local theater, where some of the amateur actors were eager to meet Cloris, who was still well-known from her acting career. He could hear the urgency in his wife's voice. She told him that she and Sarah had returned home and found that the house had been broken into. Nyles told her to have Sarah call the Napa police and he'd return to the house as quickly as possible.

A Napa City Police unit sat in the driveway as Nyles pulled up to the house. He thought they must have been nearby to have responded so quickly, although the downtown police headquarters was closer to the Overmans' house than was the Medical Center where he had been when he got the call from Cloris. He entered the house and found a young female, Hispanic-looking uniformed officer standing in the kitchen writing on an iPad on the countertop. Cloris and Sarah were sitting in the living room and they both got up when he entered the house, looks of relief on both of their faces.

"Tell me what happened," Nyles said, addressing Cloris and Sarah, rather than the policewoman, who had stopped typing into her iPad and was staring at Nyles, as if she were wondering who he was.

"This is my husband," Cloris told the police officer. "He's an ex-policeman."

Nyles felt embarrassed. He hadn't meant to ignore the police officer, but he was used to entering a crime scene and being the one in charge, and he'd automatically gone into his investigative mode as soon as he'd entered the house. He put out his hand and introduced himself.

The woman's name was Gloria Maderos and she gazed at Nyles with a wary expression on her face, as if she expected him to pull rank on her, even though she'd been told he was retired and she knew he wasn't from the Napa Police Department. "I think it would be good for your wife and Mrs. Overman to go over everything again, for both your benefit and mine," she said.

"That sounds like a good idea," he said. He didn't want to alienate the officer and he knew uniform cops often thought that detectives treated them as if they were brainless. He also knew the uniform officer's fear was often justified and that such treatment was especially likely to occur if the uniformed officer was a woman and even more so if she was Hispanic. He wondered if his own implicit prejudices had influenced how he'd treated the officer. He dismissed his thoughts and tried to focus on the situation at hand.

Sarah told him and the officer that she and Cloris had come back home and parked in the driveway and come in through the front door, which she'd found unlocked. She thought that was odd, since she'd remembered locking the door when they'd left. She'd not noticed anything missing until she entered the study to get an article about the theater from the file cabinet. The cabinet was open and files were strewn about the top of the desk. Then she saw that her computer was gone, too, as was Martin's. "I never take my computer from the study and of course there is no reason for Martin's computer to have been moved."

"I took Martin's computer," Nyles said. He felt embarrassed that he'd taken the computer without asking. "It's in the guest room. You'd gone to bed so I didn't have a chance to ask you if it was Ok, but I haven't opened it yet."

Sarah looked puzzled. "Why do you want to open Martin's computer?"

“I’d like to see what he was writing in his memoir, which you’d said was on the computer. I was looking for more clues as to what might have happened to him.”

“So only one computer was stolen?” The young officer asked, looking confused, a note of impatience in her voice. She looked at Nyles then at Sarah. She had her iPad in her hand, poised to write.

“They only took *my* computer,” Sarah answered. “I can’t imagine why.”

“Were any files missing from the cabinet?” Nyles asked.

Sarah looked confused. “I don’t know. A lot of them were on the desk, but they were Martin’s files from his years as a senator. I don’t know what he had in them and what he didn’t. I had my own file drawer in the same cabinet, but it hadn’t been touched.”

“Were the file drawers labeled with your names?” Nyles asked.

Sarah nodded.

“And no other rooms had been touched, so far as you can tell. Is that right Mrs. Overman?” the officer asked.

Sarah nodded again. “I should go over everything more thoroughly, but I can’t see anything missing or even disturbed outside of the study.”

“It sounds as if whoever it was, was looking for something very specific... evidently something related to your husband... your late husband,” Officer Maderos said. She looked over at Nyles, as if to see if he agreed.

“They might even have taken your computer because they thought it was Martin’s.” Nyles said. He looked at Gloria Maderos. “What about the front door, was there any sign of

forced entry?” He knew he would examine the door himself later, but he wanted to show respect for the investigating officer.

Officer Maderos shook her head. “Either the door was unlocked or whoever came in had a key.” She turned to Sarah. Cloris was standing next to Sarah and had one arm around her waist, as if to support her. “Who else besides you has a key to your house?”

Sarah thought for a moment. “My son—we have a housekeeper, she has a key— she used to watch Martin if I had to be gone for a long time,” she turned to Cloris. “I never told Martin that was why she was here. He always thought she was just doing extra cleaning.” She turned back to the officer. “His secretary, Shari Randall had a key. I can’t remember if she gave it back after Martin... after Martin died.”

“Martin’s car keys were never found,” Nyles said. “Was there a house key on his key chain?”

“I don’t remember,” Sarah answered, a look of surprise on her face. “You mean if someone drove Martin from the house, they might have come back?” Her voice was fearful.

Nyles shook his head. He hadn’t meant to alarm her. “I don’t mean anything. I’m just trying to account for any keys that might be out there. Whoever broke into your house apparently had one.” He looked at Officer Maderos. “There could be prints, probably smudged by all of us using the front door handle and then Mrs. Overman looking through the study, but it might pay to have someone check the file cabinet.”

The police officer looked doubtful “We don’t usually take prints in a small break-in like this.”

“The Sheriff’s Department is still looking into Mrs. Overman’s husband’s death,” Nyles lied. “There could be a connection.”

Officer Maderos still looked reluctant.

“ I can call your bosses if you’d like... or have Sheriff MacDonald call them.”

She shook her head, and directed an irritated look at Nyles. “I’ll put in a request. Mr. Overman was a very important man in this county... in the state, even. They’ll probably go along with it.”

“Thank you,” Nyles said. “I’ll have someone from the Sheriff’s Department contact your department to see what they’ve found.” Phil MacDonald wasn’t going to be happy about this development, but Nyles was pretty sure, he’d cooperate if Nyles asked him to. This might even be a factor in getting him to reconsider reopening the case. Fingerprints weren’t likely to produce anything, since there were no prints to compare them to from the crime scene where Martin died, but it wouldn’t hurt to have any new print on file in case something turned up later... and whoever broke into the house could be someone with a record. He thought about Giuseppe Malta.

Office Maderos put her iPad back in its case. “Obviously you shouldn’t touch anything in the study until after they’ve collected prints,” she told Sarah. “And you should come down to the station so we can print you... and anyone else whose prints would be in the room... you mentioned a secretary. Someone will call you within the next hour or so to come over and dust the room for prints.” She looked from one to another of them. “Anything else I should know?”

No one said anything.

The officer left. Cloris and Sarah looked at each other, then at Nyles. “Anyone want a glass of wine?” Sarah asked.

Cloris nodded. “Absolutely!”

“I’m going to check Martin’s laptop,” Nyles said. “Is there a password I need to know?”

Sarah shook her head. “Martin wouldn’t have been able to remember one.”

The same problem I often have, Nyles thought to himself.

Chapter 12

The memoir was clearly labeled in Martin's document directory, and, so far as Nyles could tell, it was the only file that had recently been accessed. Apparently Martin had used his computer for little else in the last year. In fact, according to Sarah and Ronnie, it had been Shari Randall who had used the computer to type Martin's recollections. It seemed odd to Nyles that the memoir was being typed on Martin's computer at all, instead of on the secretary's, and he checked the sent emails and found that, indeed, the secretary had been regularly sending herself copies of the memoir, perhaps at the end of each of their sessions.

The document began with a chronology of Martin Overman's career, which Nyles assumed had either been written by the secretary or by Martin early in the progression of his disease. As soon as he got beyond the introductory section, the coherence of the memoir deteriorated rapidly. In fact, the bulk of the document was a series of bulleted events, with dates on most, but not all of them and comments by Martin following each. The lack of chronology or any other clear kind of order made the narrative difficult to follow. It seemed to Nyles to be a path of loose associations: the mention of an event, a location, or a person in one entry was followed by something tangentially related to it in the next entry, jumping back and forth between years and events. More often than not, the association between one entry and the next was completely obscure. Although the whole document was just over thirty pages, Nyles realized that it would take him hours to make sense of the circuitous narrative, if that's what it could be called.

He quickly tired from the mental effort of trying first to decipher and then to understand the significance of each passage in the memoir. He got up from the desk, then left the study and entered the living room. Cloris and Sarah were sitting talking. They were both drinking white

wine. Sarah still looked spooked from the break-in, a reaction Nyles recognized from his years of interviewing victims as a police detective. Cloris was plying her with wine and trying to distract her by describing her own work with women in Hollywood who had been assaulted by men they worked for or with. From what Nyles could hear, as he made himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, the topic was one to which Sarah was sympathetic and she was beginning to become engaged in the conversation, despite her lingering trauma.

Nyles returned to the study with a fresh cup of coffee, which he hoped would sharpen his critical skills as he delved back into the document, looking for clues within the sometimes-verbatim recording of the wanderings of a mind that had clearly lost its bearings. The divergent threads of associations in the story reminded Nyles of some of his own patterns of thinking and, to his consternation, brought a return of his anxiety regarding his own mental capacities. He told himself that much of the way Martin's mind worked was the way all minds worked when they were recollecting the past, only Martin was less in control of the direction his thoughts took him. Nyles didn't think his thoughts was plagued by the kind of chaos he was seeing on the computer... or at least he hoped that weren't. He knew that his own worries were clouding his ability to concentrate on the memoir and he made a conscious effort to push them out of his mind.

He found several references to Giuseppe Malta, the trucker that Martin had sent to jail, most of the comments acrimonious. If Malta was bitter toward Overman, it was obvious that the feeling was mutual. Martin referred to Malta as a "crook", a "low-life" and even as an "Italian Mafia-type" although there was no outright accusation that the trucker was associated with the infamous crime syndicate. Martin seemed to use the characterization as more of an ethnic stereotype. In fact, stereotypes and prejudices against racial and ethnic groups were sprinkled

throughout the document. Nyles wasn't surprised. In their various times together, he had heard Martin voice several derogatory racial statements and tell ethnic jokes, all of them in bad taste and embarrassing to his wife and to anyone else who had to listen to them.

What intrigued Nyles were the other comments Martin had made regarding Giuseppe Malta. He mentioned that the trucker should have gone to jail "even if he didn't do it," not saying what the "it" was. There was also some talk about a "friend" whose company got a trucking contract instead of Malta's. He bragged that only he and the owner of the other trucking company knew the truth about what happened. There was a strong suggestion that Martin and someone else had done something illegal in order to take a contract away from Giuseppe Malta—and send him to prison— although there were no details about how that might have been done.

No wonder Malta was angry. Angry enough to have killed Martin Overman? Sarah had said that Malta had threatened to expose Martin in some way. Nyles wondered what Malta knew or didn't know. Had he broken into the house to find out more? Nyles needed to learn more, himself.

Most of the other accounts in the memoir were just ramblings about how powerful Overman was when he was in the senate, about the parties he attended with other influential Sacramento politicians and government officials and a lot of bragging about his sexual conquests. It was a good thing Sarah hadn't read the memoir... or perhaps she already knew about her husband's behavior. Martin had always been a braggart and a boor and Sarah could hardly have been blind to what he must have been doing when he was away in the state capital. If the secretary had told Ronnie about his father's reports of infidelity, it would only have added to the son's hatred of his father.

The only other entry that caught Nyles' eye had to do with a lawsuit filed against a group of winegrowers. Martin didn't say what it was about but described the episode as one of his "biggest accomplishments." He bragged that his effort on behalf of a group of winegrowers had put enough money in his campaign coffers to insure future victories in his senate races but also to line his own pocket with concealed money given to him under the table. He hinted that his son, Ronnie had been involved in some way and lamented that it was "the only time Ronnie ever did something for his old man." The whole description sounded to Nyles like another shady deal, this one involving both a group of wine growers and his son.

Nyles closed the computer. He had no doubt that some of the material in Martin's memoir, confused as it might be, was explosive. It concerned both a trucking company scandal that may have involved framing an innocent man as well as an instance of bribery from a group of winegrowers. Only Martin's impaired judgment would have allowed him to dictate such incriminating evidence to his secretary and have her record it in his memoir. And clearly, someone didn't want its contents to get out. The break-in of the house proved that. But they had taken the wrong computer. Nyles figured that fact alone eliminated the secretary, or even Ronnie, as culprits in the burglary, because both of them had keys and would have known which computer was Sarah's and which was Martin's. Anyway, Shari Randall, the secretary had emailed herself the memoir every time there was a new entry.

Whoever had entered the house and taken Sarah's computer didn't want the memoir to see the light of day. The only way someone would know what was contained in the memoir—or even that such a document existed— was if they'd been told about it. The person who knew the most about what Martin was babbling about in his confused memoir was Shari Randall. Nyles decided that he needed to have a talk with the secretary.

Chapter 13

The sky to the west was streaked with orange-pink clouds, as if someone were shining a filtered light on the scene, as Nyles drove along Route 121 toward Sonoma. The orange sphere of the sun was just visible, low on the horizon, as it descended over the Pacific Ocean, fifty miles away. Along the roadside, orderly rows of grapevines disappeared over low hills, like lines of battlefield *cheval de frise*, fading into the dusk. Nyles had been told that more than 90% of the grapes had been picked before the massive fires, sparing the bulk of the region's annual three billion dollar crop. Those same fires had devastated trees and brush and many residences further north, but there was only scant evidence of their destruction alongside this highway, one instance being the blackened grove of trees where Martin Overman's body had been found. Sarah had given Nyles Shari Randall's address and he decided to show up at her door rather than to call and be told that she was too busy to see him. It was evening and she ought to be home from work by the time Nyles arrived at her house in Sonoma. When Nyles had left Sarah's house, Cloris and Sarah were still talking about Cloris' campaign to get women to come forward and describe their experiences of abuse. It was clear to Nyles that they were more comfortable talking without him around, and neither of them objected when he said he was going to visit Martin's former secretary to gather more information about the memoir she had been typing for him.

Shari Randall lived in a small, but attractive cottage in a semi-rural neighborhood on the outskirts of Sonoma. The all-wood, single-story house had deep, wine-red painted shutters and was surrounded by a low rustic looking wooden fence with bright red bougainvillea weaving between its gnarled rails, as if the owner was deliberately giving it a storybook appearance. The walkway to the front door was made of wooden planks bordered by gravel. A small polished bronze bell hung next to the door, but Nyles knocked—unsure whether or not the bell was meant

to serve as ringer or was decorative. Shari looked confused when she opened the door, but after a moment she recognized the man whom she had met at Martin Overman's funeral.

"Mr. Monahan?" she asked, a note of suspiciousness in her voice, although she had a polite smile on her face, which still wore makeup, Nyles assumed, from her day at work.

He did his best to return her polite smile. "You have a good memory, Miss Randall. May I come in?"

She remained standing in the doorway. She was without shoes, but she was dressed in a skirt and blouse, further giving him the impression that she had just arrived home from work. Nyles again marveled at how attractive she was. She looked at him quizzically. "What is this about?"

He told her that he'd read Martin's memoir on his computer and he had some questions about it.

She didn't move from the doorway. "I doubt that his memoir will ever be published, now that he's dead. If you read it, you know that it didn't make much sense."

"I read it, but I have some questions. May I come in?"

Reluctantly, she opened the door and stepped back so he could enter.

The interior of the house had the same dollhouse quality as did the outside, with grape-decorated covers on the couch and chairs, and wine-glass ornamented drapes on the windows. Nyles found it almost overwhelming, but he didn't want to show his distaste. "Very nice, very... wine country," he said, looking around the room.

"I'm a big fan of wine," she answered, blushing. She had closed the door but was still standing in front of it. Nyles was also standing. He could see that she was uncomfortable and he

didn't want to intrude further than he already had. "I've probably gone a bit overboard in my decorating... some of my friends think so" she said. She turned and walked toward the kitchen, which had a central island above which copper pans and kettles hung. She'd obviously gone to some effort to create a country kitchen effect that matched the theme of the rest of the house. "I just got home from work," she said as she entered the kitchen. "I was going to have a glass of wine, would you like one?"

He knew she was hoping he'd leave, and he guessed that his presence had unsettled her enough that she needed to calm herself with a glass of wine. Joining her would at least give him time to ask a few questions. He nodded, then took a seat on the chair and pulled a copy of the memoir, which he had printed, from the breast pocket of his sport coat. Nyles had never gotten over feeling he should dress with some formality when he was doing investigating, even when he was doing it on his own, not as a policeman. It had been a source of good-natured ribbing among his colleagues when he had been a detective—they often dressed in jeans and shirtsleeves—and Cloris had told him it was a holdover from being raised in Boston, in an era when suits and ties were the rule for any working person. At least he wasn't wearing a tie, he thought.

"I hope red is alright" Shari said, handing him a glass of ruby colored wine and sitting down on the couch with a similar glass in her own hand. "Is that the memoir?" she asked, eyeing the papers in his hand, an expression of apprehension on her face. She sat primly, her knees together and her wine glass held in two hands and resting on her knees, and an apprehensive expression on her face, although she was doing her best to smile, looking—except for the wine glass—like an interviewee for a new job. Nyles again thought that her good looks had probably been one of the reasons that Martin had hired her. . . given his womanizing tendencies, as he'd described them in the memoir.

He told her about reading the document on Martin's computer, although he didn't mention the break-in or that Martin's files had been ransacked. If she were aware of the burglary, he was hoping she'd reveal it by something she said. He told her about the two parts of the memoir that mystified him—the insinuations that Giuseppe Malta had been framed and the mention of receiving money from wine growers to prevent legislation related to a lawsuit he didn't understand. He asked her if Martin had said anything more about either of the topics than what was recorded in the memoir.

He could see by the way she fidgeted with her glass that his question put her on edge. “I really don't know any more than what was in the memoir, Mr. Monahan. Mr. Overman talked about things and I typed what he said. That's all I know.” Nyles was used to detecting when someone was lying, and he was sure that Shari Randall wasn't telling him the truth.

“You were worried enough to tell his son Ronnie what he was saying.”

She looked genuinely surprised, then took a long sip of her wine. “Did Ronnie tell you that?”

“He told both his mother and me that his father had been saying some damaging things in his memoir. He said you'd told him about them. He even mentioned it in front of you at the Overmans' house, remember?”

He could see by the way she glanced away and fingered her wine glass that his comment had aroused her anxiety. “I forgot. Mr. Overman did mention his son in one part of the memoir, and I thought Ronnie should know. After all, it was Ronnie who got me the job with his father.”

“Did he ask you to keep him informed about what his father was putting in the memoir?”

He could see his question made her even more nervous. “I don’t remember exactly. He wanted to be sure his father didn’t embarrass himself.”

“So you told Ronnie about the lawsuit and the money from some winegrowers, is that right?”

She gazed at the floor. “I don’t remember.”

“You work for a group of winegrowers, isn’t that correct?”

Her eyes widened in panic. “Ronnie got the job for me. It has nothing to do with anything in the memoir.”

“Ronnie is very helpful in finding you jobs.”

“He felt bad that my job with his father ended when he died. That’s’ all it was.” She was looking around the room as if searching for a way to escape.

He could push her further, but Nyles had interviewed enough witnesses to know that he wasn’t going to get the truth from her, even though he was sure that she knew more...more that she didn’t want to talk about. Anyway, he felt awkward, grilling her as if she were a witness, when he wasn’t in any official capacity. Nyles wondered whom she was frightened of. Was it Ronnie? Or perhaps the winegrowers—whoever they were. Was her new job with a group of winegrowers just a coincidence, or was it the same group, and could it be a payoff for her silence about what she’d learned? He was imagining all sorts of things, but he really knew nothing. He thanked her for the wine and for answering his questions, then left.

He noticed the car as soon as he pulled out of the secretary’s driveway. It had been sitting down the road, too far away for him to identify the make in the dark, and when he headed away from the house, it pulled in behind him, following about an eighth of a mile back. He tried

speeding up, but the lights behind him remained at the same distance. If someone was following him, they must know who he was. No one was going to follow a random visitor to Shari Randall's house. Somebody was trying to put a scare into him.

When he turned onto Route 121, the car behind him was still behind him. After a mile or so it began to get closer. He felt his palms sweating, feeling slick on the steering wheel. He hoped that he wouldn't lose control of the car. The distance between the two cars had closed to barely over a car length. Whoever it was, had his lights on bright and Nyles adjusted his mirror, but the whole inside of his car was lit up by the other car's headlights. He thought about slamming on his brakes, but he didn't really want to get involved in an accident with them, whoever they were—even if it would be their fault. He might be able to outrun them, but what if he couldn't? A high-speed chase along an unfamiliar dark country road sounded more dangerous than what was happening right now.

The car was inching toward his. He maintained his speed and the other driver stayed a short twenty feet behind, even though he was traveling at sixty miles per hour. The sweat was pouring off his face and he could feel it under his arms and starting to run down his back. He was clenching his teeth. After three or four minutes the other car began to drop back. By the time he reached his exit, it was no longer in sight. Nyles breathed a sigh of relief. Had it just been some drunk teenager having fun? He didn't think so. The car had followed him from the time he'd left Shari Randall's house. He was being given a message: stop investigating Martin Overman's death. That was exactly what he wasn't going to do.

When he entered the house, he was met with nothing but quiet. It wasn't late, but he guessed that both his wife and Sarah had gone to bed. Three empty bottles of wine were sitting on the kitchen counter. They'd both drunk quite a bit. That was fine for Sarah, but Nyles worried

about Cloris. The neurologist who had treated her had said that she was permitted moderate alcohol consumption, but not at the levels she had become accustomed to before her stroke. This had presented no problem for her before the trip to Napa, but now she seemed to be keeping up with her friend's pace of alcohol consumption drink for drink.

When he crawled into bed, Cloris was snoring softly. She stirred, but didn't wake when he slid next to her. He could smell the wine she'd drunk. He lay in bed staring at the ceiling. An hour earlier he had been frightened for his own life. Now he was worried about his wife's.

Chapter 14

Nyles and Cloris were having morning coffee together in the Overmans' kitchen. Sarah had gone out shopping, and "to give the two of you a little time alone," she'd said. In his days as a cop, Nyles had been obsessed with his cases and he devoted most of his waking hours to working on them. When he and Cloris had their rare moments together, he liked to feel as if he could get away from his job, so they rarely discussed his work. After she had become ill, things changed. When he began taking private cases, he often brought them home and shared them with his wife. He found Cloris' insights surprisingly helpful.

He told Cloris what he had found so far, leaving out the incident of the car following him after his visit with the secretary. He wanted to share things with his wife, but he didn't want her worried. He knew he was being overprotective, an attitude he'd acquired as a result of her illness, and one he found hard to overcome.

"You really think that Martin may have been murdered?" Cloris asked. She couldn't conceal her surprise, but Nyles knew that she wouldn't doubt whatever his conclusion turned out to be. Cloris had always had absolute faith in his ability as a detective.

He thought for a moment—about what he'd learned both from the crime scene and from the memoir. "I'm suspicious," he answered. "I'm not sure how much I'm chasing my imagination versus real leads."

Cloris sipped her coffee, waiting for him to continue.

"The most suspicious thing is the break-in here at their house. It clearly wasn't a garden variety robbery—whoever did it had a key, and they only took a computer. From the fact that

he—or she—went through Martin’s files, I’m sure they thought they’d taken Martin’s computer.”

“In order to read the memoir?”

He nodded. “I assume so. Unless there’s something else that I’m missing in another file. I only looked at the Word documents.”

“Do you want me to look?” Cloris was more computer literate than he was. Her speech therapist had taught her to use a computer as part of her rehabilitation after her stroke, and Cloris had gotten used to using the device. Now she used it for email and for accessing social media, and she had become quite adept.

He realized that his wife might find something he had overlooked. “That would be great. Something might catch your eye.”

“If the secretary is involved in some way, why wouldn’t she just give her copy of the memoir to whomever wants it? You said she copied the whole thing.”

“Someone could be trying to get rid of Martin’s copy, meaning they already know what it says. That would implicate Shari Randall, since she’s the only one who knows what’s in the memoir. But she wouldn’t have broken into the house, although she had a key. She could have just erased the memoir if she wanted to, and she knew perfectly well which computer belonged to Martin and which to Sarah.”

“What about Ronnie?” Cloris asked. “You said he knew what was in memoir.”

He drank some more coffee, thinking about her comment. He had a hard time believing a son would kill his father, even though he knew that it sometimes happened. “Ronnie wouldn’t send someone to break into his mother’s house when he could just come in and take the

computer himself; or simply erase the memoir,” he said. “And Ronnie wouldn’t kill his own father.”

Cloris raised her eyebrows in a skeptical look. “He admitted hating him. And he felt his mother needed protection from Martin.”

“Ronnie may be involved in some way,” he said, thinking about the son getting Shari the job so he could keep an eye on what was in his father’s memoir, “...but I can’t believe he killed Martin. I certainly hope not. It would destroy Sarah, don’t you think?” He couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to find out that your child killed his father.

Cloris nodded. “It would devastate her.” She hesitated, a pensive look on her face. “Perhaps you shouldn’t pursue this,” she said.

“You mean drop the whole thing?” He felt his anxiety rising. He had a fleeting thought that he might be treating Martin’s death as a murder because of his own need, not because that’s what it was.

“I’m not sure why Sarah wanted you to look into it in the first place. She only asked you to talk to Phil MacDonald, remember. She’s starting to get over Martin’s death and the more you dig up, the harder it’s going to be for her to move on.”

“Martin’s doctor agreed with her that Martin couldn’t have driven to that fire on his own. . . and don’t forget the break-in.”

She looked at him. “I don’t know. Has Phil MacDonald called it a murder yet?”

“Not yet. He will if I find enough evidence.”

“Are you sure you’re not doing this because you’re bored?”

“You mean maybe I should take up golf, instead?”

She frowned at his attempt at humor. "I'm serious."

The truth was, he wasn't sure, but he also wasn't sure if he wanted to admit that to her. "No, I'm not sure," he finally answered. He weighed whether to tell her about being chased after visiting Shari Randall, but decided against it. "Maybe I'll just poke around a little more then turn it over to Phil MacDonald. He can decide if it merits any further investigation." Even as he said it, he knew that he wouldn't be able to let the case go. "How's Sarah doing, by the way?" He wanted to change the subject.

Cloris told him that Sarah was coping well. "She's used to having Martin around, but she didn't love him anymore... she hadn't for a long time."

After reading about Martin's affairs, Nyles wasn't surprised that Sarah no longer loved him. He wondered how much of her husband's philandering she was aware of. "She shouldn't read his memoir; it will just make her angrier at him. He viewed himself as quite the ladies' man in Sacramento."

"She suspected as much." She looked up at her husband. "She wants to take our campaign against male sexual abuse to Sacramento. She says the women who work in politics are taken advantage of all the time."

"She'll probably find out things about her husband, she'd rather not know. He only left Sacramento three years ago."

"I think she's ready for that. I think it could help her get over his death. She wants to face the truth about her life, what she allowed to happen by being married to Martin."

"It wasn't her fault."

“She feels as if she allowed it to happen by sticking her head in the sand. I think she feels guilty about it.”

“At least it’s over now.” He realized that his words made it sound as if Martin’s death was a fortunate occurrence. He felt a momentary stab of guilt. Guilt had always been an occupational hazard for him—much more than for his fellow officers. He knew he often blamed himself for things that were outside of his control.

“Not in her mind. I think she wants to finally fight back.”

“So she’s going to go to Sacramento and talk to people?”

“To women. . .” she looked at Nyles, as if gauging his reaction. “We’re both going. My work in Hollywood put me in touch with some women in the capital who are looking into this.”

Nyles felt his anxiety rising again. He had been separated from Cloris before, such as when he’d gone to Boston to assist Father Tom, but she had always remained at home. Now she wanted to go somewhere on her own. He knew she could handle it, plus she’d have Sarah with her, but it would be the first time they’d been apart like this since her stroke.

“I can see you’re worried,” she said. She reached over and put her hand on his. “I’ll be fine. I’m fully recovered. Besides, Sarah will be with me.”

He nodded. *And the two of you will be drinking heavily*, he thought. He needed to talk to Cloris about her drinking, he told himself, but not yet. He remembered the terrible arguments they ‘d had about her drinking before her stroke. His concern for her always ended up coming out as criticism more than support. He didn’t want to reenter that hell. Mostly, he didn’t want her health to be at risk again. Perhaps he was worrying too much. Sarah was still adjusting to the loss of her husband and perhaps her drinking would slow before the two of them left. Then

Cloris' would too. He held out such hope, but it didn't stop him from worrying. "I'm sure you'll be fine," he said.

Chapter 15

The Napa Valley Register occupied a low-one story building in an industrial area across the Napa River, a few miles from the Overmans' house and not far from downtown. A middle-age woman, her hair graying and piled on her head in a bun, a bright and cheerful smile on her face, occupied the front desk in the lobby of the paper. A nameplate on the counter top read *Beatrice Smalley*. Nyles asked the woman if they had a room where he could look through issues from previous years. She asked if he was searching for anything in particular.

He told her he was interested in a lawsuit against several wineries. He thought it was about six or seven years ago.

The woman's expression was blank, although she continued to smile at him. His request obviously hadn't rung a bell with her. "Let me call Mr. Major," she said. "He's in charge of the archives and he can help you. He remembers every big story we ever printed." She picked up a phone and asked someone to come to the front desk.

An elderly man, bald, skinny, wearing glasses and in his shirtsleeves, with his back bent at an almost forty-five degree angle, came through a door behind her. He looked at Nyles. "What can I help you with. I'm Daniel Major, in charge of the paper's archives... among other things."

Nyles wondered if it was just coincidence that the man in charge of the archives looked as though he were archaic himself. Was he really in charge of "other things," or was he just a typical old man trying to exaggerate his importance? Nyles reiterated what he was looking for.

Daniel Major motioned for him to come through the swinging gate next to the front desk and follow him into the back of the building. "I remember the story," the old man said, as they walked down a hallway, on either side of which were offices with people working. Although he

was bent over, he walked with a brisk step, his head bobbing up and down like a crane's. Nyles had to hurry to keep up with him. "It was big news in some of the larger papers and on TV, but we mostly limited our coverage to the wine section of the paper. The big bosses didn't want to give too much attention to it as a news story."

"Why is that?" Nyles asked. He was impressed by the man's memory. Was his memory going to be that good at the same age? Was it now? It bothered him that he couldn't stop worrying about his mental abilities. He wondered if Daniel Major ever had such worries.

"The wine industry drives our economy here in the valley. They didn't want to spread alarm among the tourists."

"But the paper did cover the story?" He assumed it had or the old man wouldn't be leading him back to the archive section.

"Howard Goode, whose bread and butter was writing about local wines, got interested and he did a lot of digging," Daniel Major continued. "I know Howard pretty well. We both worked for the paper for a lot of years. Most of what he found they wouldn't let him publish, but he wrote a few stories."

It sounded to Nyles as if he'd do better interviewing Howard Goode than reading old newspaper articles. He asked if he could talk to Howard Goode.

"Howard retired right after," the old man looked up toward the ceiling, or at least as far as he could, given his crooked frame, as if he were figuring in his head. "I'd say in 2011. He was pretty angry that they stopped him from revealing everything he knew."

They'd arrived at a back room that had shelves lined with boxes, the contents of which, Nyles assumed, were old newspapers. There were also a pair of ancient microfiche machines against one wall and two desk-top computers next to them.

"2010 would be digitized," the old man said. "You can use the computer. I'll show you how to do a search."

The old man's computer skills were as sharp as his memory, making Nyles feel at first envious, then guilty for begrudging the old man his cognitive health. After a short tutorial on the archive's search program, Nyles easily found the few stories that the paper had published about the lawsuit. Daniel Major was right, the stories were in the wine section of the paper, not in its news section. The issue seemed to have been that findings from an independent laboratory had found that a number of low-priced California wines contained potentially hazardous levels of arsenic. The Register's initial story, written by Howard Goode, was mostly informative, citing the laboratory findings and then the wine industry's response, which was that the lab results were both inaccurate and meaningless. Subsequent stories, written by guest columnists, who appeared to represent the wine growers, focused on scientific opinions that the levels of arsenic were harmless and tried to undermine the group of citizens who had filed the lawsuits as attention-seekers trying to make a name for their environmental organization. Howard Goode's name appeared again on three articles which drew attention to efforts by local winegrowers to fight a movement in Sacramento to develop regulations regarding arsenic levels in wine and to require such levels be included on labels. Senator Martin Overman was mentioned as a leader in that fight to kill the bills. Both efforts at regulation failed and Senator Overman was credited with insuring their demise.

Nyles could find no mention of accusations concerning the bribes that Martin had talked about in his memoir. Did Howard Goode know about the bribes, but wasn't allowed to write about them? Was that what made him angry enough to quit the newspaper? Nyles next talk would be with Howard Goode.

Chapter 16

Beatrice Smalley had no hesitation revealing Howard Goode's address, telling Nyles that "Howard likes to talk about the old days at the paper. He knows the wine business better than anyone."

Nyles drove north on Route 29 toward St. Helena, where Beatrice had told him that Howard Goode lived. As soon as he was a few miles north of Napa he could see the widespread damage from the wildfires in the blackened hills on either side of the highway, making them look like charred battlegrounds from some war torn country. Despite the devastation, the vineyards, which lined both sides of the road with their rows of green vines and were home to some of the valley's most well-known wineries, appeared untouched. He had read that it was the forests and even some of the winery buildings that had suffered more than the less combustible vineyards themselves, even those on the famous Silverado Trail, which ran, like a jeweled thread, with its prestigious wineries, along the base of the hills. The wine-rich hills around St. Helena, a small town of a little over 6,000 people, seemed to have been spared from the recent blazes.

Nyles remembered visiting the quaint village on a few occasions when he and Cloris were younger. Martin and Sarah had brought them here for wine tastings and dinner. St. Helena was small, but it was home to some of the Napa Valley's wealthiest residents and most prestigious restaurants. Nyles always thought that Martin liked to show his guests that he could afford to take them somewhere expensive, and he enjoyed impressing the other restaurant patrons by bringing in a Hollywood actress, such as Cloris, who was well known because of the soap opera in which she had been a regular cast member.

Howard Goode's house was on a side street just off the highway, which was also the main street running through the picturesque center of the town. Sitting in a quiet neighborhood of ancient and elegantly preserved Victorian mansions, it was a two-story, white farmhouse with a fence, a hedge of still blooming white rose bushes and a neatly trimmed wrap-around lawn. He stepped onto the wide, covered porch and knocked on the door.

Howard Goode was a rotund man about Nyles' height, with a full head of thick white hair and a round face, marred by a rosy complexion, giving him the look of a chronic drinker, although Nyles was aware that he probably jumped to that conclusion because he knew that Goode was a writer about wines. The man stood in the door with a jovial smile on his face, as though he were greeting a friend, although Nyles knew that the two of them had never met. Nyles introduced himself as a friend of the late Martin Overman and Goode immediately invited him into his house, without asking why he was there.

The house was furnished in antiques, reminding Nyles of old Dorchester homes of his youth. There was opera music coming from a room off of the living room into which he had been ushered. Nyles could see the glowing screen of a computer on a desk in the other room, as if waiting for someone to attend to it. "It looks as if I've interrupted you working," he said.

"Let me turn off the music," Goode told him, leaving for a moment to go into the other room. When he returned he offered Nyles a seat on an old-fashioned, worn velour couch. "I'm ready for a break. It's past noon; can I offer you a glass of wine? I'm going to have one," he said.

Nyles guessed that it must be wine-country protocol to offer guests a glass of wine, since Shari Randall had done the same when he'd visited her. Goode looked like a man who probably indulged in a noontime tippie, whether he had a guest or not. When Goode returned to the living room he handed Nyles a glass of white wine, then held his own glass up to the light streaming in

from a window and swirled the wine, before holding it to his nose then taking a long sip. “Ah, that we had a Dover Sole to go with this,” he said, smiling broadly.

Nyles took a sip of his own. It was a dry, but very soft wine with a touch of citrus. He wasn’t a fan of white wines, but he found this one delicious. “Is it local?” he asked.

“Napa is known for its cabernets, but you can find a good chardonnay at a lot of vineyards, such as the one this wine comes from, which is here in St. Helena and which oaks their chardonnay, so it has a more buttery tone and an extra hint of vanilla.” Goode was still gazing at his glass of wine as if it were a miraculous object.

Nyles wasn’t sure he knew what a buttery tone was, or what it meant that a wine was *oaked*, for that matter, but the wine was good enough that it might even convince him to try a white occasionally, instead of his usual red. He thought about asking the brand so he could buy a bottle for Cloris, then thought better of it. He was trying to decrease her drinking, not add to it. He felt a stab of guilt as he thought about himself drinking a glass of wine that his wife would have loved to taste herself, but that he had no intention of allowing her to try. He immediately hated the fact that he couldn’t enjoy something without feeling guilty.

Goode excused himself and within minutes returned with a plate of cheese. “A good English cheddar works well with this wine,” he said, sitting down. He grunted as he settled into the soft easy chair that sat diagonal from the sofa, so both he and Nyles could reach the cheese plate on the coffee table.

Nyles felt as if he were being treated to a professional wine tasting. He wondered if Howard Goode had missed being able to share his love of wine since he’d left the newspaper. “Do you still write about wine?” he asked, thinking about the open computer in the other room.

He reached for a piece of the hard white cheese, which, when he bit into it, felt slightly crunchy, as though it were laced with tiny crystals. When he took a second sip of his wine, he could taste the vanilla.

“I’m actually working on a novel,” Goode confided, somewhat sheepishly, although he quickly smiled then chuckled. He explained that he had entered journalism as a stop-gap measure to provide himself a living while he worked on his true love, which was writing fiction. “I’m afraid that I always got sidetracked though,” he said. “I thought that writing about wine, food, and lifestyle would be undemanding, since I was always interested in both food and wine, anyway,” he patted his large stomach, “...as you can see. But it didn’t work out that way. I picked a paper that devoted itself almost exclusively to those topics and my articles soon became nationally syndicated; so I never got to start my novel until I retired.”

“Wasn’t that six years ago?” Nyles asked.

“Six and a half... but who’s counting?” He smiled broadly and scooped up two slices of cheese, then popped them in his mouth, followed by a slow sip of his wine. His satisfaction showed on his face. “You know more about me than I do about you.”

Nyles took an immediate liking to the wine connoisseur. He appeared to be a man who enjoyed life, something Nyles had always had a hard time doing. Nyles explained that he was a retired policeman and a longtime friend of Martin and Sarah Overman. He told Goode how Sarah had asked him to look into Martin’s death, which involved reading the memoir the former senator was writing. He told him about the lawsuit mentioned in the memoir and how he had tracked down Mr. Goode through the Napa Valley Register.

“Do you mean that Senator Overman could have been murdered?” Goode’s eyes had brightened, as though the thought intrigued him.

Nyles didn’t want to say too much. “There’s no real suggestion that that’s the case. But he was writing a memoir that discussed a lawsuit involving local winegrowers and I wasn’t familiar with such a suit. You wrote some articles about it.”

Goode nodded. He then asked Nyles how much he knew about the efforts to suppress legislation concerning the levels of arsenic in local wine and about Martin Overman’s role in thwarting such legislation. Nyles told him he only knew what Goode had written in the Register, but that Martin’s memoir had mentioned campaign contributions for his support in opposing the legislation.

“They weren’t just campaign contributions,” Goode interrupted him.

Nyles knew that the memoir had said that some of the money went into Martin’s personal accounts and that it somehow involved his son Ronnie. He told Goode what he had read.

Goode shook his head. “It’s very hard to believe that Overman would have admitted that in his memoir. What happened wasn’t even remotely legal. Only a few people, myself included, knew the details. I wasn’t allowed to write about it and I couldn’t even get law enforcement to listen when I told them about it.”

Nyles asked him what he meant by law enforcement not listening.

Goode told him that he had told the Napa County Sheriff, since most of the wineries were in Napa County.

“Phil MacDonald?”

“Do you know him?” Goode asked, sounding surprised.

Nyles told him that he and Sheriff MacDonald were friends and had been for years.

“I don’t think MacDonald was directly involved in any of the shenanigans, but he turned a blind eye to them...for some reason.” Goode was clearly suggesting that Phil MacDonald was involved in some way, but he seemed to be downplaying it, perhaps because Nyles had told him he and the sheriff were friends.

“So what *did* go on?” Nyles asked.

Goode told him that the effort to regulate arsenic levels and to label them in wine had gained a lot of support in the California legislature. As the senator from Napa and Sonoma counties, Martin Overman opposed such legislation, but he demanded something extra to use his power to block the legislation before it ever got to the senate floor, plus he chaired the committee that dealt with Proposition 65, the labeling law. He could squelch any effort to include the arsenic levels on the wine labels—but for a price. Nyles had surmised as much from what he had read in Martin’s memoir and in Goode’s newspaper articles. What he didn’t know, that Howard Goode now told him, was that a group of wine growers, all of them connected to the Napa Valley Wine Consortium, which now employed Shari Randall, had worked a fraudulent scheme in which they had used Ronnie Overman’s real estate agency to conduct bogus transactions between themselves, selling different portions of their land to each other and paying Ronnie a large broker’s fee, which was in reality a bribe that he passed on to his father to insure his support in blocking the legislation in Sacramento.

Nyles could see why neither the Wine Consortium nor Ronnie Overman wanted the contents of the memoir to come to light. It could explain trying to steal Martin’s computer, but was it enough to cause someone to murder him? He still couldn’t imagine Ronnie Overman having a role in his father’s murder. Phil MacDonald’s role in not pursuing evidence of bribery

bothered Nyles even more. “You told Sheriff MacDonald all of this?” Nyles asked, trying his best to mask the disbelief in his voice.

Goode nodded. “I only had suspicions, not hard evidence, but the Sheriff wasn’t interested in any of it. In fact, he was downright hostile to it.” He squinted his eyes and looked directly at Nyles. “You said that Mrs. Overman asked you to look into her husband’s death. I thought he wandered into a fire area and succumbed to the smoke.”

“That may be what happened,” Nyles said. “I’m just checking out some anomalies, like the things mentioned in his memoir . . . they may mean nothing.”

“But you said you were retired.”

Nyles had to face the same question again as to why he was pursuing the cause of Martin’s death so doggedly. “As I said, it’s a favor for Senator Overman’s wife.”

“You’ve dug into it pretty deeply for a favor.”

“Old habits die slowly. I was a detective, remember.” Nyles was aware that his answer sounded lame, even to him. The “anomalies” were certainly present, but his persistence in pursuing them was due as much to his need to keep his depression at bay as to the merits of the case. Although Howard Goode had been open to him, he didn’t want to go into his motivation with the wine connoisseur. “How many people are aware of the bribery involved in getting Overman to block regulation and labeling?” he asked, changing the subject.

Goode told him that he had told not only Sheriff MacDonald, but also his editors at the Napa Valley Register. They had not allowed him to publish any of his evidence or suspicions, fearing that they would lose both community support and most of their advertising, which came

from not just the wine industry but all the ancillary businesses associated with it, such as restaurants, tours and hotels.

“So you quit the newspaper; was that why?”

“Yes,” Goode said, taking a deep sip of his wine.

“But you never wrote any more about it? Wasn’t it a health hazard?” If Howard Goode was a crusader and had quit his job because he was being silenced, why hadn’t he said something after he left his position with the newspaper?

The portly wine critic shook his head. “The overwhelming scientific evidence was that the levels of arsenic posed no health risk. The laboratory that tested the wines used drinking water levels of arsenic to gauge what was acceptable for wine. But no one drinks wine as if it were water. The average person drinks 60 ounces of water a day. A whole bottle of wine is less than half that. If you drank as much wine as people drink water, you’d die of alcoholism before the arsenic killed you. Anyway, it was only in the cheapest wines,” he held up his glass. “You don’t need to worry with this chardonnay,” He said, smiling broadly.

Nyles thanked him. He was impressed with Howard Goode. He seemed to be a renaissance man with a conscience. He imagined him turning his opera back on after Nyles left and returning to his novel. “By the way,” he asked as he was leaving, “what is your novel about?”

“It’s a thriller about a political scandal involving the wine industry.” Howard Goode’s face broke into a wide smile and he winked at Nyles. “Of course it has nothing to do with real life.”

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